

community



Education &
Early Years

Official Response
to the Northern Ireland consultation

ATTENDANCE MATTERS



February 2026

About **Community Union**

This is an official response on behalf of members of Community Union

Community is a general Trade Union affiliated to the TUC. We provide legal and casework support to our members and regularly engage with them in determining our response to policy proposals.

Community's Education and Early Years sector represent thousands of serving teachers and support staff, headteachers, lecturers, nursery and early years workers, nannies and other education professionals in schools and academies, nurseries and early years settings, colleges, and universities across the whole of the UK.

This evidence was submitted on behalf of our members working in Early Years and Education in Northern Ireland and as such represents the collective view of our membership.

The information shared within this response may be used and quoted as appropriate for the purposes it was gathered, with Community Union acknowledged as the contributor. We would be happy to discuss the comments in this response further, please contact us using the details supplied.

This Official Response will be published on our website following the close of the consultation period.

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Q7**What percentage of attendance at school would you regard as acceptable?****95%+****90%–94%****85%–89%****80%–84%****Less than 80%**

Community believes that hard data targets are completely the wrong approach. Many issues which affect attendance are outside of the remit of an individual school and when performance dashboards focus heavily on percentage thresholds (e.g., below 90%), those schools serving high-need communities can appear to be underperforming without contextual adjustment. This can distort accountability discussions.

Too often minimum attendance expectations appoint blame onto schools for those issues which are outside of their control meaning that school's risk being subject to accountability measures outside their sphere of influence. This in turn is likely to lead to an increase in the number of pupils excluded or otherwise removed from roll in order that schools can maintain their attendance levels.

We know that certain pupil groups are statistically more likely to have lower attendance, for example those eligible for Free School Meals, Looked After Children, Pupils with Special Educational Needs and mental health difficulties. Blunt absence statistics have a more significant impact on small schools where a small number of pupils with complex needs have a disproportionate impact on the whole-school percentages.

But it is more than just about small schools. A hard percentage makes absence an administrative issue rather than one which treats children as individuals and seeks to understand the reasons behind the behaviours they display. It fails to recognise the fact that, up to a certain age, pupils have little to no control over their attendance at school, it does not distinguish between authorised (illness, medical appointments) and unauthorised absence in a meaningful analytical way. It does not capture partial-day absence accurately when simplified into headline figures and it fails to contextualise long-term medical conditions or special educational needs. This lack of nuance can lead to inappropriate comparisons across pupils or schools.

It is vital that schools are given access to the necessary specialist resources to support families to improve attendance. This will take time and engagement with a wide range of social and medical stakeholders in order to understand and address the underlying issues. Seeking to vilify a child because of poor attendance is wholly unacceptable.

Q9**What are the main issues regarding regular attendance at school?****Q10****What are the factors, in your experience that make it difficult for children to attend school?**

There are a number of reasons which make it difficult for children to attend school, many of which are outside of schools' control. We also note that some pupils experience a perceived lack of purpose with school for a variety of reasons.

The impact of social media and incessant notifications from apps cause significant disruption to sleep and thus impact peer interaction, identity and influence behaviour in-school. Even in schools where mobile phone use is restricted, the impact is still felt through pupils who are over-tired and unable to self-regulate.

The constant doom of the news and the impact of the cost-of-living, together with the misalignment of a curriculum that prioritises academic achievement over skills development and limited opportunities for vocational learning all have an impact on attendance, especially in areas of lower income.

Mental wellbeing and anxiety-related absence has risen markedly since the pandemic. This is particularly due a fear of failure and perfectionism especially around exams and can be exacerbated in selective schools, post primary. Waiting lists for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and limited in-school therapeutic capacity amplify these issues.

Q11

What would help in overcoming these challenges?

Financial penalties for non-attendance are available across the UK, but they are used far less frequently in Northern Ireland than in England, for example. In addition to fines, or fixed penalty notices other penalties can be applied including parenting contracts, parenting orders, education supervision orders, and ultimately prosecution. These are 'sticks', but there needs to be a range of mandatory supportive options before resorting to legal intervention. Unfortunately, this sort of action is usually more costly in terms of time than simply applying a penalty notice and so attendance issues are criminalised. And although we note that the threat of fines can lead to a temporary improvement in attendance the overall impact of fines is weak.

Fines disproportionately impact low-income families and those under financial strain where employment is unstable or varies widely, such as those in shift work or zero-hours contracts. Parents also report feeling powerless to support pupils suffering with high anxiety, and because this is often around the important teenage years it can have a devastating impact on exam outcomes.

In families already experiencing anxiety and stress, the additional threat of fines has limited impact on achieving the goal of improved attendance and instead adds to the existing stress burden

Community believes that early intervention, mental health support, and strong pastoral systems as well as strategies for engaging with families have a far better and longer-term impact than fines.

Q14

To what extent do you agree that booking term time holidays is acceptable?

Strongly agree

Agree

Agree in some circumstances

Disagree

Strongly disagree
Don't know

Interviews and qualitative material about school attendance in NI highlight that mental health and emotional wellbeing are frequently cited as barriers to engagement and regular attendance by young people and parents.

<https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/exploring-school-absence-in-ni>

The Northern Ireland Youth Wellbeing Survey found that about 12.6 % of children and young people in Northern Ireland meet criteria for a common mood or anxiety disorder. And many parents feel greater anxiety and lower mood when supporting a child who struggles with attendance, indicating that there is an emotional toll on families.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35585713>

In September 2025, schools began recording absence under a new code for emotional-based school avoidance to help track how anxiety and related factors affect attendance. This change recognises that anxiety and emotional distress are significant drivers of non-attendance, but baseline figures from this coding have not yet been made publicly available.

<https://www.ncl.ac.uk/press/articles/latest/2025/04/schooldistressresearch>

Q15&16

To what extent do you think the "Attendance Matters" strategy will help address the issues associated with pupil attendance?

Which aspects of the "Attendance Matters" strategy are most helpful?

As with any proposed strategy "Attendance Matters" does have the potential to begin to address some of the multiplicity of issues that exist around pupil attendance, particularly the issues around anxiety, emotional wellbeing and complex personal/social factors.

The language around emotionally-based school non-attendance (EBSNA) suggests that this strategy could start to address the emotional barriers to attendance and crucially, if properly implemented, funded and supported. A greater understanding of why pupils are absent is necessary so that we can seek to address those wider issues, but this could have a far greater impact than a punitive system of fines.

Community is particularly pleased to note that this guidance calls for inclusive behaviour strategies and nurturing environments and encourages this with positive reinforcement and behaviour support. This aligns directly with research showing that punitive approaches alone are ineffective for anxiety-related absence and can harm student-school relationships

Community is pleased to note that the consultation references the importance of joined up health and LA services. However, services beyond education have struggled to meet their statutory roles in supporting schools over the past five years and mental health waiting lists are particularly high. It will be vital that additional funding to address the health and social care needs of families and children is made available to support the success of this strategy.

As has been previously mentioned, it is inappropriate to hold schools to account for issues outside of their control and similarly it is inappropriate to penalise parents when promised support services are simply unavailable. The acknowledgement that schools are not solely responsible for attendance is extremely welcome and the approach should enable a more joined-up approach to tackling the wider issues affecting pupil attendance.

Q17**Do you agree with the overall aim of the "Attendance Matters" strategy to support children and young people to attend school every day?**

Education is cumulative. Skills in literacy, numeracy and subject knowledge build sequentially but they do not build linearly. Some small absence might not have much of an impact – such as illness and bereavement. In the same way repetitive small attendance gaps compound over time. In a 190-day school year 90% attendance equates to 19 missed days – a significant period.

School attendance supports more than just academic learning, it also provides structured interaction with peers, identity formation, and social regulation with studies showing that regular attendance strengthens relationships and engenders a sense of belonging which is strongly associated with higher attainment and better long-term outcomes. From a safeguarding perspective regular attendance is important because it allows the system to monitor pupil wellbeing and identify any emerging risks both with the pupil and with the family unit and provide early intervention.

However, as we have already pointed out, attendance must not be just about figures and headlines. There is little real difference between a child whose attendance is 89% against one with 90% and yet some schools target significant resources in addressing this and other borderlines in order to 'improve' their attendance figures. Instead this funding could be spent on real support for more families and more children rather than trying to game the system. And pupils with disabilities and anxiety-related needs require flexibility and reasonable adjustments which are difficult to account for in blunt statistical data.

Attendance boundaries can also lead to parents feeling pressured to send children in when they are unwell which results in reduced learning as well as spreading illness and disease. In worst cases this can trigger widespread illness amongst children or affect staff and have a more profound impact on learning.

Q18**What role do you think parents, schools, statutory bodies and communities should play in improving attendance?**

Supporting pupil attendance requires coordinated action across families, government and the wider community. Community is hugely supportive of LA teams having regular conversations with schools around access to services because we know that dedicated early support for the whole family has the potential to be transformative. We know that individual children's barriers to attendance often go far beyond the school gates and that persistent absenteeism is almost always a symptom of wider problems, and therefore early support is crucial.

But the system needs to work to support everyone.

Parents establish the foundational routines, expectations and attitudes toward education that shape a child's engagement, while also acting as early identifiers of emerging barriers such as anxiety or social difficulties.

Government agencies, the Department and Education Authorities provide the policy framework, data monitoring, welfare services and targeted interventions that enable much needed early identification and structured support, balancing accountability with safeguarding and inclusion duties.

The local community, and community organisations and faith groups reinforce the social value of schooling by promoting belonging, aspiration and positive peer networks.

When these three spheres operate in alignment attendance is strengthened – not through enforcement alone, but through a collective culture that recognises regular school attendance and participation as both expected and supported.

If any part of this tripartite fails, then the whole partnership is put at risk. This is what we have seen over the past decade with health and social care being overwhelmed and under funded.

Q19

What partnerships between schools and community organisations have you seen work well?

The EA's Education Welfare Service works in structured partnership with schools, parents, other EA services (e.g., Educational Psychology, SEN support). But, as we have noted already this is reliant on funding and capacity – both of which have struggled to keep up with demand following the pandemic. We also recognise the positive work done by EWOs such as attendance audits and early support for those at risk of poor attendance. Early intervention is key to addressing the issue before it has a detrimental impact on pupil attendance and outcomes.

<https://www.eani.org.uk/services/education-welfare-service>

In places like Enniskillen and South Belfast, local area plans such as RAISE have effectively brought a wide group of schools and connected youth organisations to try to unpick the issues that drive chronic absence. This model is more expensive than early intervention and requires the co-ordination of a large number of partners to be effective, but it is starting to have a positive impact on improving attendance in those areas.

<https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/RAISE%20Enniskillen%20-%20Strategic%20Area%20Plan.PDF>

Q21

Do you think school provides a nurturing and trauma-informed environment?

In recognised trauma-informed schools, staff are trained to understand how past adversity affects behaviour and learning, and to respond with empathy and structure that supports regulation and trust. But this is not common across schools. Trauma awareness and supportive interaction strategies are available to teachers and support staff, through tiered trauma-informed practice training, which embeds understanding of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and responsive practices. But in order to be more effective it needs continued engagement with staff and consistent funding to have a greater impact in schools.

Fane Street Primary School has been publicly recognised for its trauma-informed, attachment-aware and nurturing ethos. The school has worked with a wide range of education partners, social care and health to implement whole-school trauma-sensitive practice, earning an attachment and trauma-sensitive award. The interventions deployed support emotional regulation of the child, and critically, parents are involved through classes and programmes like Incredible Years, meaning the learning can continue at home.

<https://www.csscni.org.uk/news/award-winning-controlled-school-fane-street-primary-school-and-wellbeing-champions>

Q22

Have you seen relational or restorative practices used effectively in schools? If so, how?

There is emerging evidence and discussion about restorative practices being used in schools in Northern Ireland, but the formal, peer-reviewed evidence base specific to NI schools is still relatively limited. This is similar to the situation in England where there is healthy anecdotal evidence, but nothing that has been formally assessed.

A recent online school survey (not limited to NI but including NI primary settings) found that 96 % of responding staff believed restorative practice was feasible and acceptable with around one-third of schools already using restorative practices regularly (with various levels of staff trained). This suggests positive professional reception amongst staff, though the survey does not directly measure outcomes like behaviour or attendance.

<https://openresearch.nihr.ac.uk/articles/5-73>

Restorative approaches have also been introduced in several schools where they are increasingly used to support conflict resolution, repairing harm and improving relationships, amongst peers, even though implementation remains intermittent rather than universal.

Q24

What type of early interventions do you think are most effective in improving attendance?

The most effective interventions for improving pupil attendance in Northern Ireland combine early identification, multi-agency support, and tailored engagement strategies, there is no one-size-fits-all solution!

Schools flag issues with attendance, but often this occurs after a pattern of poor attendance has already begun to become established. Similarly, EWOs play a key role in monitoring attendance patterns, conducting home visits, and linking schools with families to address barriers proactively. What is clear is that more capacity is required to support timely assessments from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to help identify and support pupils experiencing anxiety, emotional distress, or other mental health challenges that impede attendance.

Equally important to any solution is a nuanced understanding of community and social contexts, enabling schools to work collaboratively with and learn from local youth services, voluntary organisations, and family networks., And whilst schools must remain places of

learning there is a need for them to understand the socioeconomic, relational, and environmental factors that contribute to absence in their area.

Interventions that integrate all these elements – combining professional oversight, therapeutic support, and community engagement are consistently associated with higher sustained attendance, reduced persistent absenteeism, and improved overall wellbeing for pupils and should be the aspiration.