



International Network for School Social Work

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Management of School Attendance in England

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There are slightly different laws and service provision in each of the countries (England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) in the United Kingdom. I work in England, so I am going to focus on how we manage school attendance here. The picture is further complicated by the fact that we have the mix of schools funded directly by the Local Authorities, the state-funded, non-fee-paying Academies (grouped in Multi Academy Trusts) and free schools.

The Statistics on School Attendance

All schools are required to send data to the central government 3 times a year.

- In 2018/2019 the absence rate was 6.5%
- 1 in 9 pupils is persistently absent
- 121,000 pupils missed more than 25 days a year (out of 190), the majority for 'health' reasons
- 7,900 pupils were permanently excluded from school in the 2017/2018 school year
- 60,000 pupils are being home educated, an explosion
- 261,000 penalty notices were issued to parents in 2017 due to absences

The Law on Attendance

There is a strong legal framework for school attendance, beginning in 1833 when restrictions were placed on child employment and schools were developed. There are legal requirements on schools to take an attendance register twice daily and all absences receive a code to categorise them (e.g. illness, unauthorised). In essence, parents or those acting as guardians who are caring for the child can be fined or prosecuted for the child's non-attendance. However, each case is considered individually and other interventions are used first. It is expected that a supportive approach will be used in all cases except for unauthorised holidays. Most recently, in 2013 Penalty Notices were introduced with a fine for parents if they take children out of school on holiday without agreement, or for other excessive non attendance.

Based on safeguarding legislation, schools are also required to report any children whose whereabouts are unknown (e.g. the child stopped attending and cannot be traced via usual means). This is due to some serious safeguarding incidents that occurred. The legislation covers child

protection and children in care (such as in foster homes). Each school must have a lead staff person (usually a teacher) who is required to monitor and oversee all concerns related to child protection and to ensure that the right action is taken, including referral to the Local Authority.

Is the balance between care and control right? The law gives us a mix of care and control, but the challenge in England is that the resources to deliver the support necessary for an adequate provision of “care” are often not available.

The Support Available to Schools

In England (and indeed in the rest of the UK), there is no requirement for schools to have Social Workers, in fact very few do. There is, however, good safeguarding legislation in place and all schools have regular training in how to recognise and deal with safeguarding issues and will link with Local Authority Social Workers to ensure children are protected. An unprecedented level and pace of change over the last 10 years has altered service delivery beyond recognition. There have been 10 years of austerity within national and local government with a curb on Government spending on welfare. Government has decentralised with devolution of power away from Local Authorities, a breakup of the maintained Education Service and more power placed in the hands of Academies and free schools. Previously, schools had access to core teams of Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) who worked for Local Authorities. Officers were trained in the legal framework but were also able to assess family needs and work with them supportively to resolve school attendance issues, referring to specialist professionals as needed. There is now very much a “mixed economy” of provision of services which includes:

- A core service by Local Authorities to deliver the legal responsibilities placed on them by central government, but that is unlikely to offer additional support unless schools pay for it.
- A “traded service” delivered by Local Authorities in which the staff remain employed by the Local Authority but provide a service which schools pay for.
- Staff employed directly by schools or Multi Academy Trusts, who have differing levels of training and may deliver a mix of roles including home visiting, pastoral support and preparation of legal paperwork. They have a variety of titles which include: Attendance Officer, Inclusion Officer, Pastoral Support, Family Worker. Some are qualified Social Workers. However there is no required training for these staff.
- Private Companies are commissioned to provide a range of services which include home visiting and preparation of legal paperwork.

The amount of support provided in any given school depends on interpretation, commitment and variable funding levels. Support services are fragmented and there is no consistency of response with some members of staff poorly trained. However, where provision is good, children get a speedy response from their school (often better than when the service was delivered by the Local Authority) and links with other services are excellent. When it is not so good, there can be a slower response to families which means needs escalate and difficulties become entrenched.

The current pandemic crisis of Covid-19 means that developments will be on hold for the foreseeable future. Schools are open only for the children of key workers and for vulnerable children. The situation is being monitored and it is as yet unknown how long it will last as we have not reached the peak of the pandemic. The highly committed staff who work in this field will continue to do their utmost to support children and families and we will hope to rebuild service delivery and our schools when we begin to recover.