Attendance

NOVEMBER 2026 · ISSUE 6

★ FILM OF THE YEAR The short film of the year that everyone working in schools must watch



Image courtesy of MIMESIC Films

Unauthorised Absence

Endorsed by the National Attendance Portal

Full film out Tuesday 10 November · mimesic.com

LONG COVID KIDS

Believe children. Believe families.

EBSA: parents are partners, not problems

Your inclusion strategy: the DfE 31st December deadline

Belonging Framework: for pupils and leaders available NOW

Contents

FEATURES

03 **Editorial:** This is the issue we had to publish. Why we stopped, listened and put one word under the microscope.

04 **Cover story:** Unauthorised Absence. Watch the trailer now; the full film is out on Tuesday 10 November, and it is the most important resource for school leaders to watch this year.

07 **Meet the filmmakers:** The people behind Unauthorised Absence.

08 **Timeline and interview:** Can a story change the law? In conversation with writer Jo Clayton.

LONG COVID KIDS

12 **Big piece:** Long Covid Kids. The absence nobody is counting, and what schools must do now.

33 **Help is out there:** Long Covid support for schools and families.

PRACTICE

35 **EBSA and parent support:** Anxious children, worried parents and a toolkit for working as partners.

38 **The belonging framework:** Why belonging is the engine of attendance, and how it looks in practice.

41 **Attendance Magazine: the book:** The issue's ideas, gathered in one place.

42 **The DfE inclusion strategy statement:** A four-step build guide, with a checklist to keep you on track.

48 **Belonging for leaders:** Leaders need to belong too.

50 **The National Attendance Portal:** Where to find data, tools and support.

GUEST VOICES

52 **Guest article:** What Gets a Child Back Through the Door. Victoria Nieve Spencer.

56 **Guest article:** Before Absence Becomes the Problem. David Curran, Moon Hall School Reigate.

OPINION

60 **From the editor:** Is school attendance now a public health issue? Colin Cattanach.

62 **Candid Corner:** The challenge for government.

IN THIS ISSUE

One film. Four big conversations.

EDITORIAL

The Children Behind the Registration Mark

Every unauthorised mark in a register has a story behind it. This issue tells those stories without flinching.

Why we made this issue

We have filled these pages with the children our systems describe least well: the girl who cannot get past the school gate, the boy whose energy runs out by lunchtime, the family who opened a penalty letter on the worst week of their year. None of them is a statistic. All of them are counted as one.

The short film Unauthorised Absence leads this issue because it makes the case better than any policy paper we could print. Watch it, then read our review, our commentary and the debate it has started.

The agenda, not the exception

Long Covid, emotionally based school avoidance and belonging are not side issues. They are the attendance agenda. Any strategy that treats them as exceptions will keep missing the children who need it most.

A register records where a child was. It cannot record why. Behind every code sits a morning that went wrong: a parent who rang the office in tears, a teenager who sat in the car park unable to walk in, a child too unwell to explain. Those are the stories this issue sets out to tell, and the questions it asks of every school leader reading.

Read it with a pen in hand. Mark the pages that sound like your pupils. Then take them to your next leadership meeting and ask what your own data is leaving out.

The clock

And the clock is running. Mainstream schools in England must publish an inclusion strategy by 31 December 2026. Leaders act this term, not next year.

Absence is too often read as defiance when it is distress.

Colin Cattanach, Editor, Attendance Magazine

THE DEADLINE

31 Dec 2026

Inclusion strategies published on every mainstream school website.



Illustrative image

SPREAD THE WORD

Share this issue, tag us on LinkedIn and repost it everywhere. It is free, and it always will be.

↗️ **More information: youtube.com trailer**

Image courtesy of MIMESIC Films

ENDORSED BY THE NATIONAL ATTENDANCE PORTAL

We stand behind every message in this film.



THE FILM · 1 OF 8 · THE HOOK

04

Unauthorised Absence

A mother. A child in distress. A fine. Trailer out now.

Trailer out now · full film available from Tuesday 10 November. Three million views in 48 hours. Parents already live this story. They need support, not sanctions.

Next: how to watch →

Watch the Trailer First

Start with the trailer, then choose how to watch the film.



▶️ Watch the trailer on YouTube

HOW TO WATCH

The full film is available from Tuesday 10 November

Attend a local screening

Find one on the screening map with dates, venues and booking details. More screenings are being added. Get together with your local community.

Stream it online on YouTube

Watch the full film on YouTube from Tuesday 10 November.

Then join the free Zoom webinar from 7:30pm GMT to hear from the filmmakers and special guests and ask questions. Register on Eventbrite.

Find screenings and stream the film: www.mimesic.com

ENDORSED BY THE NATIONAL ATTENDANCE PORTAL

Why the National Attendance Portal endorses Unauthorised Absence

- Parents are partners, not problems.
- Distress is not truancy.
- Support must come before sanction.
- Fines and prosecution do not make a child well, and they do not bring a child back through the door.
- Every school should watch this film with its staff.

Colin Cattanach, Editor, for the National Attendance Portal team

Next: the story behind the film →

The Story on Screen



Still from Unauthorised Absence. Image courtesy of MIMESIC Films
Find the full film at **www.mimesic.com**.

Written by Jo Clayton · **Directed by** Georgia Parris · **Produced by** Natalie Lauren · **Starring** Emily Bruni, Beatrice Flaherty, Cathy Tyson, Anna Maxwell Martin · About 16 minutes. Image courtesy of MIMESIC Films. MIMESIC Films on YouTube

Synopsis

Anna is a single mother raising her nine-year-old daughter, Thea, a bright, sensitive child in severe school-related distress and stuck on a three-year waiting list for an autism assessment. At school, Thea's distress is mistaken for truancy or bad parenting. As Anna fights for support she is blamed, sent on parenting courses, fined for repeated 'unauthorised absence' and threatened with prosecution.

Synopsis: British Council UK Films Database.

The trailer came out on 26 September 2026 and had three million views in 48 hours. Blame. Parenting courses. Fines. The threat of prosecution. That is the reality for thousands of families.

QUESTIONS TO SIT WITH

When the film lands, which of your own pupils will you think of first? What would a parent say your school did when they first asked for help?

"Distress is not truancy."

Our view

One question for every school: what do you do when a parent is not believed?

Parents are partners, not problems. Distress is not truancy. Parents need more support, not more sanctions.

On 20 October 2026, a petition with 300,000 signatures went to Downing Street. It calls for an end to parental fines and prosecutions.

THE GAP

The register records a mark.

The child lives a day.

Good attendance work starts by closing that gap.

Further reading: Square Peg · Full film: www.mimesic.com

Next: meet the filmmakers →

↗️ **More information: youtube.com trailer**

Meet the filmmakers

That story came from two women who know this system, one as a parent, one from inside schools. I watched the trailer and had to know who made it. Leaders should listen.



Image source: LinkedIn

Jo Clayton, writer



Image source: LinkedIn

Natalie Lauren, producer

Jo Clayton, writer

A writer and storyteller whose background includes work with Shakespeare's Globe and Great Ormond Street Hospital. She has spent the last eight years navigating the SEND system as a mother, which sparked the project. "The system is broken beyond anything I could imagine..." and "We're trying to do for the attendance laws what Mr. Bates vs The Post Office did for Post Office..."

Natalie Lauren, producer

A filmmaker and producer who also plays the Teacher. She spent 10 years in the education system supporting students who didn't fit mainstream schooling. Four of her previous short films are winning awards on the festival circuit.

Credits: Directed by Georgia Parris. Executive producers Alix Wilton Regan, Jennifer English, Hugh Viney and Anna Maxwell Martin. Starring Emily Bruni and Beatrice Flaherty, with Cathy Tyson and Anna Maxwell Martin. About 16 minutes, drawing on the lived experiences of hundreds of families. Script accolades: Manchester Film Festival semifinalist; Bath Film Festival (IMDb Script to Screen Awards) finalist. Over 60 senior professionals signed an open letter of support.

READ MORE INTERVIEWS

↗ CenterFrame Member Spotlight · ↗ Mode Insurance Q&A with Natalie Lauren · ↗ Film page at MIMESIC · ↗ British Council UK Films Database · ↗ Watch the trailer

Listen to the people who lived it before you write the next attendance letter. Colin Cattanach

> "We're trying to do for the attendance laws what Mr. Bates vs The Post Office did for Post Office..."
>
> **— Jo Clayton**

Next: the road from crowdfunder to Downing Street →

Can a story change the law?

3 million

views in 48 hours

ACCOLADES

Nominated: IMDb Script to Screen Award 2025 · Longlisted: BIFA 2026 · Qualified for the Oscars 2027



Image courtesy of MIMESIC Films

2025	Crowdfunding campaign.
Easter 2026	Film shoot, then months of post-production.
26 Sept 2026	Trailer goes viral: 3 million views in 48 hours, thousands of messages of support, screening requests worldwide.
19 Oct 2026	Longlisted for Best Short Film at the BIFAs.
20 Oct 2026	Exec producer Anna Maxwell Martin helps deliver a 300,000-signature petition to Downing Street calling for an end to parental fines and prosecutions, with campaigners Susan Liverman and Maddie Roberts, Claire Barrett (Not Fine in School), Ellie Costello, MPs from three major parties and producer Natalie Lauren Woodward.
21 Oct 2026	Premiere screening.
Undated	Film raised in the House of Lords during scrutiny of the Courts and Tribunals Bill, with Lord Marks of Henley calling for a therapeutic rather than punitive approach.
31 Oct 2026	Emily Bruni and ten-year-old Beatrice Flaherty nominated for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress at the British Short Film Awards (ceremony at the BFI, hosted by Claudia Winkleman).

Source: Jo Clayton.

Next: in conversation with Jo Clayton →

In conversation: Jo Clayton

She is a mother first. Her child struggled silently in school. Then she wrote the film the attendance system did not want to see.



Image source: LinkedIn

"Behind every absence is a story."

Jo Clayton, writer of Unauthorised Absence, on blame, labels and what families need.

Why make Unauthorised Absence? What was missing from the public debate on absence?

The catalyst for the film was my own experience as the parent of a child who silently struggled in school, strengthened by the hundreds of desperate stories I heard from other families I met on support groups. They all followed roughly the same pattern: we were parents who cared deeply about our children and their education; our children were getting ill and burning out in school, but their absence was being framed as something wilful and deliberate, "unauthorised". For parents, the attendance system can be a deeply hostile place where we are at risk of becoming criminalised. Often we've had to abandon careers and lives to care for children who were becoming desperately unwell and going into crisis, and then we're being threatened with fines and prison sentences, it's an awful lot to come to terms with in often a very short space of time. There's been over a decade of lobbying, campaigning and academic research in this area, from groups like Not Fine In School, Define Fine and Square Peg, all making the harm of this legislation explicit, but it's been getting nowhere in terms of changing policies.

Is "unauthorised" a deliberate challenge to how attendance codes label children and families?

Yes. If you speak to the majority of parents, they find the attendance system impersonal and unnecessarily officious. Even if your child's only been off with chickenpox, getting a nasty letter in the post is not going to get relations with the school off on the best footing. Parents feel "got at" rather than supported from the start. For the parents of children who are vulnerable, ill or disabled this feeling of being backed into a corner and misunderstood only multiplies. It feels unjust and unfair, and the detached, bureaucratic nature of the labelling and language that's used is at best unhelpful, at worst deeply upsetting and potentially life-altering.

Next: Jo on who struggles and why →

What changed your understanding of why children struggle to attend?

I've learnt there are myriad reasons children can't be in school. We've been contacted by a number of organisations and charities affected by the attendance legislation, representing children with:

LONG COVID · FASD · ME/CHRONIC FATIGUE · EHLERS-DANLOS · CONNECTIVE TISSUE DISORDERS · AUTISM · ADHD · DYSLEXIA · BEREAVEMENT · ACUTE ANXIETY · PDA · POVERTY · PARENTAL MENTAL ILLNESS · FRAGILE X · FUNCTIONAL NEUROLOGICAL DISORDER · BLADDER AND BOWEL ISSUES · INSOMNIA

Behind every absence is a story but the attendance system no longer makes space for those stories and those families and children simply become "unauthorised absences". Some of those conditions take a lifetime to diagnose, and in the meantime families are desperately trying to work out what is going on for their children, we'd like to suggest what those families need is compassion, space and support, rather than bureaucracy, pressure and a punitive approach.

Where is the line between legitimate challenge and an approach that makes things worse?

Personally? I think the drive for 100% attendance is misguided. An ill or distressed child who is physically present in school, isn't necessarily learning or engaging, and could even be bringing an unhelpful level of disruption and upset to a classroom. I'd like to see the focus change to a way of promoting 100% engagement, and that doesn't mean that all children have to be physically present in a classroom 100% of the time. A friend's youngest just got into Cambridge University with 20% attendance and Long Covid. It took a Herculean effort for his mother to convince his school that a) he was really ill b) he could continue studying and achieve his potential even if he wasn't physically in school full time. His school found a way for him to have a hybrid and flexible curriculum that helped him thrive and achieve his potential.

What should schools understand about EBSA and children who are unable, not unwilling, to attend?

Every child and family has a story, and before you seek to punish or blame, listening, being curious and compassionate, is key. A senior Consultant Paediatrician who supported the film got his ADHD diagnosis at school because he threw a chair across a classroom; luckily, he had parents who could advocate for him in the system, but far too many children don't. All and any child can experience life events that leave them struggling with attendance. Teachers, attendance officers and school leaders are not social workers, but they are - first and foremost - human beings and that humanity has a huge power to effect change for every child and family. We'd love to see an education system that empowered teachers, leaders and attendance officers with the needed time, space and autonomy to get back to this most fundamental aspect of education.

Next: belonging, and Jo's closing word →

What does a school that genuinely creates belonging feel like to a young person?

Belonging is an embodied sense of acceptance and safety. It isn't a matrix or a set of tick box objectives, or as simple as an "attendance hub", sensory room, or a change-out of fluorescent lighting. All these things can and do help many children to access education, but for others an attendance hub can be a place full of fear and overwhelm, a sensory room can feel infantilising, and the change in lightbulbs might not compensate for being bullied or misunderstood. Far too often schools are too loud, bright and overcrowded, there is too much pressure to achieve and many pupils are paddling hard just to stay afloat. Try as they may these pupils can't "fit-in" when their minds and bodies are screaming that they're done. The same is true for staff. While some might thrive in high pressured, target-driven environments, many of us don't; we're destroyed by them. Teacher illness and burnout are symptoms of the same systems that prioritise results over wellbeing, and we believe it's time for a total re-evaluation.

What one conversation should the film start in the staffroom?

"How can we change the attendance conversation from one of attendance at any cost, to one of support and understanding?"

What must change to move from "How do we get this child back?" to "What needs to change so this child can learn?"

We believe it's desperately important that the school attendance system is taken out of the criminal justice system. If a mother is fined £2,500, imprisoned, or put on a tag, the effect on her children is not an improvement in attendance and educational outcomes – it's devastating and has long-term negative consequences. As our Exec Producer, Anna Maxwell Martin (who also voices a role in the film) has stated, the fines and prosecutions are "cruel and unnecessary"; children need to be supported at the point of need regardless of diagnosis. We'd like to see an education system that was enabling all pupils to fulfil their potential rather than disabling the most disadvantaged through blanket punitive measures.

Jo Clayton, writer, Unauthorised Absence. Interview 29 October 2026.

ENDORSED BY THE NATIONAL ATTENDANCE PORTAL

The National Attendance Portal endorses the messages in Unauthorised Absence. Watch it. Share it. Then change one thing.

www.nationalattendanceportal.uk · www.mimesic.com · ▶️ MIMESIC Films on YouTube

Trailer out now; full film available from Tuesday 10 November.



Illustrative image

LONG COVID KIDS · 1 OF 23 · THE ISSUE

WE ARE IN AWE OF LONG COVID KIDS

Every school leader and attendance practitioner must read their work and visit **longcovidkids.org**

SECTION

12

Long Covid Kids: Believe the Child Behind the Absence

Behind an unexplained absence there may be a child who is genuinely ill. Colin Cattanach asks us to believe them first.

Next: An illness hiding in the absence data →

An Illness Hiding in the Absence Data: Believe the Child



Illustrative image

The register closes at 8.50. One chair stays empty, a code goes in, and nobody asks why.

Long Covid is real, it is in our classrooms, and illness is a reason for support, not an excuse. It means symptoms that last weeks or months after infection and that no other diagnosis explains: exhaustion, pain and brain fog that come and go without warning. Over 111,000 children aged 3–17 in England and Scotland reported it in 2024. Cases nearly doubled between 2023 and 2024.

Code those days as unexplained absence and the illness vanishes. A compliance problem takes its place. Capability is not motivation: a child who cannot attend is not a child who will not.

Think of the pupil whose attendance dips every few weeks. Ask first whether anyone has asked about their health. Believe the child, then read the pattern again.

"It is like I have run out of battery." – a child with Long Covid

111,000+

children aged 3–17 in England and Scotland self-reported Long Covid in 2024

~66,000

of them had symptoms lasting 12 weeks or more – about 1 in 100 children

20,000+

children severely limited in their daily activities

Source: Long Covid Kids, 'Long Covid in Children: A Practical Guide to Education', 2026.

? Questions to sit with

If a child with diabetes missed the same days, would we send the same letter?

Who looks at the pattern behind our lowest-attending pupils before a threshold does?

Further reading: Long Covid Kids: education professionals · DfE: Supporting pupils with medical conditions

Next: When fatigue looks like truancy →

When Fatigue Looks Like Truancy, Believe the Child

By period 3 her head is on the desk. Too ill on Tuesday, fine on Wednesday: to a register, she looks like a child choosing when to attend.

25% of children are still symptomatic at three months (CLoCk study).

~1 in 3 have still not recovered after two years (CLoCk study).



Rest is not truancy. Illustrative image.

> *“ A policy that triggers a letter at a set percentage cannot tell a boom-and-bust illness from disengagement.* – Attendance Magazine

Fluctuating symptoms collide with fixed thresholds, targets and penalty systems. Leaders must build the judgement in; a kind phone call to a parent often tells you more than any letter. Illness is a reason for support, not an excuse.

Why a good day proves nothing. Post-exertional malaise (PEM, also called PESE) means symptoms can worsen hours or even days after effort. The child who looks fine in the corridor may be paying for it that evening. *“I am worried that you don’t believe I am sick, I may seem OK, but then I am not.”*

? Questions to sit with

Source: Long Covid Kids, ‘Long Covid in Children: A Practical Guide to Education’, 2026.

Who in our school decides whether a child is believed, and on what evidence?

What does a boom-and-bust week look like on our register, and who reads it?

Further reading: NICE ME/CFS guidance · DfE: Working together to improve attendance

Next: Long Covid is a medical issue, not an excuse →

Long Covid Is a Medical Issue, Not an Excuse

The last page ended on fatigue that looks like truancy. Now see it from the adult's side: in period 3 a girl lays her head on the desk and the adult reads it as attitude. Long Covid gives rise to a medical condition that schools must support. Treat it as a SEND issue, because that is what it is. For a growing number of pupils the barrier is not effort. It is a long-term health condition the school day was never designed around.

Recognition comes first. A child whose needs are never recorded will never have a plan, and a child without a plan keeps collecting marks. Naming the need is the first act of inclusion, and it costs nothing. In practice: a named lead, a record of what the child needs, and a shorter day or rest space when the body says stop.

Brain fog, post-exertional fatigue and pain change what a full day means. Pushing through can make a child worse for days afterwards. A child who managed Monday may be unable to manage Wednesday. That is the condition, not a choice.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Believe it, name it, then support it.

Brain fog

Concentration and memory fail mid-lesson.

Fatigue

Effort today costs days of recovery.

Pain

Headaches and aches that come and go.



Illustrative image

> **“Pacing is treatment, not indulgence.**
>
> – Attendance Magazine

Questions to sit with

Which pupils have a need nobody has named, and whose job is it to name it?

If a child crashed at home after a good day in school, would we ever hear about it?

Further reading: DfE: Supporting pupils with medical conditions · Long Covid Kids: education professionals

Next: What schools must do now →

Believe Them: What Schools Must Do Now

Belief only counts when it becomes action. A parent's phone buzzes at 8.40: another absence call. Here are five actions, in order. None needs new money. All need leadership.

1 Name it

Record Long Covid in the SEND register where it applies, so the need is visible to every adult.

2 Flex it

Offer part-time timetables, rest spaces and paced returns that build stamina without causing crashes. Remember that symptoms can worsen hours or days after activity (PEM/PESE).

3 Bridge it

Provide remote learning links on bad days so the child stays connected to lessons and friends.

4 Code it fairly

Use health-informed codes, not unauthorised marks, so the register tells the truth.

5 Plan it together

Agree a shared plan with the family and health professionals, and review it as symptoms change.

? Questions to sit with

Which of these five steps are we avoiding because they ask something of leaders?

Whose plan is it: the school's or the family's?

Further reading: National Attendance Portal · DfE: Working together on attendance

Next: The latest evidence →



Plan it together: ask the family what a bad day looks like. Illustrative image.

> "A need nobody has recorded is a need nobody can meet.
>
> – Attendance Magazine

LINK IT UP

Write these steps into your inclusion strategy. They are exactly the targeted support the DfE expects to see (page 26). Start with one child you already know about.

The latest evidence: these children are not making excuses

Five steps need evidence behind them, and the evidence is clear. At eight fifty the register closes on a column of absence marks, and behind some of them sits a child who could not get out of bed. These numbers describe children already in classrooms across England and Scotland, many recorded as simply absent.

111,000+

children aged 3–17 in England and Scotland had self-reported Long Covid in 2024; almost 66,000 with symptoms for 12+ weeks.

1 in 100

children affected, with over 20,000 severely limited day to day.

- Cases nearly doubled 2023–2024: about 1,000 new paediatric cases a week before national monitoring stopped.
- 25% still had symptoms after 3 months; nearly a third had not recovered after two years (CLoCk study).
- The 2026 RECOVER-Pediatrics study of 1,976 children found worsening grades, attention difficulty, reduced peer interaction and more need for educational support. The impact on learning is measurable, and it is social too.

Behind some marks on your absence list may be a child who is exhausted, not unwilling. A quiet conversation with the family, before any letter goes home, is often where belief begins.

Source: Long Covid Kids, "Long Covid in Children: A Practical Guide to Education" (2026)

Questions to sit with

How many names on our absence list have we never phoned about health?

If these numbers described pupils in our own staffroom, would we still call the absences unexplained?

Further reading: Long Covid Kids: education professionals · Long Covid Kids: parents and caregivers

Next: Key messages for every school →

Believe first: key messages for every school

With the evidence in hand, the next question is what adults say. A pupil reaches the gate at 8.50, pale and silent, and the first words they hear set the tone for the day. Eight principles sit beneath this guide. Put them in training, in policy and in the way every adult speaks to a child who is unwell. Belief first, judgement second.

1. Education is more than attendance.
2. Participation may look different: inclusion is not physical presence.
3. Listen, believe, work in partnership.
4. Activity can worsen symptoms (PEM/PESE), sometimes hours or days later.
5. What you see may not reflect the full impact.
6. Capability is not motivation.
7. Consider the whole child.
8. Support should reduce demands, not help a child tolerate them.



A quiet space to rest. Illustrative image.

It is like I have run out of battery.

Attendance Magazine

> "I can hear the question and I can hear the answer but they won't join up."

Source: Long Covid Kids, "Long Covid in Children: A Practical Guide to Education" (2026)

Questions to sit with

Which of the eight principles would a pupil say we break most often?

Do our policies ask a sick child to tolerate demands, or do they reduce them?

Further reading: Long Covid Kids: parents and caregivers · DfE: Working together on attendance

Next: Believing children means adjusting →

Believing children means adjusting

Principles need practice. Small, consistent changes keep children learning and connected. Reduce the demand; do not just extend the deadline. Agree the detail with the family in an Individual Healthcare Plan.

- Rest is not contingent on finishing a task
- Consider the demands of the whole day and week
- Notes and recorded lessons
- Less copying and handwriting
- Extra processing time
- Reduce workload, not only extend time
- A quiet, low-stimulation space
- Lifts and seating
- Uniform flexibility
- A trusted, consistent adult
- Keep the child connected to friends and events
- Don't expect catch-up on everything
- Individual Healthcare Plans
- Local authority Section 19 duty (Education Act 1996)



Ask the child what helps. Illustrative image.

Never encourage a child to "push through".

Pacing protects learning.

– Attendance Magazine

Source: Long Covid Kids, "Long Covid in Children: A Practical Guide to Education" (2026)

Questions to sit with

If we asked the child rather than the policy, what would we change today?

Is our rest space a place to recover, or only a place to be out of sight?

Further reading: DfE: Supporting pupils with medical conditions · NICE ME/CFS guidance

Next: Believe children. Believe families. →

Believe children. Believe families.

Illness is not an excuse for poor attendance. It is a reason to support.

Everything in this issue comes down to one phone call. It rings at 8.45, and a mother says her son cannot stand up. Illness is a reason that demands support. Stop treating sick children as truants and their parents as problems.

Belief is the starting point, not a reward for evidence. Capability is not motivation: "I can't today" is not "I don't want to." A child with fluctuating health, limited energy or reduced capacity is not lacking aspiration, and a family asking for flexibility is not lacking commitment.

From Monday, schools should

- Start from belief when a family says their child is ill
- Ask what support is needed, not what proof is missing
- Offer flexibility that fits fluctuating health
- Record the illness behind the absence, not just the absence

Believe children. Believe families. Then support them.

Leaders: share this message, and sign up to it. Ask your staff: when a parent says their child is too unwell to attend, what is the first thing we do? If it is to ask for evidence, start there. Offer a conversation, a rest space or a paced return first, and code the absence so the register tells the truth.

Colin Cattanach, Editor

Questions to sit with

When a parent says their child is ill, do we ask first for proof or for a plan?

Would a family say they felt believed after their last contact with us?

Further reading: Long Covid Kids: parents and caregivers · National Attendance Portal

Next: In conversation with Sammie McFarland →

In conversation with Sammie McFarland

Colin Cattanach, Editor of Attendance Magazine, talks to the founder and Chief Executive of Long Covid Kids and Friends. Sammie's perspectives are drawn from Colin Cattanach's conversation with Sammie McFarland and edited for print.

What is the heart of your message to schools?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie founded Long Covid Kids following her own and her daughter's experiences of Long Covid. What began as a small grassroots group of families in 2020 has grown into the world's first charity dedicated to supporting children and young people affected by Long Covid, connecting with more than 11,000 families.

Long Covid remains the charity's foundation, but its work increasingly recognises the shared challenges faced by children and young people affected by other prolonged, fluctuating and energy-limiting health conditions. Diagnosis can be delayed, difficult to establish or may not fully reflect a child's needs, yet the barriers to education, participation and support can be remarkably similar.

Her central message to schools is that education is about more than attendance and academic attainment. It is also about development, relationships, belonging and opportunities to learn and participate.

Long Covid and other prolonged, fluctuating and energy-limiting health conditions can affect every aspect of a child's education and school experience. Attendance may be one visible indicator of their impact, but it does not tell the whole story.

Children and young people may experience symptoms affecting multiple body systems, with needs and capabilities that fluctuate over time. Difficulties with attendance or participation should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of motivation, aspiration or parental commitment. Schools need to recognise the impact of ill health and respond with understanding, flexibility and appropriate support.



Image provided by Long Covid Kids

Sammie McFarland, Founder & CEO, Long Covid Kids and Friends. Photo: Long Covid Kids.

About Sammie. Sammie works alongside children, young people and families to ensure lived experience informs research, policy, healthcare and education. Her contributions extend nationally and internationally through organisations and expert groups including NIHR, NHS England, WHO and the International Post Covid & Post Infection Conditions (IPIC) Society. Drawing on evidence, lived experience and professional expertise, her work focuses on improving understanding, inclusion and opportunities for children and young people affected by Long Covid and other prolonged, fluctuating and energy-limiting health conditions. Sammie gave evidence to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry's Module 8 hearings on Children and Young People in October 2025. longcovidkids.org/team/sammie-mcfarland

About Long Covid Kids. Long Covid Kids supports children and young people living with Long Covid, Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME) and other prolonged, fluctuating and energy-limiting illnesses, and their families. We provide trusted information, practical support and connection, while working to improve understanding and remove barriers across health, education and everyday life.

Next: Looking beyond attendance →

Looking beyond attendance: understanding children's health needs

The scale of Long Covid and health-related absence

Sammie's perspective: The latest Office for National Statistics estimate Sammie cites, from 2024, is about 111,000 children aged 3 to 17 in England and Scotland, around one in every 100, and more than 20,000 were severely limited in their day-to-day activities. National monitoring has since reduced, so the current number of children affected is unknown. Symptoms fluctuate, diagnosis can be delayed, and attendance systems do not record the illness behind sickness absence, so the full impact on children's education remains difficult to establish.

111,000	1 in 100	20,000+
children aged 3 to 17	around one in every 100	severely limited (ONS, 2024)

Source: longcovidkids.org/policy-parliamentary

Attendance Magazine: What does the increase in health-related school absence tell us about the need for a more health-led approach to education?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie points to the Department for Education's report that 18.1% of pupils in England were persistently absent in autumn 2025/26, 2.12% severely so, and that illness was the single largest recorded reason for absence. Illness accounted for 3.37% of all possible sessions, still above pre-pandemic levels.

For Sammie, Long Covid cannot explain all of that, but the figures raise an important question: has education policy adapted sufficiently to children's health needs? When illness is a leading reason for absence, responses must go beyond attendance targets to understand the underlying health needs, barriers to participation and support children require to access education in ways that are appropriate and sustainable.

Further reading: Long Covid Kids · Sammie McFarland · Policy and parliamentary

> **“illness was the single largest recorded reason for absence”**
>
> — Sammie's perspective

Long Covid, Chronic Illness and School Attendance: The Case for a Health-Led Response · Sammie McFarland, Long Covid Kids

Next: Looking beyond attendance, continued →

Looking beyond attendance (continued)

Attendance Magazine: What are the risks of treating health-related absence primarily as an attendance or behaviour issue?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie sees the debate becoming distorted when health-related absence is treated as a behavioural or parental problem. She argues that sickness absence needs a health-led response, focused on understanding the child's circumstances, identifying barriers and providing appropriate support rather than applying pressure to attend.



A child resting at home: health needs sit behind many absences. Illustrative image.

> **“sickness absence needs a health-led response”**
>
> — Sammie's perspective

Next: Belief, stigma and the culture surrounding chronic illness →

Belief, stigma and the culture surrounding chronic illness

Attendance Magazine: When families sit across from you, what is the one thing they say they need first?

Sammie's perspective: For Sammie, the answer is being believed and having their concerns taken seriously. She describes families with children who have debilitating symptoms yet still feel they must prove those symptoms are genuine. She sees invisible, fluctuating conditions making that harder, because a child may manage something one day and be unable to repeat it the next. Attending on Monday does not mean they could attend on Tuesday.

Attendance Magazine: Where does the wider culture make this worse for the child at the school gate?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie argues that when a culture starts from suspicion, questioning whether a child is genuinely ill or could attend if they wanted to, the burden of proof lands on the child and family. This can leave families feeling disbelieved and dismissed, reinforcing stigma and creating additional barriers to appropriate support.

> **"the burden of proof lands on the child and family"**
>
> — Sammie's perspective



An empty chair by the classroom window. Illustrative image.

Next: Capability is not motivation →

Capability is not motivation

Attendance Magazine: When a child cannot get through the school day, is that a motivation problem?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie stresses that capability and motivation are not the same thing. A child can desperately want to be in school and still be unable to sustain a conventional day. They may be able to achieve highly yet lack the energy for six lessons, the corridors, lunchtime and homework, five days a week. She argues that if schools mistake that for poor motivation, interventions can backfire: rewards will not resolve post-exertional symptom exacerbation (PESE), sanctions will not create energy, and a motivational chat cannot remove a health-related limitation.

For Sammie, the priority is to recognise capability and adapt expectations and support accordingly. Depending on the child's needs, this might include maintaining relationships with teachers, offering selected lessons or remote access, planning rest and prioritising learning. Some children may be unable to participate even with adjustments and require periods of complete rest. That is not lowering expectations; it is recognising that participation may look different.

Attendance Magazine: Why does energy that comes and goes break the way schools record attendance?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie describes Long Covid as prolonged, fluctuating and, for many children, energy-limiting. Attendance systems assume present or absent, and she says Long Covid is anything but binary. A pupil may be unable to manage mornings but participate later in the day, or their capacity may fluctuate from day to day. Cognitive activity can exacerbate symptoms just as physical activity can. Symptoms may worsen immediately or hours or days after activity, known as post-exertional symptom exacerbation (PESE).

She notes that NICE guidance for ME/CFS, a related but distinct condition, advises against pushing through symptoms. In her view, rest is not always adequately recognised as a legitimate health need in education. Sammie would like schools to consider opportunities to rest, quieter spaces, flexible transitions, adjusted PE and reduced homework, where appropriate, so that participation is manageable and more sustainable over time.

Further reading: Long Covid Kids · Sammie McFarland · National Attendance Portal

Long Covid, Chronic Illness and School Attendance: The Case for a Health-Led Response · Sammie McFarland, Long Covid Kids

Next: Repurposing education around the child →

Repurposing education around the child

Attendance Magazine: What would education built around the child look like?

Sammie's perspective: For children with prolonged, fluctuating and energy-limiting health conditions, the standard model of education may not meet their needs. Sammie argues that the system sometimes has to move towards the child rather than only pulling the child back into it.

For Sammie, schools need to separate education, attendance and physical presence. A child who cannot attend school full-time, or at all, should not automatically lose their teachers, friendships, opportunities to learn and connection to their school community. The goal remains ambitious, but the approach must be flexible and responsive to the child's changing health and individual needs.

> **“the system sometimes has to move towards the child rather than only pulling the child back into it”**
>
> — Sammie's perspective

Next: Repurposing education, continued →

Repurposing education around the child (continued)

Attendance Magazine: What happens when children's health needs go unrecognised or unsupported in education?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie warns that disconnection can build. Without appropriate support, children may experience missed learning, weaker friendships and a reduced sense of belonging to the school community. Anxiety about returning may grow, qualifications can become harder to access, and families and schools can end up in conflict.

She notes that the DfE links missing education to underachievement and becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training), but stresses that these outcomes are not inevitable. The concern is that unmet health needs and inaccessible education can create barriers that extend into further education, training and employment.

For Sammie, early, flexible and appropriate support matters. Families need a consistent point of contact, appropriate support and planning, including an Individual Healthcare Plan (IHCP) and/or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) where relevant, regular reviews and clarity about what evidence is genuinely needed. Support should not be delayed while plans are being developed or formalised.



Learning at home: flexible support keeps education within reach. Illustrative image.

> **"Support should not be delayed while plans are being developed or formalised.**
>
> **— Sammie's perspective**

Next: School health capacity and attendance coding →

School health capacity and attendance coding

Attendance Magazine: How can schools and health services work more effectively together to support children with health-related attendance difficulties?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie notes that England still has school nurses, but a readily accessible nurse in every school bears little resemblance to what many communities experience. She sees schools supporting children whose educational access is affected by physical health, mental health, neurodivergence, poverty and complex family circumstances, often with insufficient coordination between health and education services.

For Sammie, stronger collaboration between schools, healthcare professionals, children and families is essential to recognising individual needs, reducing barriers and ensuring appropriate support. The School Health Hub website, which is now live, provides practical guidance and resources for schools and families.

Attendance Magazine: What are we missing when health-related school absence is recorded under a single sickness code?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie highlights that current attendance data tells us little about the health needs and circumstances behind illness-related absence. Children affected by Long Covid, ME/CFS, a broken bone and other health conditions may all be recorded under the broad category of illness, limiting our understanding of health-related absence and the support children need.

Sammie advocates for better national data on health-related absence to inform policy and provision, while protecting children's confidentiality and recognising that diagnosis can be delayed or difficult to establish. Access to support should be based on individual needs, not dependent on a formal diagnosis.

> **"Access to support should be based on individual needs, not dependent on a formal diagnosis."**
>
> — Sammie's perspective

Next: Ventilation, prevention and the UK Covid-19 Inquiry →

Ventilation, prevention and the UK Covid-19 Inquiry

Attendance Magazine: Why should schools consider indoor air quality as part of protecting children's health and access to education?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie highlights that supporting children's health must include preventing avoidable illness, not only responding once children become unwell. She points to the DfE's February 2026 guidance, which recognises the importance of good ventilation in maintaining healthy learning environments and reducing the transmission of respiratory infections, including Covid-19. The DfE's new allergy safety guidance, which Long Covid Kids & Friends contributed to, also explicitly encourages schools to consider environmental air quality and infection prevention as part of their wider health and safety responsibilities.

For Sammie, CO_2 monitoring, windows, mechanical ventilation, attention to poorly ventilated rooms and air cleaning are not simply estates issues. They are practical preventative measures that can help protect and benefit the health and wellbeing of the whole school community, creating healthier environments that support learning, inclusion and meaningful participation in education.

Attendance Magazine: Where do children now stand in the UK Covid-19 Inquiry?

Sammie's perspective: The UK Covid-19 Inquiry's Module 8 placed children and young people's experiences of the pandemic under scrutiny, including the impact on their education, health, wellbeing and access to services. Sammie provided written and oral evidence on behalf of Long Covid Kids & Friends, highlighting the experiences of children living with the ongoing consequences of Covid-19.

For Sammie, the significance of Module 8 goes beyond examining what happened during the pandemic. It also provided an opportunity to highlight how overlooked and poorly understood post-infectious and energy-limiting conditions have been, and the barriers children and young people continue to face in accessing healthcare, education and meaningful participation in everyday life.

The forthcoming report is an opportunity to ensure that their experiences inform lasting improvements in policy and practice. The lessons must recognise not only the disruption children experienced during the pandemic, but also the ongoing needs of those whose lives and childhoods continue to be affected.

Further reading: Long Covid Kids · Sammie McFarland · National Attendance Portal

> **“practical preventative measures”**
>
> — Sammie's perspective

Next: A cultural shift: believe, then support →

A cultural shift: believe, then support

Attendance Magazine: What needs to change in school culture to better support children with health-related educational needs?

Sammie's perspective: For Sammie, Long Covid raises a bigger question than how to support children with one illness: how education can better include children whose health does not fit a standard model. She wants a move from suspicion to belief, from compliance to participation, from percentages alone to understanding children's individual circumstances, and from asking why a child will not attend to asking what barriers they face and what support they need.

She sees that a child can remain ambitious while ill, love school while unable to attend, be academically able with very little usable energy, look well while profoundly unwell, and attend today yet be unable to participate tomorrow. Schools, she says, need to be able to respond flexibly without being accused of abandoning high expectations.

> **“Schools need to be able to respond flexibly without being accused of abandoning high expectations.”**
>
> — Sammie's perspective



A quiet nurse room offers rest and support. Illustrative image.

Next: A cultural shift, continued →

A cultural shift: believe, then support (continued)

Attendance Magazine: What would a credible national response actually contain?

Sammie's perspective: Sammie argues that children's health needs and health-related absence require a coordinated response across healthcare and education, with better data that protects confidentiality, stronger collaboration between children, young people, families, schools and healthcare services, and improved school-health capacity.

In her view, pupils need personalised adjustments, including opportunities for rest, and support to maintain connections with teachers and peers when full-time attendance is not possible, recognising that some children may be too unwell to participate even with adjustments.

Families need a consistent point of contact rather than repeated challenge, and school staff and leaders need training to understand prolonged, fluctuating and energy-limiting illnesses, including how capability can differ from motivation.

Indoor air quality and infection prevention matter too, and Sammie argues that policy should recognise meaningful participation, inclusion and belonging, rather than measuring success through attendance figures alone.

> **“rather than measuring success through attendance figures alone”**
>
> — Sammie's perspective

Next: What Attendance Magazine has learned from Sammie's work →

What Attendance Magazine has learned from Sammie's work

I came away from this conversation with a simple conviction. Long Covid is not simply an attendance problem, and for the estimated 111,000 children aged 3 to 17 living with it in England and Scotland, the gap between “I don't want to” and “I can't today” decides everything. Sammie's work gives schools six lessons. Each comes with a question to take into your next meeting. *Colin Cattanach, Editor*

1. **Believe first.** Belief is the starting point, not the reward for producing enough evidence. *What would change if our default response to a child reporting illness was belief?*
2. **Treat illness as a reason for support.** Sickness absence needs something different from a behaviour response. *When did we last ask what this child can manage right now?*
3. **Build flexibility into the timetable.** Planned rest, selected lessons and remote access can keep a child connected. *Could a pupil who manages only mornings keep their teachers and friends?*
4. **Code honestly and use health partners.** Code I hides the cause, and school health capacity is thin. *Do we know which health partners we could call tomorrow?*
5. **Prevention is inclusion.** Good ventilation is an attendance and public-health measure. *When did we last check the air in our most crowded room?*
6. **Listen to lived experience.** Families know what their child can manage, and should not have to prove it repeatedly. *Who in school can a family speak to without starting again?*

They do not need lower ambition. They need a different route to achieving it.

Attendance Magazine

Long Covid, Chronic Illness and School Attendance: The Case for a Health-Led Response · Sammie McFarland, Long Covid Kids

Next: Help is out there: Long Covid support →

Help is out there: Long Covid support for schools and families

LONG COVID KIDS

www.longcovidkids.org

Bookmark this site. Founded through lived experience, Long Covid Kids & Friends works alongside children, young people, families and professionals to improve understanding and support for those affected by Long Covid and related illnesses. Its website brings together practical guidance, resources and support for schools and families. Its new guide, *Long Covid in Children: A Practical Guide to Education*, is featured in this issue. *Colin Cattanach, Editor*

For schools and education professionals

Guidance for teachers, leaders and attendance staff.

Parents and carers

Support for families living with Long Covid.

Children and young people

Information written for young people themselves.

Find support now

Where to turn when help is needed today.

Health and social care professionals

Resources for clinicians and care teams.

COMING SOON

Long Covid Integration Plan, coming soon to the Membership section of the National Attendance Portal

A plan to help schools build Long Covid and other energy-limiting illnesses into attendance, inclusion and support plans.

nationalattendanceportal.uk

Next: What school leaders will do differently →

What school leaders will do differently after reading this

1 Stop treating a good day as proof of a well child

Owner: SENCo and head of year. Brief staff that a child may manage something once and be unable to repeat it, and that symptoms can worsen hours or days later. What a child manages at school may not reflect the impact on their health afterwards.

2 Agree a plan that reduces demands, not one that asks for more stamina

Owner: named senior lead with the child and family. Agree individualised adjustments that reduce demands and support safe, manageable and sustainable participation. Do not set targets that assume steady improvement.

3 Make rest legitimate

Owner: pastoral lead. Ensure children can access rest when needed, including a quiet space where appropriate, without having to repeatedly justify their needs. Recognise that some children may require complete rest away from educational activity.

4 Offer participation that is not physical presence

Owner: curriculum lead. Consider flexible, remote or adapted ways to maintain access to learning, friendships and school life. Recognise that some children may be too unwell to participate even with adjustments, and that maintaining connection should not create additional demands.

5 Ask once, record well

Owner: office manager. Listen to children, young people and families, record agreed needs and adjustments, and ensure relevant staff have access to appropriate information. Avoid requiring families to repeatedly explain or provide evidence of the same health needs.

Review: whenever the child's health or needs change. **Debate question.** Would we expect a child with a broken leg to manage stairs without appropriate support? Why, then, do we sometimes expect children with invisible or fluctuating health conditions to manage educational demands without the adjustments they need? Take that question into your next leadership meeting and ask which child it makes you think of.

Questions to sit with

1. Which of these five actions would be most challenging to implement, and what support would staff need? 2. Who will agree the first review with the child and family, and when?

We are in awe of Long Covid Kids

Attendance Magazine and the National Attendance Portal are in awe of the work Long Covid Kids does for children, families and schools. If you lead attendance anywhere, read their guidance, share it with your staff and visit their website today.

Colin Cattanach, Editor

longcovidkids.org



EBSA · 1 OF 3 · PARTNERSHIP

35

EBSA and Parent Support

Parents are partners, not problems. Inside: a practical toolkit to help families and schools work together when a child struggles to attend.

Next: Parents are partners, not problems →

Parents Are Partners, Not Problems

Emotionally based school avoidance is anxiety and distress that make school feel impossible. It is not a parenting failure.

Picture the gate at 8:50. A parent crouches beside a child who will not let go. You know the signs: stomach aches, Sunday-night dread, partial days.

Parents feel blamed and alone. Many have fought for hours to get out of the door before school even calls.

Why partnership works

A parent knows what the morning looked like and what helped last week. Treat that as evidence. Section 19 of the Education Act 1996 places a duty on the local authority to arrange suitable education, so families deserve a school that works alongside them.



Illustrative image

Ask "what would make tomorrow morning easier?" before you send a letter. Offer a call at a time that suits, agree who the family speaks to, and say nobody is being judged.

The answer is early, warm and co-produced

- Act on the first signs, not the tenth letter.
- Lead with warmth: a known voice, not a template.
- Build the plan with the family, not for them.

Questions to sit with

? When did we last treat a parent's account of the morning as evidence rather than excuse?

? Which of our attendance letters would we be uncomfortable reading to a frightened family?

Further reading: notfineinschool.co.uk · teamsquarepeg.org

Next: The Parent Support Toolkit →

The Parent Support Toolkit

7.40 a.m. A child clings to the car door. A parent runs out of words. Five tools turn that morning into a plan everyone can follow.



A calm conversation at reception starts the plan. Illustrative image.

> If a step fails, we change the step, not the child.
>
> — Attendance Magazine

Co-produced return plans

Small, graded steps agreed with the child and family, from the car park to the classroom. Review every step together. Rush none.

One key adult, one safe space

A named person and a calm room the child can always reach. They know who to find when things feel too much. Every adult must honour it.

Weekly warm contact

A friendly call each week instead of warning letters. Kind, regular contact rebuilds trust and catches problems early. Start with something good.

Signposting

Parent peer support groups and the National Attendance Portal. Families should never have to search alone for help.

THE FIFTH TOOL

A plain-English guide for parents

Explain each step in words a worried parent can read at 7 a.m. Who will call, what a meeting is for, what support exists. No jargon, no threats. Offer it in print and by text.

Questions to sit with ? Which parent would you struggle to look in the eye after reading your last attendance letter?

Further reading: notfineinschool.co.uk · teamsquarepeg.org

Next section: Belonging →



Illustrative image

BELONGING · 1 OF 4

38

The Belonging Framework

Belonging is the engine of attendance. Inside: the framework, and what it looks like in practice.

Next: Belonging is the engine of attendance →

Belonging Is the Engine of Attendance



Illustrative image

A teacher at the gate says a boy's name, and he stands a little taller. Children come to places where they feel recognised, welcomed and expected. Belonging is no soft extra. It is why a child gets out of bed.

Why belonging comes first

Any school can write a tougher attendance policy. Few can build the feeling that a child is missed when absent. That feeling is the engine. When a pupil trusts an adult will notice and be glad of their return, the journey shortens and the doorway opens.

Absence is rarely one decision. It grows from small moments: a forgotten name, a return met with a sanction, an unsafe corridor. Belonging reverses each, one conversation at a time.

Five conditions to build

- **Relationships:** at least one trusted adult who knows each child well.
- **Recognition:** names used, effort noticed, achievements shared with home.
- **Safety:** physical, emotional and social, including at unstructured times.
- **Voice:** pupils shape decisions and see what changes as a result.
- **Community:** families feel the school is theirs, too.

Fact box: the pupil voice audit

Ask a representative group, including pupils with SEND and those with patchy attendance: Who notices when you are away? Where do you feel least safe? What would make Monday easier? Record the answers, share them with governors and act on the top three within a term.

Bold claim: if your attendance strategy does not start with how children feel, it starts in the wrong place.

Questions to sit with ?

1. Which child in your school would not be missed tomorrow, and what does that tell you?
2. If pupils graded your welcome honestly, would you act on the answer?

Further reading: [nationalattendanceportal.uk]

Next: The Framework in Practice →

The Framework in Practice

Belonging is built on a rhythm. Habits repeated by every adult become the culture children feel.



Steady habits build trust. Illustrative image.

> **A rhythm beats a campaign.**
>
> — Attendance Magazine

Why rhythm matters

An anxious child hovers at the gate, waiting for one familiar face. Children who struggle to attend need predictability. A daily greeting, a weekly acknowledgement and a termly invitation say the school is steady and they are expected. Each layer reinforces the others. None needs a large budget.

Daily

Meet-and-greet at the gate, tutor check-ins and names used warmly by every adult.

Weekly

Celebrate presence, and follow up every absence with care rather than suspicion.

Termly

Belonging surveys, house events and family events that bring parents through the door.

Annually

Review attendance and behaviour policy against pupil voice data.

Checklist: is the rhythm real?

- Do leaders stand at the gate every morning, not just when inspectors call?
- Does every absence prompt a caring conversation, not a standard letter?
- Are families invited in at least once a term for something positive?
- Does pupil voice data shape the annual policy review?

Questions to sit with ?

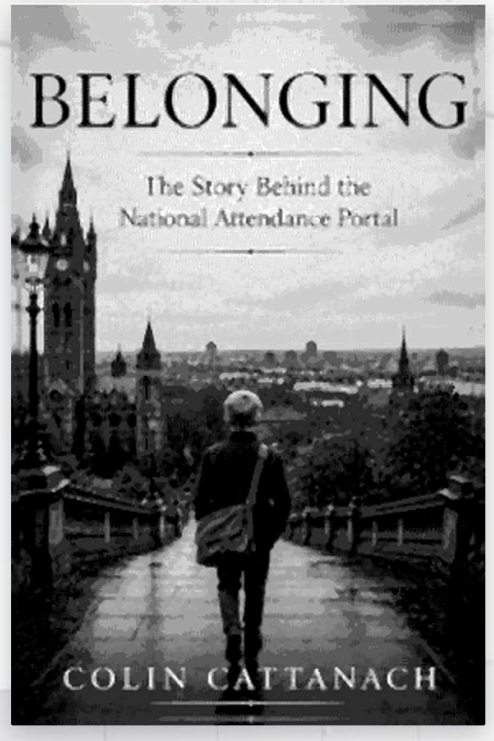
1. Will the daily greeting start this half-term, and who stands at the gate?

2. Which habit in your school exists only when inspectors are watching?

Further reading: [nationalattendanceportal.uk]

Next: The story behind the National Attendance Portal →

Belonging: the story behind the National Attendance Portal



The book behind the statistics.

Attendance is often discussed through percentages, persistent absence figures and interventions. This book focuses on the child, family and story behind those numbers, and why relationships, inclusion, leadership, opportunity and feeling connected to school can matter as much as monitoring systems.

The story behind the Portal

The Portal grew out of Attendance Magazine, a free professional publication created by Colin Cattanach, founder, editor and attendance leader with more than three decades in education. Readers showed they needed more than articles: one place for tools, learning, evidence and support. That became the National Attendance Portal.

Colin grew up in a working-class Glasgow family, and a headteacher who saw something in him changed the course of his life. Written largely while he recovered from cancer treatment, the book is personal and candid about what more than 35 years in education have taught him.

Supporting charity

50% of proceeds go to Prostate Cancer UK.

Book and charity page

Buy the paperback on Amazon UK

Next section: The DfE inclusion strategy →



INCLUSION STRATEGY · 1 OF 6

42

The DfE Inclusion Strategy Statement

Every mainstream school needs an inclusion strategy. Inside: four steps, a checklist and a free builder to write yours.

Next: Every mainstream school needs an inclusion strategy →

Every Mainstream School Needs an Inclusion Strategy

Governors meet at 6pm. Tea cools beside the template. The schools white paper "Every child achieving and thriving" (February 2026) puts inclusion at the heart of mainstream schools. Your strategy statement must prove it.

A public promise, not a private policy

Publish your inclusion strategy on the school website by 31 December 2026, with activity and budgeted costs. Parents, governors and inspectors must see what you will do and pay for. Warm words cannot replace the work and the money.

Follow the money, follow the principles

Invest inclusive mainstream fund allocations in line with the 7 principles of inclusion. Make the link explicit: trace each pound to a principle, each principle to a child who benefits.

Built to be revisited

Review the multi-year strategy annually and state that on its cover. Check the plan against what actually happened. A living document earns more trust than a glossy plan gathering dust.

Use the EEF two-part model

Start with universal approaches for every pupil. Then add adaptations and additional support for those who need more. Targeted support must not patch over weak everyday practice.

DEADLINE

31 Dec 2026

PRINCIPLES

7

guiding every pound of the inclusive mainstream fund

FACT BOX: YOUR STATEMENT MUST

- Be published on your website
- Set out activity
- Show budgeted costs
- Note the annual review on the cover

? QUESTIONS TO SIT WITH

1. Could a parent trace one pound of our fund to one child who is missing school?
2. Would we publish this strategy if attendance were the only thing inspectors read?

Further reading: shared-inclusionbuilder.netlify.app · SEND Code of Practice

Source: Department for Education, GOV.UK.

Next: Build your statement in four steps →

Build Your Statement in Four Steps

Picture a head at the kitchen table, template open, blank page staring back. Follow the DfE's own logic: understand, remove, add, then cost and publish. Each step below builds on the last, so work through them in order and your statement will read as one clear argument rather than a list of good intentions.

1 Understand the needs of your cohort

Bring together SEND, attendance, health and pupil voice data so the needs are evidenced, not assumed. Look for patterns: who is absent, when, and why? Ask pupils and parents directly, and record what they tell you.

2 Remove predictable barriers with whole-school approaches

Fix what affects many children first: transitions, timetables, sensory environments and the tone of communication. These are the EEF's universal approaches, the first part of its two-part model, and they benefit every pupil.

3 Add targeted, evidence-based support

Where universal provision is not enough, add specific adaptations and additional support, and say what evidence it rests on. This is the second part of the EEF model, and it should be a deliberate choice, never a default.

4 Cost it, publish it and review it

List budgeted costs, publish on your website before 31 December 2026 and set the annual review date. If your strategy runs for several years, note the annual review on the cover page.

CHECKLIST BEFORE YOU PUBLISH

- Needs evidenced from several data sources
- Activity linked to the 7 principles of inclusion
- Budgeted costs shown for every action
- Annual review noted on the cover page

? QUESTIONS TO SIT WITH

1. Whose voice is missing from our needs data, and why have we not asked?
2. Which barrier would we still be ignoring if nobody complained?

Further reading: shared-inclusionbuilder.netlify.app · SEND Code of Practice

Source: Department for Education guidance, GOV.UK.

Next: Put attendance at the heart of it →

Put Attendance at the Heart of It

It is 6pm, the governors are waiting, and one spreadsheet tells the truth. Attendance data is the most honest evidence of barriers a school holds. Use it.

The white paper 'Every child achieving and thriving' (February 2026) puts inclusion at the heart of mainstream schooling. A duty, not a slogan. By 31 December 2026, every school must publish its inclusion strategy online, setting out activity and budgeted costs. Parents, inspectors and the children it describes will read it.

A child who is not in school is telling you something. "Absence is rarely random." (Attendance Magazine) It clusters around anxiety, illness, unmet need and not belonging. Read the pattern. Find your barriers before anyone has to complain.

Built on the EEF two-part model

The Education Endowment Foundation's approach, referenced in DfE guidance, is clear: begin with universal approaches for everyone. Then add adaptations and support for those who need more. Skip the first step and your budget patches problems good everyday practice could have prevented.

Part one: Universal approaches

Whole-school practice that removes barriers for every child: belonging routines, warm communication, predictable transitions.

Part two: Adaptations and support

Targeted help for children whose needs universal practice cannot meet, planned and reviewed.

Name your pathways

EBSA: graded returns, key adult, safe space. **Long Covid:** paced timetables, remote links, fair coding. **SEND:** needs recorded, plans shared, reviewed termly.

EVIDENCE OF BARRIERS

Break persistent absence down by need, year group and day of the week. Follow the patterns to the barriers. Show how inclusive mainstream fund spending follows the 7 principles of inclusion. Review multi-year strategies annually and note the review on the cover page.

? QUESTIONS TO SIT WITH

1. Which pattern in our absence data have we seen and chosen not to name?
2. If a pupil read our strategy, would they recognise themselves?

> **"Attendance data is the most honest evidence of barriers a school holds."**

Next: Your inclusion strategy checklist →

Your Inclusion Strategy Checklist

Tick every box before you publish. Pin this page above the desk of whoever owns the document.

The deadline is fixed: 31 December 2026. The white paper 'Every child achieving and thriving' (February 2026) puts inclusion at the heart of mainstream, and your published strategy is how you prove it. Each item below is a test of whether your document is honest, specific and useful to a worried parent reading it at the kitchen table.

Start with evidence, not aspiration. Know your cohort, name the barriers, then choose activity that follows the EEF two-part model: universal approaches first, then adaptations and additional support. Map everything to the 7 principles of inclusion that guide the inclusive mainstream fund, and put a budgeted cost beside every action. Vague promises without a price are the quickest way to lose trust. Be candid about what you cannot yet do, and say when you will.

- [ ] Cohort needs analysis completed
- [ ] Barriers to learning and participation identified
- [ ] Activities mapped to the 7 principles
- [ ] Budgeted costs listed
- [ ] Published on the website before 31 December 2026
- [ ] Annual review date set

BEFORE YOU HIT PUBLISH

Check the cover page states that a multi-year strategy is reviewed annually. Make sure attendance, EBSA and Long Covid pathways appear by name. Ask a parent to read it.

? QUESTIONS TO SIT WITH

1. Which box would we tick dishonestly if the deadline were tomorrow?
2. Who has the standing to say this document is not good enough?

Further reading: shared-inclusionbuilder.netlify.app · SEND Code of Practice

Next: A free inclusion strategy builder →

Here is ours: a free inclusion strategy builder

A practical way to draft your school's Inclusion Strategy Statement, from the team behind the National Attendance Portal.

Eligible individual schools must publish a separate Inclusion Strategy Statement for 2026/27 by 31 December 2026. The builder gives you a structured route through it, so the blank page is no longer the hardest part. It is new magazine content, a planning aid, not a statutory directive. It does not certify compliance and is not DfE approval.

The workflow

Profile, context and vision

Describe your school and its commonly occurring needs at cohort level, then write a concise inclusion vision.

Evidence, barriers and provision

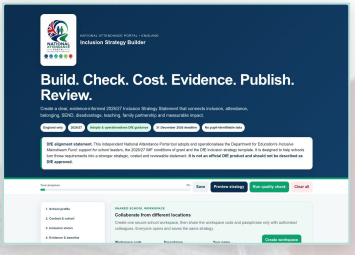
Baseline across attendance, attainment, SEND, behaviour, disadvantage and pupil and family voice; name your barriers and existing provision.

Principles, priorities and action plan

Work through the seven DfE principles, then set priorities with lead, costs, timescale, outcomes and success measures.

Funding, review, governance and quality check

Produce a full strategy, a one-page summary or an action-impact plan, ready to print or save as PDF.



Screenshot: Inclusion Strategy Builder

The free Inclusion Strategy Builder, shared-inclusionbuilder.netlify.app

Privacy: cohort-level planning only. Never enter pupil names, dates of birth, addresses, medical identifiers or case histories.

Open the free Inclusion Strategy Builder →

National Attendance Portal

Next section: Leaders →



LEADERS · 1 OF 2

48

Belonging for Leaders

Leaders need to belong too. Inside: the story behind the National Attendance Portal and what leaders can do next.

Leaders Need to Belong Too



FIG. 3

Valued leaders build schools where pupils feel valued. Illustrative image.

The loneliest job in the building

It is 6pm and the governors have gone home. The head is still at the desk. Heads and attendance leads carry an isolation that rarely appears in any improvement plan. They absorb the parental anger, the scrutiny of the data and every difficult decision, often with nobody senior enough to share it with.

Culture flows from the top

Pupils read the adults around them with unerring accuracy. Leaders who feel valued, trusted and connected build schools where pupils feel the same. Exhausted leaders, however committed, cannot sustain the warmth this issue demands.

Belonging is not a pupil-only agenda

We ask staff to welcome every child back, notice every absence and make every conversation kind. Leaders deserve the same. A belonging strategy that stops at the classroom door has a hole in it.

Further reading: educationsupport.org.uk · nationalattendanceportal.uk

PRACTICAL MOVES

Peer networks

Regular, confidential time with leaders facing the same pressures.

Professional supervision

A trained, independent space to process the emotional load.

Protected reflection time

Thinking time that survives the busiest week.

Honest governors

Governors who challenge with care and support in equal measure.

Questions to sit with

? When did a governor last ask how you are, before asking what the figures say? Who looks after the attendance lead?

? Is reflection time protected in your diary, or the first thing to go in the busiest week?

Next section: The National Attendance Portal →

The National Attendance Portal

Four communities, one purpose: the UK's hub where schools, researchers, governors and families come together on attendance and inclusion.

It is 6pm and the governors are still arguing over one column of attendance figures. Nobody in the room can fix it alone. Health, housing, belonging, teaching and trust all shape attendance, so the answers must be shared too. The Portal is where we share them: evidence, practice and honest conversation, open to everyone who wants every child in the room and thriving.

Schools

Find practical tools, swap what works and learn from colleagues facing the same barriers.

Researchers

Share findings where practitioners will actually use them, and see what schools need studied.

Governors

Ask sharper questions, scrutinise strategy and support leaders well.

Families

Get clear, jargon-free guidance and know that your voice is heard, not handled.

Why it matters

Every absence has a story. Too often the system sees only a code. The Portal puts the story back and treats attendance as inclusion, belonging and support, not blame. It is free to use, open to all and built to grow with the people who contribute.

The story behind the Portal

The Portal grew out of Attendance Magazine, a free publication created by Colin Cattanach as an independent space for attendance thinking. Readers showed they needed more than articles: one place for tools, learning, evidence and support. That became the Portal.

Join, contribute, challenge and learn. The more voices in the room, the better the answers become.

Get involved

- Visit the Portal and explore what is there
- Share one thing that works in your setting
- Pass it on to a governor, a parent or a colleague
- Bring the Portal into your next attendance meeting

? Questions to sit with

- Who owns attendance in your school: a person or a spreadsheet?
- Which family have you stopped hearing from, and why?

Further reading: nationalattendanceportal.uk. Always free.

What school leaders will do differently after reading Belonging

Belonging is not a poster. It is what a child notices on the way in.



The corridor at break. Illustrative image.

> **If attendance rose tomorrow but children still felt they did not belong, what would we have won?**
>
> — Attendance Magazine

1. ### Walk the arrival route as a child who dreads it

   Owner: headteacher. Review: this week. Note who greets whom, and what is said to a late arrival.

2. ### Name one person for every child at risk of drifting away

   Owner: pastoral lead. Review: fortnightly. The task is a relationship, not a spreadsheet.

3. ### Ask pupils and families what makes school hard to enter

   Owner: inclusion lead. Review: end of term. Keep it cohort-level and listen more than you explain.

4. ### Start your Inclusion Strategy Statement

   Owner: strategic lead with governor oversight. Review: before the 31 December 2026 publication deadline for eligible schools. Use the free builder or the portal.

Debate question

If attendance rose tomorrow but children still felt they did not belong, what would we have won?

Take it to your next leadership meeting and let people disagree. In my experience the honest answers come from the quietest person in the room, so ask them first, and write down what you decide to change.

MORE INFORMATION

Inclusion strategy builder · National Attendance Portal

Next: What Gets a Child Back Through the Door →

What Gets a Child Back Through the Door

Victoria Nieve Spencer, coach, speaker and author



Victoria Nieve Spencer. Image provided by the author.

About the author

Victoria Nieve Spencer is a coach, speaker and author based in North Yorkshire. She has worked in schools for over ten years, coaching senior leaders and supporting students directly, after 25 years in government, latterly as a job coach at the DWP. She is the creator of The Spencer Nieve Principle™ (Regulate. Reconnect. Rebuild.) and the Foothold Programme, an early attendance intervention.

A student once told me school was pointless. The calls and letters home only made it worse, and he said he didn't care. It sounded like stubbornness. Underneath it was fear: a fear of not being good enough.

I've met that fear in a lot of places. For fifteen years I've sat across from people at their lowest points, including young people, in addiction centres, schools, colleges and a children's cancer charity. Wherever it shows up, the pattern is the same: fear, shame, a feeling of not being good enough or not being understood. When I bring that to school attendance specifically, what I've learned, again and again, is that it starts with safety. A young person has to feel safe before they can feel heard or valued, and before they can believe in themselves, or feel that someone else believes in them too. Persistent absence is rarely about the timetable or just one thing. When a child doesn't feel safe, for whatever reason, staying away can be a nervous system doing its job. Once they do feel safe, the rest has room to happen: knowing why they're actually here, what it means for them, and seeing school as a stepping stone to their own future. Fines, rules and forms filled in at home don't get a child through the door. Feeling safe does.

> **“Fines, rules and forms filled in at home don't get a child through the door. Feeling safe does.”**

What I do is create the conditions where a young person feels safe enough to come back to who they are right now, why they're actually there, and what the outcome is for them. Everything else follows from that.

Continued: The problem with chasing numbers →

The problem with chasing numbers

In the autumn term of 2025/26, 18.10% of pupils in England were persistently absent, around 1.29 million young people, up from 17.79% a year earlier (DfE, Pupil absence in schools in England). Even the government's own guidance, Working Together to Improve School Attendance, says the vision is early intervention to understand the barriers behind a child's absence, not just recording it. But look at what schools are actually measured against day to day: accurate registers, data shared with the Department for Education, individual attendance improvement targets, penalty notices. Schools are built almost entirely around tracking and enforcement, which means the response often starts and ends there too, in practice. All necessary, but none of it touches the actual reason a child stopped coming in. In my experience, that reason is almost always emotional or sensory before it's logistical: family pressure, a sense of not being good enough, or a feeling of not being understood. For some children it's simpler than that: the environment itself is simply too much.

18.10%

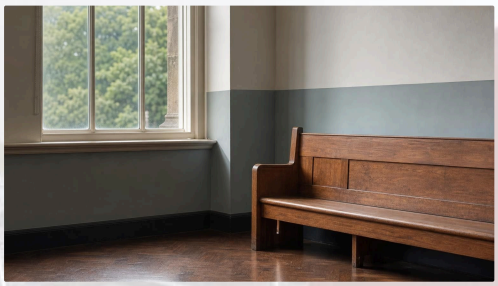
pupils persistently absent, autumn term 2025/26 (around 1.29 million young people), up from 17.79%

Source: DfE, Pupil absence in schools in England

When the environment is too much

For some children, especially many with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities), the barrier isn't emotional first, it's sensory. A corridor that's too loud, a classroom that's too bright or too crowded, a day with no quiet moment in it. An overstimulating environment can shut a child down just as effectively as feeling unwanted or misunderstood, and it deserves the same seriousness in how we respond to it.

This is part of what I mean by belief and understanding: it isn't only about how a young person feels about themselves, it's also about whether the space around them lets them settle enough to feel anything at all. For some children, a calm space is the first step, before any conversation about attendance can begin.



A calm space can be the first step. Illustrative image.

> **"An overstimulating environment can shut a child down just as effectively as feeling unwanted or misunderstood."**
>
> — Victoria Nieve Spencer

Continued: Understood, not persuaded →

Understood, not persuaded

Even when a student doesn't want to be there, the conversation still matters. What they need isn't persuasion: it's space to understand why they feel the way they do, and to know that sharing that is encouraged, not judged. That's often where the shift starts: when they feel understood enough to talk about why they don't want to be there.

One student was initially closed off, then opened up, unprompted, about ten minutes into our first session, sharing family pressures they'd been carrying alone. I hadn't pushed for it. They chose to tell me, because it felt safe.

A student who said they wanted to enjoy school, just hadn't known how to, and now did. Another who told me they were excited to learn because they could finally see a future for themselves.

Staff notice it too: students turning up who they'd normally have to chase, and breathing techniques being used without being asked.

Belief over compliance

There's a difference between a student turning up because a parent might be fined, and a student turning up because they genuinely want to be there. The first gets a body in a seat. The second builds something that lasts: a young person who can see how showing up today connects to the future they want.

> **"The first gets a body in a seat."**

I see three things sitting on top of that safety. Belief, in themselves, and feeling that someone else believes in them too. The why and the what: why am I actually here, what does this mean for me, and if I'm failing anyway, what's the point; I don't enjoy it, it feels like a waste of time, I don't understand what's in it for me. And dysregulation: a nervous system too overwhelmed to engage with any of the above, sometimes because the environment itself is too much. Address only one of these and the other two will still hold a child back. Address all three, and something shifts.

Belief	The why and the what	Regulation (dysregulation)
SAFETY		

Continued: Questions to sit with →

Back to the student I started with, who stands out for the why and the what. He came from a family where the bar was set very high, and he felt he couldn't reach it. The "I don't care" was a mask for anxiety about failing in front of the people he was constantly compared to.

I didn't try to correct the behaviour. I gave him space to talk about his own why, not the version handed to him by his family. We looked at what he was genuinely drawn to, and what that could actually open up for him specifically, not what it meant for the people around him. Once he had his own answer to why he was there and what it meant for him, something changed. He told me he'd never been asked questions like that before, never had a conversation like it. He returned to school and started to engage, not because the pressure at home eased, but because he finally had a why that belonged to him.

> **“He finally had a why that belonged to him.”**

These three don't cover everything. Friendship fallouts, feeling different, not being accepted by peers are just as real, and they deserve more room than a single article can give them.

I've since built this thinking into a structured early-support programme called Foothold ("solid ground, before the slip"), which I'm now taking into schools. But the programme is just a container for something I'd say regardless of whether I had one: attendance strategy will always be incomplete if it stops at tracking. What actually moves the number is what's underneath it: belief, why, and whether a child is regulated enough to engage with either.

Underneath all three is something I keep coming back to: a young person has to feel safe before they can feel heard or valued, and attendance follows from that. It's why the work starts with regulation, and why it includes the adults who lead the school: staff take their cue from their leaders, and when leaders are steady, children are more likely to feel safe enough to come back.

Regulate. **Reconnect.** **Rebuild.**

Questions to sit with

- Does this child feel safe here?
- Who has asked them about their own why?
- Is the environment itself too much?
- Does our response start and end with tracking?

Next: Guest article, David Curran →

Before Absence Becomes the Problem

What attendance can tell us, and what it cannot

David Curran, Assistive Technology Lead & Head of Innovation and Futures, Moon Hall School Reigate



David Curran. Image provided by the author.

About the author

David Curran is an educator, careers leader and assistive technology specialist with more than 26 years' experience in education. His work focuses on inclusion, assistive technology, AI, learner independence and future pathways. He is also a parent and brings both professional and personal perspectives to questions around attendance, belonging and access to education.

I have worked with young people for long enough to know that attendance data can tell the truth and still miss the story.

A learner arriving at school on time may look entirely unremarkable on a spreadsheet. If you know what happened before they reached the gate, it may be one of the most important things they have achieved that week. An absence mark can tell us equally clearly that somebody was not there, but it cannot tell us why.

Attendance matters. Children generally need to be in school to benefit from what schools offer, and the current Department for Education guidance rightly treats attendance as a shared responsibility between schools, families, trusts and local authorities. It also recognises that pupils who are persistently or severely absent may need support, not simply a process applied to them.[1]

The difficulty comes when the absence becomes the whole problem we are trying to solve.

Sometimes what looks like poor attendance is the end of a journey rather than the beginning of one. Before the missed days there may have been missed learning, and before that there may have been a barrier that was not fully understood. A young person may have spent months finding ways to cope before absence becomes the part adults can most easily see.

That does not mean every absence is caused by unmet need, nor does it remove the responsibilities young people and families have around attendance. It does suggest that the register can sometimes be the starting point for a conversation rather than the conclusion.

> **“Attendance data can tell the truth and still miss the story.”**

Continued: Inclusion Beyond SEND →

This became particularly clear through the work around Inclusion Beyond SEND, a conference we jointly organised with the University of Surrey in September 2026. The event brought together educators, researchers, employers, specialists and practitioners to look beyond individual interventions and consider how we build access, confidence and independence into learning from the start. One of the ideas that developed through that work was a pathway from access to participation, belonging, confidence, independence and future opportunity.

Access	Participation	Belonging	Confidence	Independence	Future opportunity

The Department for Education's recent research into school belonging is relevant here. Its 2026 study used PISA 2022 data linked with the National Pupil Database to examine the relationship between belonging, bullying and attainment among 16-year-olds in England.[2] Belonging is not simply a pleasant extra around the edges of learning. It is part of the wider picture we need to understand when we think about engagement and outcomes.

I have seen this from the professional side, but I have also sat on the parent side of the table. That changes the view.

Attendance, behaviour, SEND and wellbeing can easily become separate conversations involving different people, different systems and different pieces of information. Each decision may make sense when viewed on its own, yet the experience of the young person can become harder to see as a whole. Schools are busy places and staff do not always have every piece of the picture. Parents do not necessarily have it either, and young people rarely arrive with a neat explanation of what is going wrong.

The important question is who joins those pieces together.

As a parent, I have seen how quickly behaviour can become the headline when there may be something more complicated sitting underneath it. I have also seen the difference that individual adults can make when they know the young person, listen carefully and make support more consistent. Those experiences have made me cautious about using behaviour, attendance or attainment as explanations in themselves. They tell us something is happening, but not necessarily what it is.

> **“Consequence and curiosity can exist together.”**

There is a balance here. Poor behaviour still needs to be addressed. Schools need boundaries, and staff and other learners have a right to safe and calm classrooms. Inclusion cannot mean removing expectations whenever something becomes difficult. At the same time, consequence and curiosity can exist together. We can expect a young person to take responsibility while still asking what contributed to the situation and whether access, communication, relationships or unmet need form part of the picture.

Continued: Pupil experience and home education →

Recent DfE pupil-experience data adds another dimension. In 2024–25, 55% of secondary pupils with SEND said there was often or always an adult at school who believed they would be a success, compared with 66% of pupils without SEND.[3] That does not tell us that schools do not care. I know too many teachers, support staff and leaders who care enormously for that interpretation to make sense. It does, however, make me wonder about the experience of the young person who repeatedly encounters school through the things that have gone wrong.

55%

of secondary pupils with SEND

66%

of pupils without SEND

said there was often or always an adult at school who believed they would be a success. Source: DfE, 2024–25.

How long does it take before someone begins to see themselves as the learner who is always late, behind, disruptive, difficult or absent? Once that becomes part of their identity, getting through the school gate is only one part of rebuilding the relationship with education.

Elective home education also belongs within this conversation, although it needs to be considered carefully. EHE is not one experience and families choose it for many different reasons. It is a lawful form of education in England, and for some families it is a positive, planned and appropriate choice.[4] It would therefore be wrong to write about home education as if it automatically represented a failure of schooling.

There are, however, situations where the decision to home educate follows a longer period of difficulty with attendance, anxiety, SEND, relationships, confidence or access to learning. In those circumstances, I think it is reasonable to be interested in the journey that came before the decision. We might ask whether the young person could access the learning, whether support was consistent, whether they had an adult they trusted and whether they still believed they could succeed within the environment around them. These are questions rather than assumptions. The fact that a young person is now educated at home tells us where their education is taking place. It does not necessarily tell us how they reached that point.

This is also why the conversation needs to extend beyond school attendance itself. Alan Milburn's 2026 Young people and work interim report examines the increase in young people who are not in education, employment or training, with particular attention to young disabled people and those with health conditions.[5] The review was commissioned because the journey into adult life is becoming increasingly difficult for a significant group of young people. That should matter to anyone thinking about inclusion.

Our ambition cannot stop at getting somebody through the school gate or keeping their attendance above a particular threshold. We want young people to participate in education, develop confidence, understand what helps them learn and gradually become more independent. Ultimately, we want them to leave education with genuine choices about what happens next.

This changes the question we ask when somebody is struggling to attend. Instead of focusing only on how we get a young person back into school, we also need to think about what we are asking them to come back to.

Continued: Questions to sit with →

If nothing about the barrier has changed, physical presence may not produce engagement. If relationships have deteriorated, getting somebody through the gate may not immediately restore trust. If a learner has spent a long time believing they cannot succeed, simply telling them how important attendance is may not give them a reason to believe tomorrow will be different.

None of this makes attendance less important. For me, it makes the attendance conversation richer. The data can alert us to a problem, but understanding what sits behind it requires people to talk to one another and, importantly, to the young person.

What has changed? What is getting in the way? Where are things still going well? Who does this learner trust? When do they feel successful? What might make participation easier without removing the learning or lowering expectations?

Schools cannot solve everything sitting behind absence. Families, health services, local authorities and wider systems all have parts to play. There will also be occasions when support is available and is not accepted, and times when difficult decisions still have to be made. Being curious about the reasons behind absence should not mean pretending those complexities do not exist.

It does mean resisting the temptation to reduce a young person to a percentage.

Attendance is important because education is important. The purpose is not simply presence. It is what that presence makes possible.

> **"Access is the starting point. What matters is where it allows a young person to go."**

Questions to sit with

- What has changed?
- What is getting in the way?
- Where are things still going well?
- Who does this learner trust?
- When do they feel successful?
- What might make participation easier without removing the learning or lowering expectations?

References and further reading

1. Department for Education (2026). Working together to improve school attendance. Statutory guidance, updated 9 July 2026.
2. Department for Education (2026). School belonging and attainment at Key Stage 4. Published 19 August 2026.
3. Department for Education (2025). Pupil experiences in school: academic year 2024 to 2025. Published 27 November 2025.
4. Department for Education (2024). Elective home education. Guidance for local authorities, schools and parents, updated 19 August 2024.
5. Milburn, A. (2026). Young people and work: interim report. Department for Work and Pensions. Published 28 May 2026, updated 10 August 2026.

Next: From the editor →

Is school attendance now a public health issue?

It is time the DfE stopped tinkering with the data and started looking at the whole child.

Colin Cattanach, Editor, Attendance Magazine

I think the answer is yes, and I think we should say so plainly. Illness is the single largest recorded reason for absence from school. In autumn 2025/26, 18.1% of pupils were persistently absent, according to the DfE. When that many children are missing that much school, we are not looking only at behaviour data. We are looking at health signals, and we should read them that way.

For years we have treated attendance as a compliance problem: a number on a dashboard, a threshold to cross, a letter to send home. I understand why. Numbers are tidy and they feel manageable. But a child is not tidy, and a child who is not in school is usually telling us something that a percentage cannot.

One code, many children

Consider how we record sickness. One code lumps together a child with Long Covid, a child with ME, a child with crippling anxiety and a child with a broken bone. Those are wildly different situations with different needs, different timescales and different responses. Put them under a single heading and we cannot see what is happening. That is not a small technical gap. It means the system is, by design, blind to the very thing it says it wants to understand.

Behind the codes sit the reasons we all recognise from our own schools and our own inboxes: anxiety and emotionally based school avoidance, SEND, chronic illness, poverty, sensory overload and plain unmet need. Look at that list. Almost none of it is about a child choosing not to come. It is about health, wellbeing and inclusion. If the causes are health causes, the response has to be more than an attendance letter.

Tinkering with the dashboard

The DfE keeps refining. Codes, thresholds, registers, data sharing, targets: each change is presented as progress. I have no doubt it is well meant. But it feels to me like tinkering with the dashboard while the engine overheats. Better instruments are welcome, yet the warning light is already on, and fines and prosecutions have never made a child well.

In this issue, Sammie McFarland and Long Covid Kids make the case for a health-led response. Victoria Nieve Spencer writes about safety and regulation. David Curran reminds us that attendance data can tell the truth and still miss the story. And the film Unauthorised Absence, with Jo Clayton, shows what that missed story looks like in a family's life. Different voices, one message.

Continued: What public health thinking means →

What public health thinking means

We already respond to other population-level health trends with public health thinking: prevention, early identification, joined-up services, proper capacity. So why not this one? It means ventilation and air quality in our classrooms, so fewer children fall ill in the first place. It means spotting need early, with health, education and social care working together rather than passing a family between three waiting lists. It means school nursing capacity. And it means measuring engagement and belonging, not just presence.

> **You cannot data-manage a child well.**

What a public health approach to attendance would look like

- **Prevention:** clean air and ventilation so fewer children fall ill.
- **Health-informed data:** records that show why a child is absent.
- **Joined-up services:** health, education and social care working together.
- **School health capacity:** school nursing and wellbeing support.
- **Support before sanction:** help first, not fines and prosecution.
- **Engagement and belonging:** measured alongside presence.

None of this means abandoning accountability. Schools and families both want children in the classroom, and many children are absent for reasons that a good school can help with. But accountability that cannot tell illness from disengagement punishes the wrong people. A public health approach asks first what is making children unwell, anxious or unable to attend, and then what we can do about it together.

So, to the DfE: please keep improving the data, but look up from the dashboard. The question is no longer whether attendance is a public health issue. It is how long we will carry on pretending it is not.

Questions to sit with

- What would we learn if we could see the reason behind every sickness absence?
- Who in our area is responsible for joining up health, education and social care?
- How would we know if children felt they belonged?

Further reading: DfE attendance guidance · Long Covid Kids · National Attendance Portal

Colin Cattanach, Editor

Next: Candid Corner →

Candid Corner: The challenge for government

Minister, 18.1% of pupils were persistently absent in autumn 2025/26. Illness is the single largest recorded reason. Families are met with fines, prosecution threats, parenting courses and multi-year assessment waiting lists. 300,000 people signed a petition, delivered to Downing Street on 20 October 2026, asking you to end fines and prosecutions. Listen. Here is what we ask you to do.

1 End fines and prosecutions

Take attendance out of the criminal justice system for families of children who are ill, disabled or in distress.

2 Fund support, not enforcement

Pay for the health and SEND support behind absence. Fines have never helped a frightened child.

3 Record what is really happening

Long Covid and energy-limiting illness sit under one sickness code. Fix the data.

4 Measure belonging, not just presence

Count engagement and belonging. Presence alone hides the children who are suffering.

5 Give schools time, capacity and permission to be humane

The 31 December inclusion strategy deadline needs resource, not just a template.

> **You cannot fine a child well.**
>
> National Attendance Portal team

Questions for policymakers

- What would change if you measured belonging as seriously as attendance?
- Who is paid to rebuild trust with a family that has stopped believing in school?
- Are you funding support, or only consequences?

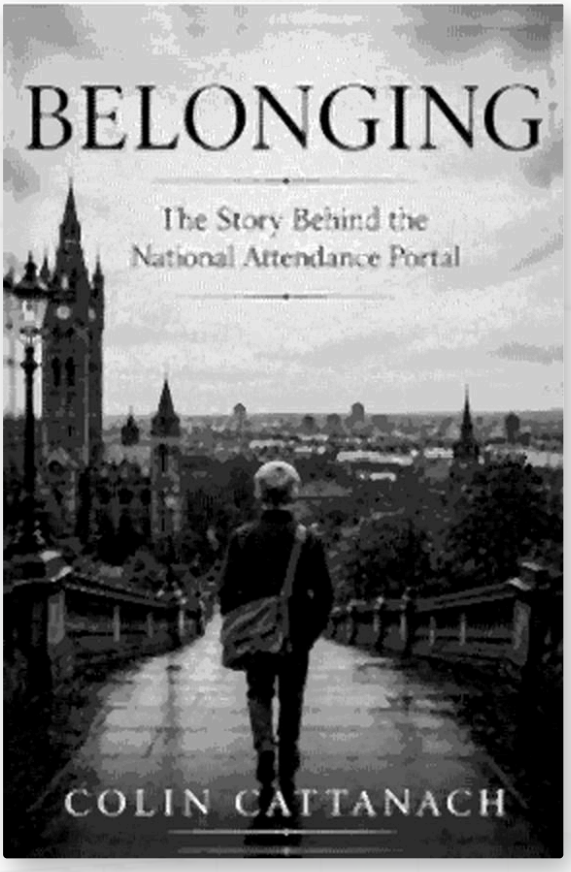
Further reading: DfE attendance guidance · National Attendance Portal

> **“Fines have never helped a frightened child.”**

We will keep asking until you answer.

The National Attendance Portal team

Back cover: Belonging, free to read →



Belonging: The Story Behind the National Attendance Portal

Colin Cattanach

A working-class boy from Glasgow whose life changed because one headteacher saw something in him. Over thirty-five years in education, written largely while recovering from cancer treatment, it makes the case for treating the attendance crisis as a public health matter.

Written for every child who was nearly missed.

Buy the paperback on Amazon UK

National Attendance Portal

Free to read on Heyzine