



Attendance

Jayne Low OBE,
DFE
lead contributor

New Agony Uncle
feature

Analysis of
ABIE, RISE, DFE
Support

Expert Practitioner
Kane Hudson

Candid Corner
and much more.....



December
2025

Our fifth publication since September and what a bumper edition it is.





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Editorial

A Sector at a Crossroads

Attendance is now the frontline of national education policy. New guidance , new acronyms, new 'expectations' & yet the same stubborn realities on the ground.

Illness surges continue to disrupt learning. Multi-agency working remains fractured despite decades of policy promises. Rising SEMH need stretches pastoral teams to breaking point. Families struggle to engage, not through wilful disinterest, but through genuine barriers that no amount of statutory guidance can magic away. And yet, the messaging from Whitehall often feels disconnected from these lived realities.

We're told schools are "doing brilliantly", that attendance is "rising", that leaders are "energised" **(That's an Ofsted one!)** . Meanwhile, headteachers report the toughest term in a decade. Persistent absence sits stubbornly above pre-pandemic levels. Multi-agency partners can't meet their statutory requirements. This edition of **Attendance** cuts through the noise. We examine the DfE's ABIE expectations with clear eyes, acknowledging what's useful whilst challenging what's unrealistic. We scrutinise the credibility of the Department's emerging PR machine. We review the evidence base behind RISE and ask whether it's delivering measurable impact. And crucially, we showcase examples of real front-line practice that are actually moving the dial. **Because in 2025, school leaders deserve honesty, clarity and credible ideas, not spin, not gloss, not performance theatre.** You deserve the truth about what works, what doesn't, and why the gap between policy and practice continues to widen.

This magazine exists to serve that truth. Welcome to our December edition. As always send us your feedback via LinkedIn.

Jayne Lowe OBE, DfE Ambassador for Attendance and Behaviour

Jayne Lowe is DfE Attendance and Behaviour Ambassador and has previously served as both Attendance and Behaviour Adviser to the DfE. Jayne understands the challenges that families face having been a PRU Headteacher and leading on attendance and behaviour at school and local authority level.



Going Beyond the Numbers Shifting Our Focus from Simple Headlines

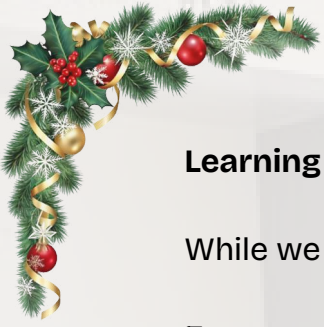
It's completely understandable when I visit schools that discussions about attendance sometimes start with a sigh, noting that rates aren't where they used to be. The lingering effects of COVID-19 have created a tough, slow-moving attendance challenge for everyone. However, the crisis also led us to rely too heavily on one metric: overall attendance compared to the national average. As rates of persistent absence skyrocketed at that time, the only yardstick was the national headline, making it difficult for schools to get underneath the problem.

The Power of Granular Data

The good news is the DfE stepped up! They built View Your Education Data (VYED) for schools and local authorities to help them better understand absence, moving past those headline figures. Honestly, I wish I'd had these tools when I was working in schools and local authorities! In the past, delayed, broad data meant leaders were often stabbing in the dark or spending hours trying to conduct their own analysis. The new approach changes everything by offering:

- Near-live data across current and previous years.
- Detailed insights into the distribution of absence through banded data.
- Comparisons with schools that have similar contexts.

This rich data allows leaders to ask the most meaningful question: "How are we performing against ourselves over time?" Schools that have embraced these tools are able to tell their story of improvement, showing how they've used data insights to shape their strategy.



Learning from the Past to Plan the Future

While we can't change last year's data, we can absolutely use it as a powerful roadmap to boost the present.

For secondary schools, getting early access to Year 6 pupil data has been a game-changer. Leaders are proactively spotting historic trends, reaching out to families, and building support before the children even walk through the door.

I've also seen great schools reflect on last year's attendance peaks and troughs to design brilliant, targeted initiative calendars for the current year. Leaders are identifying hot spots in the data and intervening to reverse trends. Knowing where they were has given them a clear idea of where they'd like to go.

The Secret Ingredient: Finding the "Why"

Here's the heart of the matter: data isn't just numbers!

The quantitative data from your MIS and VYED is essential. It tells you the "what, who, and when": attendance dips on Mondays, it's low for Year 9 boys, Year 1 pupils struggle to be on time, or it drops before the end of term. But these systems can't tell you the "why."

To get the full picture, school leaders need to dig for context. First, look at system-level data: staff rotas, transport routes, the school menu, or the SEND support strategy. These might reveal clues.

But the real breakthrough comes from gathering qualitative data. This is all about talking to people and observing:

- Observe gate duty on a Monday morning to feel the welcome.
- Visit breakfast club to see how many children attend and try out the menu.
- Chat with students about what makes them look forward to school (or not!).
- Talk openly with Year 1 parents about the specific barriers they face.

Asking them why attendance is poor on Mondays, why it's tough to get in on time, and why attendance dips before holidays opens up dialogue on the barriers they face. Asking, "What would make things better?" and combining that answer with your detailed data enables you to build a strategy that's impactful and inclusive.

Attendance Magazine response to Jayne Lowe's analysis : Moving the debate beyond data and headlines

Jayne Lowe OBE offers an articulate and compelling reflection on the shifting landscape of attendance since COVID-19 and the role granular data now plays in helping schools understand absence patterns more precisely. Her experience as a PRU Headteacher and national ambassador places her at the centre of the national narrative and her call to move beyond headline percentages is a message many school leaders will welcome. But as schools across the country know, granular data alone is not enough and it is here that we want to extend and deepen the conversation.

1. Data is a window, Not the view

Jayne is absolutely right: the national picture became overly dependent on one metric, overall absence at precisely the time when persistent absence was rising sharply. The introduction of VYED and near-live data has undeniably transformed how schools can interrogate patterns. It has enabled leaders to understand where the problems sit. However, what data cannot do is reveal why certain patterns persist, nor can it bridge the relational, cultural, and community gaps that underpin many of the most entrenched attendance challenges.

Schools repeatedly tell us that:

- They have identified the patterns for years.
- What they lack are the capacity, external services, and multi-agency responsiveness needed to address the reasons behind those patterns.
- Data is not a substitute for resource.

2. National tools don't replace local realities

Jayne celebrates the DfE's work in creating VYED and rightly so. It is a significant step forward in accessible national data. But its effectiveness depends on other factors: Some local authorities and schools simply cannot respond to needs as quickly as the data reveals them.

- Early help thresholds remain high.
- CAMHS waiting lists exceed a year in some regions.
- School reintegration pathways vary wildly across LAs.

So yes, VYED gives leaders sharper tools but some are working without the workforce, services, or time to act on what they find.

3. The real breakthrough: Culture, Community and Consistency

This is where Jayne’s core message resonates deeply with our readership: understanding attendance requires a nuanced blend of quantitative trends and qualitative insights. Schools who’ve achieved transformational change those with attendance at or above pre-pandemic levels are those who: Welcome families visibly at the gate. Build consistent trust with parents who may have generational negative experiences of school. Ensure SEND needs are met early and proactively. Engage with pupils through belonging-driven cultures, not compliance-driven systems.

As one head told us recently:
“Data tells us who is missing. Relationships tell us why.”

4. The National Conversation must move beyond applause

Jayne’s article implicitly highlights a wider issue: we remain too quick to celebrate pockets of improvement without acknowledging the structural challenges facing schools such as staffing shortages, reduced SEND provision, post-COVID anxiety, the fragmentation of local authority services, and the widening disadvantage gap. If the national narrative only highlights improvements, schools risk feeling gaslit. The lived experience on the ground is far more complex.

5. Our shared mission

Where Jayne’s message aligns powerfully with our editorial stance is this: Schools should be asked, “How are we performing against ourselves over time?” **Context matters. Granularity empowers. Stories of improvement must be told.** But we must be honest: data is only the beginning. The real work happens in homes, corridors, breakfast clubs, pastoral offices and every relationship that makes a child feel safe enough to walk through the door.

In Summary

Jayne Lowe’s contribution offers a valuable national perspective on the evolution of attendance data and the importance of moving beyond simplistic metrics. At Attendance Magazine, we wholeheartedly agree but we also hear the frustration and fatigue from schools who know the problem intimately, see it clearly in their data and are still navigating constrained systems that make solutions slow, inconsistent or out of reach. Data is essential. Insight is powerful. But culture, belonging and **resourced services** are what turn insight into impact.

This is the next frontier.



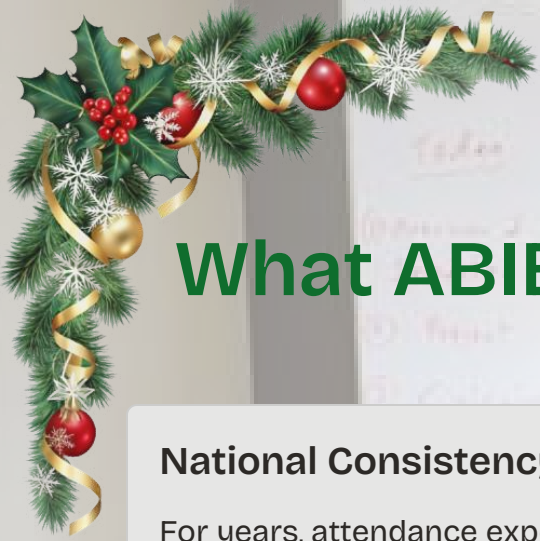
ABIE: Help, hype or heavy-handed?

The DfE's New Attendance Baseline Improvement Expectations (ABIE)

The Department for Education's ABIE model represents the most significant shift in attendance accountability since statutory guidance was updated in 2022. At its core, ABIE proposes that every school should meet minimum year-on-year improvement thresholds with schools and Multi-Academy Trusts expected to monitor, challenge and escalate compliance across their schools.

The framework establishes baseline expectations for both overall attendance requiring schools to demonstrate measurable progress against an AI generated baseline. For the first time, improvement expectations are being standardised nationally, removing the discretion that previously allowed schools to set their own trajectory based on local circumstances. Leaders are now expected to implement monitoring systems that track weekly attendance data, identify schools falling below improvement thresholds, and deploy rapid intervention strategies. The guidance suggests that sustained underperformance should trigger formal support packages, with escalation to regional directors if improvement doesn't materialise within defined timeframes. For school leaders, this represents a fundamental recalibration of accountability. Attendance is no longer just a safeguarding concern or a behavioural indicator, it's now a performance metric with potentially high-stakes consequences.

The question isn't whether ABIE matters (it clearly does), but whether it helps.



What ABIE Gets Right

National Consistency

For years, attendance expectations varied wildly between regions, trusts and local authorities. ABIE creates a common language and shared benchmarks, enabling more meaningful comparison and collaboration across the system.

Acknowledges the Emergency

By setting explicit improvement thresholds, the DfE is finally treating attendance as the national crisis it has become. Post-pandemic complacency is no longer an option for schools must demonstrate active recovery.

Sharper Data Use

The emphasis on weekly data monitoring pushes schools towards real-time intervention rather than retrospective analysis. This shift towards predictive, proactive systems is long **overdue** and represents genuine strategic thinking.

Daily Leadership Focus

ABIE recognises that attendance belongs at every leadership table, every day. It's not a pastoral afterthought, it's a strategic priority that requires senior leadership ownership, resource allocation and relentless focus.



What School Leaders Question

Context-Blind Thresholds

Schools serving high SEND populations, communities with high mobility or areas experiencing illness spikes risk being unfairly judged against schools with more stable cohorts. One-size-fits- all targets ignore the complexity of educational inclusion.

- Alternative provision settings face impossible comparisons
- Schools prioritising inclusion over exclusion carry heavier attendance burdens
- Geographical health inequalities create uneven playing fields

DataQuality Issues

Weekly DfE attendance data continues to fluctuate significantly, with corrections issued retrospectively. Schools are being held accountable for improvement against baselines ABIES that have had some errors that have been urgently fixed by the DfE. Trust in the AI generated data is key.

No Additional Resources

New expectations have arrived without new capacity. Schools are expected to deploy sophisticated tracking systems, intervention programmes and family engagement strategies; all within existing stretched budgets and diminishing pastoral team capacity. The system is stretched and some schools will 'break'.

Perverse Incentives Risk

When targets dominate, relationships suffer. There's genuine concern that ABIE could incentivise schools to manage attendance through pressure rather than belonging; chasing numbers over nurturing the conditions that make children want to attend.



Our verdict

Potentially useful but only with realism.

ABIE could genuinely help the system if applied with three critical ingredients: **nuance, contextual intelligence and an understanding that inclusion-heavy schools already carry the heaviest lift.** Without these, it risks becoming another compliance burden that rewards schools serving advantaged cohorts whilst punishing those doing the hardest inclusion work.

The framework needs built-in recognition of context not as an excuse for low expectations, but as acknowledgement that identical improvement trajectories in vastly different settings represent profoundly unequal effort.

The ultimate test?

Whether ABIE drives schools towards better relationships with families, or simply better data management. Only one of those improves actual attendance.

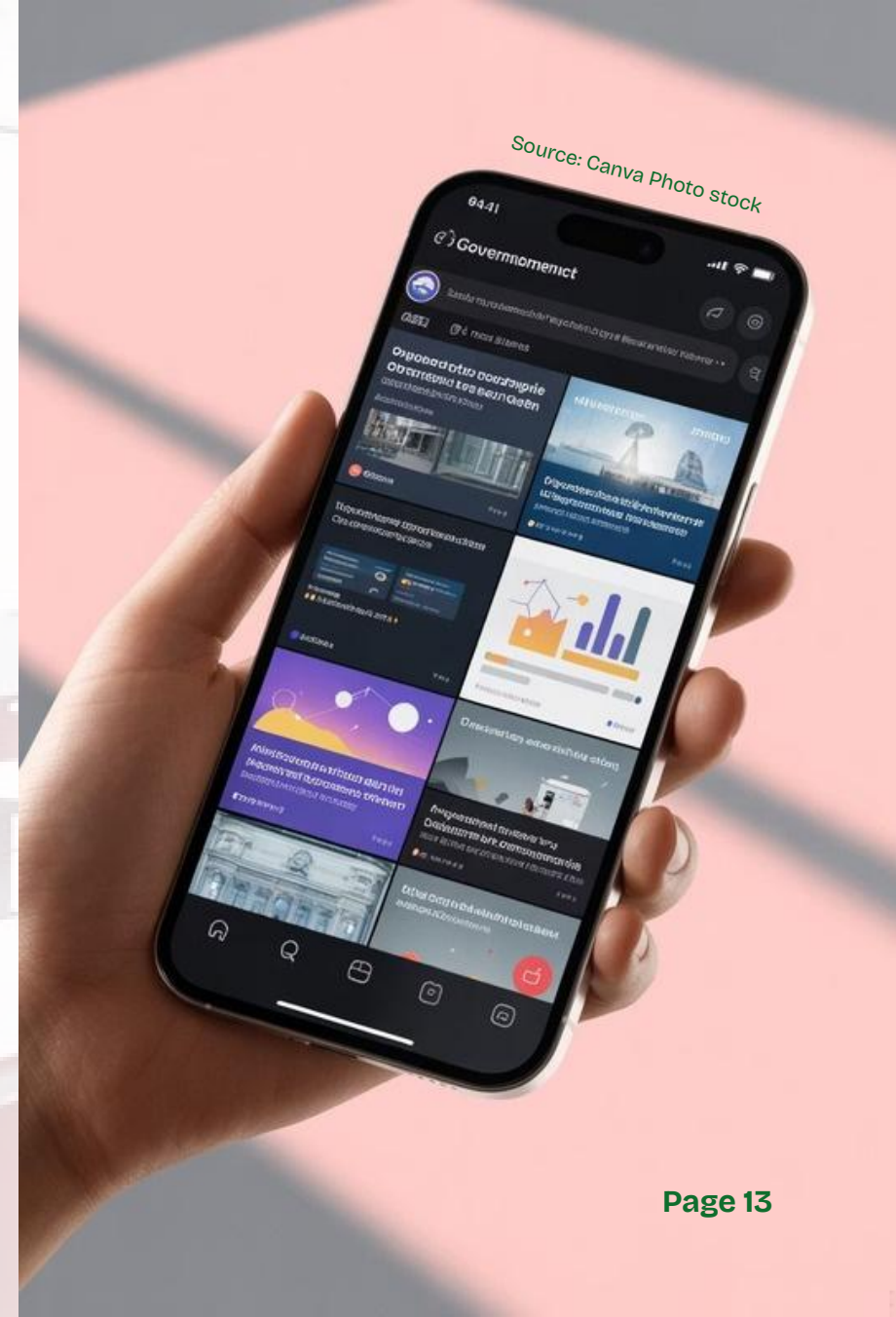


The DfE PR Machine: A Credibility Gap?

Over recent months, there has been a noticeable surge in upbeat DfE social media content. Posts celebrating school successes, highlighting rising attendance figures, and showcasing "energised" leaders (An Ofsted reference!!) have proliferated across X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn. The tone is relentlessly positive, the graphics polished, the messaging carefully calibrated.

This would be unremarkable even welcome if it aligned with frontline experience.

But it doesn't. Instead, it coincides awkwardly with a series of uncomfortable truths that many school leaders are living daily.



Source: Canva Photo stock



The Uncomfortable Timeline

DFE gaffs

This PR gaff by the DFE was not well received by the Education community and one wonders if a year 10 work experience is writing press briefings.

Source: DFE



1

Multi-Agency Breakdown

Statutory multi-agency partners particularly health services, CAMHS and early help continue to struggle to meet their attendance-related obligations. Schools are left managing complex SEMH and safeguarding cases often in isolation.

2

Persistent Absence Reality

Despite celebratory posts about "progress", persistent absence rates remain far above pre-pandemic levels. The stubborn gap between 2018/19 and 2025 hasn't closed; it's widened in many communities, particularly those serving disadvantaged families.

3

4

Frontline Exhaustion

Headteacher surveys consistently report this as one of the most challenging periods in recent memory. Attendance work is relentless, resource-intensive and emotionally draining with limited evidence that national policy levers are making the job easier.



The Sector Reaction

Increasingly, educators are asking a pointed question: is this genuine celebration of progress or a DfE PR charm offensive designed to reshape perception rather than reality?

The concern isn't that the DfE highlights success; success should be celebrated.

The concern is selectivity. When positive messaging dramatically outpaces acknowledgement of systemic challenges, trust erodes. School leaders begin to feel that their lived experience is being dismissed or worse, contradicted by those who should be their closest allies.

A narrative built on 'cherry-picked' data risks alienating the very professionals who need to trust national messaging the most. When leaders see glossy posts about attendance "rising" whilst their own schools battle record illness absence and crumbling multi-agency support, the gap between policy rhetoric and practice reality becomes a chasm. This isn't about negativity. It's about credibility. And credibility demands honesty.

What Leaders Are Saying

"The disconnect between DfE social posts and my daily reality is staggering. We need honesty, not spin."

"If attendance is rising so brilliantly, why are we more stretched than ever?"

"Selective data celebration undermines trust when we're fighting fires they won't acknowledge."



our verdict

The DfE must avoid gloss. Credibility comes from honesty, transparency and acknowledging the real conditions in schools, not from polished graphics on social media.

Trust is the currency of effective policy. When national bodies celebrate progress that frontline professionals aren't experiencing, that currency devalues rapidly. School leaders don't need cheerleading, they need recognition of the genuine complexity they navigate, support that matches the scale of challenge and communication that respects their professional intelligence. The most credible message the DfE could send right now? **"This is hard. We know it's hard. Here's what we're doing to make it less hard."** Anything less feels like performance theatre. Leaders need to galvanise and speak with one voice!



RISE: What Evidence Really Exists for Attendance?

Regional Improvement, Support & Excellence Under Scrutiny

RISE represents the DfE's flagship school improvement mechanism, designed to replace the previous fragmented landscape of teaching school hubs and improvement partnerships. With significant funding and national backing, RISE positions itself as the coherent, evidence-informed support system that schools have long needed. But when we narrow the lens specifically to attendance outcomes, the focus of this magazine, what evidence exists that RISE is actually moving the dial? We conducted a systematic review of publicly available impact data, case studies and independent evaluations. The focus on Attendance and behaviour is emerging and we accept its early days for evaluation. **The current early findings are mixed.**





RISE: The Positives



Strong Use of Local Expertise

RISE has strategically deployed national attendance ambassadors, including Jayne Lowe OBE, whose credibility among practitioners is unquestionable. This isn't top-down theory; it's practitioner-led, contextually grounded support that schools trust.



Better Alignment Across Priorities

One of RISE's genuine strengths is the recognition that attendance cannot be separated from SEND provision and behaviour systems. The framework encourages integrated thinking rather than siloed interventions, reflecting how these issues actually present in schools.

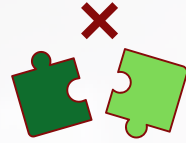


Clear Case Studies and Frameworks

RISE has developed comprehensive resources, including structured self-evaluation tools, case study libraries and implementation guides. For schools beginning their attendance improvement journey, these materials provide valuable scaffolding and reduce the need to reinvent wheels.



RISE: The Gaps



Evidence of Impact Remains Light

Despite being operational for over a year, rigorous evaluation of RISE's impact on attendance outcomes is **scarce**. We found numerous process evaluations (describing what RISE does) but minimal outcomes data (proving what RISE achieves). **Schools are investing significant time in RISE engagement without clear evidence of return on that investment.**

Process Heavy, Outcomes Thin

Much of the RISE guidance focuses on implementing systems, processes and structures for important foundations, certainly but there's limited emphasis on measuring actual attendance improvement. **The risk is that schools become very good at doing attendance work without necessarily improving attendance rates.**

Few Independent Evaluations

The vast majority of RISE impact reporting is self-evaluation or DfE-commissioned. Independent academic evaluation of the gold standard for educational interventions is notably absent. This creates an evidence vacuum that makes it difficult for school leaders to make informed decisions about whether RISE merits their time and focus. **Marking their own work is not a good look!**

Replication of Existing Practice

Many of the strategies promoted through RISE frameworks closely replicate what high-performing schools were already doing. For these schools, RISE offers validation rather than innovation. The question remains: **is RISE genuinely spreading effective practice to schools that need it, or simply documenting what already works elsewhere?**



What Schools Actually Need from RISE

1

Rigorous independent evaluation

Commissioned by but independent from the DfE, using robust methodologies that can distinguish RISE impact from other variables affecting attendance. Schools deserve evidence, not assertion.

2

High-Quality comparative data

Transparent reporting of attendance outcomes in RISE-engaged schools versus matched comparison schools. Show us the difference RISE makes, with proper controls for context, cohort and baseline.

3

A truly national resource library

Not just case studies from successful schools, but honest accounts of what was tried, what failed what worked and why. Failure data is as valuable as success data and often more so.

4

Resourced multi-agency models

The missing pillar. RISE can provide schools with better internal systems, but attendance improvement ultimately depends on functional multi-agency working. Where's the RISE equivalent for health services, social care and early help?



Our verdict on RISE

Promising foundations. Limited evidence. Potentially the right mechanism if refined.

RISE has established credible structures, engaged respected practitioners and created useful resources. These are not insignificant achievements and they represent genuine progress from the previous fragmented landscape.

However, for a flagship national programme with substantial funding, the evidence base for attendance impact is disappointingly thin.

Schools are being encouraged to invest considerable time in RISE engagement without access to robust, independent data proving that investment yields measurable improvement. The challenge for RISE leadership is clear: move from process to outcomes. **Prioritise rigorous evaluation over celebratory case studies.**

Acknowledge what isn't working alongside what is. And crucially, recognise that attendance improvement cannot be achieved through school-level interventions alone; it requires system-level multi-agency transformation that RISE hasn't yet addressed. RISE could be the vehicle for genuine national attendance improvement. Right now, it's a vehicle with an excellent map but no clear evidence it's reaching the destination.



Innovation Spotlight

Kane Hudson is an Assistant Headteacher at Ernesford Grange Community Academy, specialising in Parental Engagement, Attendance, Culture and Personal Development. A dynamic and forward-thinking practitioner, Kane has rapidly become one of the most influential voices in the attendance space, known for creating high-impact, practical resources that schools across the country are now adopting. With a background in Sport, PSHE and Business education and currently completing the NPQSENCO, Kane combines deep pastoral insight with a solution-focused, digitally savvy approach. His innovative 15-day end-of-term attendance drives and open-access resource banks exemplify genuine school to school collaboration at its best.



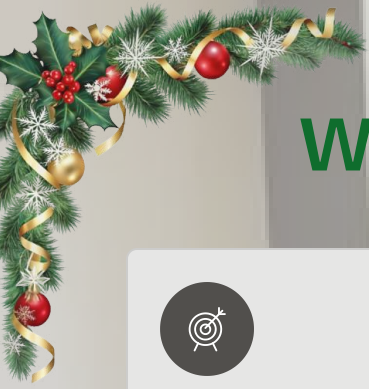
Kane's work stands out for its clarity, effectiveness and generosity. He is part of a new wave of leaders turning national attendance challenges into opportunities for creativity, community connection and pupil success.

Kane Hudson's 15 Day Challenge

The best examples of Creative Attendance Practice in 2025

Amidst the policy noise, system change proposals and structural reforms, sometimes the most powerful innovations are beautifully simple. Kane Hudson's 15-day end-of-term attendance challenge, pioneered in Coventry, exemplifies this perfectly.

The concept is deceptively straightforward: students commit to attending every day for the final 15 days of the autumn term; historically the period of steepest attendance decline as illness rises, fatigue sets in and holiday anticipation builds. What makes Hudson's approach remarkable isn't complexity; it's psychological sophistication wrapped in practical simplicity. And crucially, it's working. The 15-day challenge has spread rapidly across Multi-Academy Trusts not through policy mandate but through practitioner recommendation; the most authentic form of educational endorsement.



Why the Hudson 15 Day Challenge Works



Short-term window = Higher motivation

Behaviour change psychology tells us that distant goals struggle to motivate. Fifteen days is short enough to feel achievable, long enough to establish momentum and perfectly timed to address the notoriously difficult November-December decline. Students can visualise the finish line.



Strong narrative and Competition

The challenge creates a compelling story that students can buy into. Form groups compete, year groups track progress publicly and individual achievements are celebrated visibly. Competition is healthy when the goal is attendance rather than attainment and everyone genuinely can win.



Targets the critical period

Rather than attempting year-round intensity, Hudson strategically focuses effort on the period of greatest vulnerability. This recognises that sustainable attendance improvement requires targeted intervention at pinch points, not relentless pressure across 39 weeks.



Daily touchpoints with families

The system includes light-touch but constant communication with parents by text updates, celebration messages, gentle encouragement. This maintains visibility without overwhelming families, keeping attendance at the forefront of collective thinking without becoming punitive.



Celebrates incremental gains

The challenge explicitly celebrates improvement, not perfection. A student who historically attended 60% but achieves 80% during the challenge is championed as loudly as the student who maintains 100%. This inclusive approach maintains engagement across the attendance spectrum.



Why It's Replicable



01

Clear Templates and Branding

Hudson has created ready-to-use resources: posters, parent letters, student pledge cards, tracking spreadsheets and celebration certificates. Schools can implement the challenge within a day of deciding to participate.

03

Flexible for Any Context

The core concept adapts brilliantly across settings. Primary schools run 10-day challenges. Alternative provision settings create personalised versions for individual students. Large secondaries scale it across year groups simultaneously.

02

Minimal Workload Addition

The system piggy backs on existing attendance monitoring rather than creating parallel tracking. Most schools report that once the initial setup is complete, daily management requires less than 30 minutes of pastoral time.

04

Free and Open Source

Unlike commercial attendance programmes, Hudson shares his resources freely through professional networks. This generosity has accelerated spread and enabled schools with zero budget to implement sophisticated interventions.





Our verdict

Kane Hudson's 15-day challenge represents practical innovation at its finest; a model of what attendance practice should look like in 2025. At a time when schools are drowning in complex guidance, expensive programmes and policy churn, Hudson offers something rare: an idea that is simultaneously evidence-informed, practically simple, genuinely effective and immediately implementable. The 15-day challenge demonstrates that attendance improvement doesn't require elaborate theory or substantial funding; it requires psychological insight, strategic timing, relationship-focused implementation and celebration of progress. These are principles every school can apply, regardless of context or budget. This is innovation in service of schools, not innovation for innovation's sake.

It's precisely what the sector needs right NOW!



- ✓ **Launch Week:** Next week features a 5-day countdown in morning briefings and dedicated assemblies to build momentum and explain the critical importance of attending school every day. Click Here: <https://lnkd.in/eFnKapDt>
- ✓ **Whole-School Engagement:** The drive is comprehensive, involving daily promotions (messages, riddles, recognitions and shoutouts) delivered through morning briefings, social media and Google Classroom. Click Here: <https://lnkd.in/eTF-X8QR>
- ✓ **Partnership with Families:** We are sending families a launch letter and an 'Attendance Success Tracker' to encourage and celebrate daily attendance at home, reinforcing our school message. Click Here: <https://lnkd.in/eNBcy6Jc>
- ✓ **Tutor Champions:** Our tutors will play a central role, using the '15 Days of Positivity Tutor Tracker' in their rooms to visually track and champion student presence over the final 15 days. Click Here: <https://lnkd.in/e8zseRXX>
- ✓ **Positive Postcard:** Click Here <https://lnkd.in/e9hSghPT>



Candid Corner

Real Questions from School Leaders

Answered with Brutal Honesty



Each month, we receive dozens of questions from attendance leads, pastoral teams and senior leaders grappling with the messy reality of improving attendance. This edition features five questions that capture the sector's most pressing challenges right now. No platitudes. No policy speak. Just honest, practical responses that respect the complexity you're navigating.



Photo source: Stock photographs Canva



Photo source: Stock photographs Canva



Candid Corner Question 1

"We've tightened systems, trained staff and improved communication but attendance is still stuck. What next?"

Straight Answer:

You've improved the school side. Now improve the family side.

This is the single most common disconnect we see. Schools invest enormous energy perfecting internal systems for monitoring procedures, intervention trackers, communication protocols, staff training to only to discover that attendance barely shifts. The reason? You've optimised what you directly control, but attendance fundamentally depends on factors you don't control: what happens at home.

Our sector consistently underestimates the genuine barriers families face:

- **Entrenched health anxiety:** Post-pandemic, many parents developed hypervigilant illness responses. A mild cold that previously meant school now triggers absence "just to be safe".
- **Trauma and SEMH needs:** Children carrying unprocessed trauma don't struggle with attendance; they struggle with feeling safe enough to leave home or enter social environments.
- **Loss of routine from the pandemic:** For some families, consistent school attendance never fully resumed. The habit was broken and hasn't been rebuilt.
- **Parents who fear school contact:** Previous negative experiences for whether real or perceived; create avoidance of engagement with school staff.
- **The hidden cost of coming to school:** Uniform replacement, food, transport, heating costs, lost parental work time for families on the edge financially, these barriers are prohibitive.

"How do we challenge families without damaging relationships?"



Straight Answer:

You're framing this as a binary choice. It isn't. Challenge *and* relationship aren't opposites, challenge strengthens relationships.

The fear of damaging relationships often paralyses schools into avoiding necessary conversations. Parents continue to authorise absences inappropriately, attendance deteriorates and by the time schools intervene forcefully, relationships are already damaged by accumulated frustration on both sides.

The Key Principles:

Challenge with curiosity

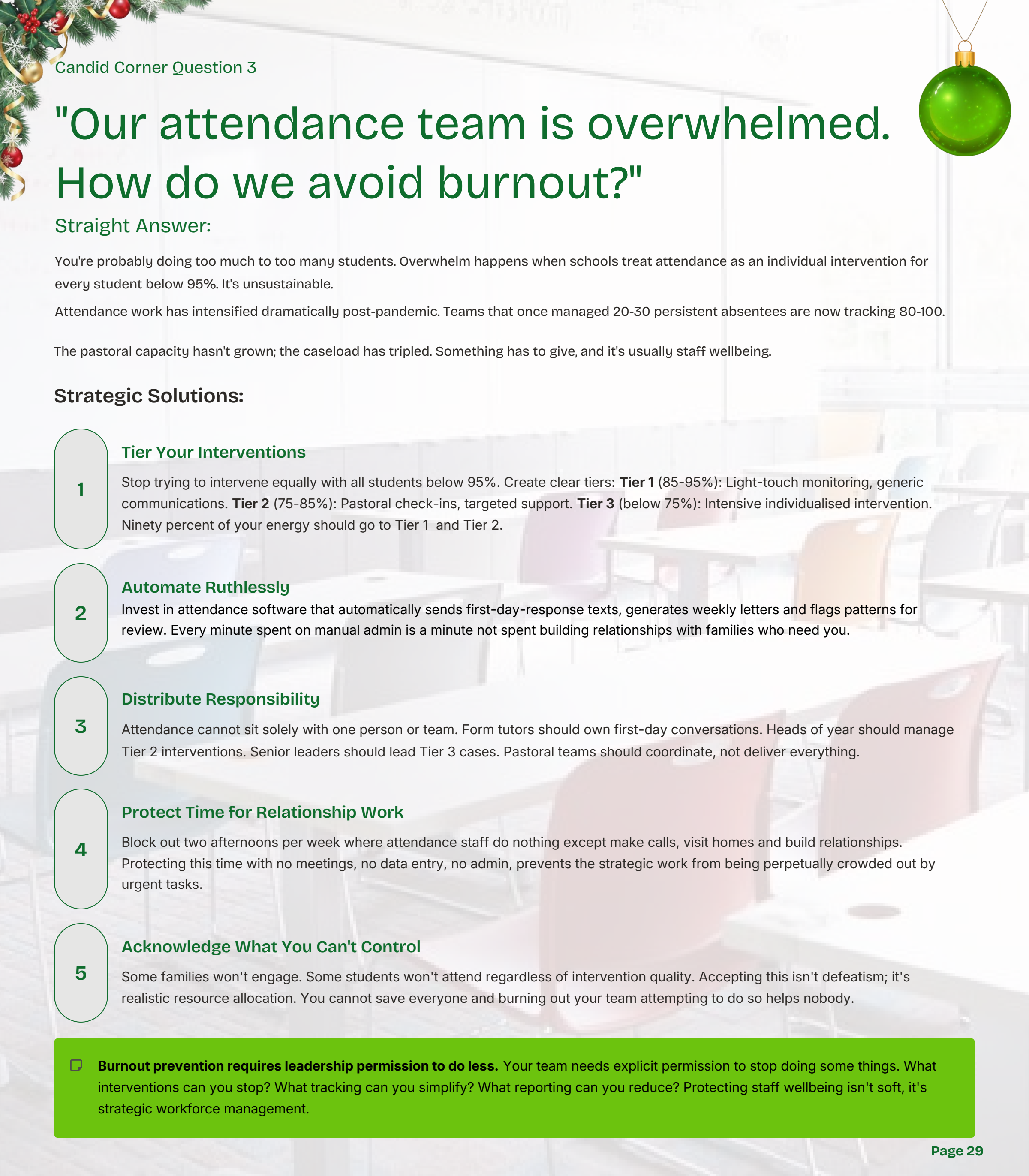
Replace "Your child's attendance is unacceptable" with "I've noticed your child has missed 12 days this term. Help me understand what's happening." You're still challenging the pattern, but you're inviting dialogue rather than triggering defensiveness.

Separate behaviour from person

Make it clear you're questioning attendance decisions, not parenting capacity. "I can see you care deeply about your child's education but let's work out together why attendance has become difficult." This acknowledges intent whilst addressing impact.

The Conversation Script:

1. **Name the pattern specifically:** "Over the past half term, your child has attended 12 days out of 30."
2. **Express genuine concern:** "I'm worried because we can see gaps opening up in learning, and socially they're missing out on friendship development."
3. **Invite their perspective:** "What's making it difficult for them to attend regularly?"
4. **Co-design solutions:** "What would need to change for attendance to improve? What can we do? What can you do?"
5. **Set clear expectations with support:** "We need to see attendance at 95% from this point. Here's how we'll support that goal together."
6. **Families respect clarity delivered with compassion. What damages relationships isn't challenge; it's inconsistency, hidden frustration or suddenly jumping to formal action without prior honest conversation.**



"Our attendance team is overwhelmed. How do we avoid burnout?"

Straight Answer:

You're probably doing too much to too many students. Overwhelm happens when schools treat attendance as an individual intervention for every student below 95%. It's unsustainable.

Attendance work has intensified dramatically post-pandemic. Teams that once managed 20-30 persistent absentees are now tracking 80-100.

The pastoral capacity hasn't grown; the caseload has tripled. Something has to give, and it's usually staff wellbeing.

Strategic Solutions:

- Tier Your Interventions**
Stop trying to intervene equally with all students below 95%. Create clear tiers: **Tier 1** (85-95%): Light-touch monitoring, generic communications. **Tier 2** (75-85%): Pastoral check-ins, targeted support. **Tier 3** (below 75%): Intensive individualised intervention. Ninety percent of your energy should go to Tier 1 and Tier 2.
- Automate Ruthlessly**
Invest in attendance software that automatically sends first-day-response texts, generates weekly letters and flags patterns for review. Every minute spent on manual admin is a minute not spent building relationships with families who need you.
- Distribute Responsibility**
Attendance cannot sit solely with one person or team. Form tutors should own first-day conversations. Heads of year should manage Tier 2 interventions. Senior leaders should lead Tier 3 cases. Pastoral teams should coordinate, not deliver everything.
- Protect Time for Relationship Work**
Block out two afternoons per week where attendance staff do nothing except make calls, visit homes and build relationships. Protecting this time with no meetings, no data entry, no admin, prevents the strategic work from being perpetually crowded out by urgent tasks.
- Acknowledge What You Can't Control**
Some families won't engage. Some students won't attend regardless of intervention quality. Accepting this isn't defeatism; it's realistic resource allocation. You cannot save everyone and burning out your team attempting to do so helps nobody.

 **Burnout prevention requires leadership permission to do less.** Your team needs explicit permission to stop doing some things. What interventions can you stop? What tracking can you simplify? What reporting can you reduce? Protecting staff wellbeing isn't soft, it's strategic workforce management.

"How do we balance inclusion with attendance accountability?"

Straight Answer:

This feels like a tension because national accountability systems treat it as one. In practice, inclusion and attendance aren't opposing forces as they're mutually reinforcing when done properly.

Schools prioritising genuine inclusion often see attendance data that looks "worse" than selective schools because they're educating students with complex SEND, challenging behaviour and chaotic home lives with students who would be excluded or managed out elsewhere. Comparing their attendance to schools serving stable, advantaged cohorts is comparing fundamentally different challenges.

The policy failure is treating attendance as context-neutral. The leadership challenge is refusing to accept that framing.

Practical Reconciliation:

Reframe "Acceptable" Absence

For some students with severe SEND or medical needs, 85% attendance represents extraordinary achievement. Celebrate this. Document it. Make the case explicitly that inclusion sometimes means accepting attendance patterns that would be unacceptable for neurotypical, physically healthy students.

Separate Cohort Data Analysis

Track attendance separately for EHCP students, SEND Support, and mainstream cohorts. This isn't lowering expectations; it's recognising that meaningful comparison requires like-for-like analysis. Present this data to governors, Ofsted and MAT leaders proactively.

The Conversation with accountability bodies such as Ofsted

"Our overall attendance is 91.5%, below national average. However, our mainstream cohort attends at 94.8%. The difference is our SEND cohort (15% of roll) which attends at 82%. We believe this demonstrates our commitment to inclusion as we educate students other schools exclude, and we support their attendance as much as their complex needs allow. We will not improve attendance by removing these students."

Inspectors and MAT executives who understand education will respect this transparency. Those who don't were never going to rate you fairly anyway for they're working from a template that doesn't accommodate genuine inclusion.

Stand firm. Inclusion is not negotiable. Accountability systems that punish inclusive schools are broken systems, not broken schools.





"What's the one thing that would actually make the biggest difference to attendance nationally?"

Straight Answer:

Functional, resourced, statutory multi-agency working.

This is the answer schools don't want to hear because it's the one thing entirely outside their control. But it's the truth. Schools can perfect their internal systems, build exemplary relationships, implement sophisticated interventions and still hit a ceiling because the students and families with the most complex barriers require support that schools cannot provide.

What's Actually Needed:

- **Accessible CAMHS provision:** With waiting times under 6 weeks, not 18 months, so emotionally-based school avoidance can be addressed when it emerges rather than after it becomes entrenched.
- **Responsive Early Help services:** That genuinely help families early, before crisis, with practical support for housing, finance, health anxiety and parenting capacity.
- **Health service engagement:** GPs and paediatricians who understand that medically authorising absence has educational consequences, and who work collaboratively with schools to balance health need against attendance importance.
- **Social care capacity:** So that safeguarding concerns don't languish for months while attendance deteriorates and families get the protection or support they require.
- **Genuine partnership accountability:** Where health, social care and education are held equally accountable for attendance outcomes, not just schools.

Every attendance leader knows the challenging cases where progress is impossible without external agency intervention. And every attendance leader knows those agencies are chronically under-resourced, operating with impossible caseloads and unable to meet their statutory duties. Schools cannot fix this alone. Until policy-makers acknowledge that attendance is a system-level challenge requiring system-level resource and not just a school leadership issue requiring more monitoring then we will continue fire fighting symptoms whilst the underlying problems persist. The brutal honesty? **Structural change isn't coming soon.**

So in the meantime, keep doing what you can control, advocate loudly for what you can't do and refuse to accept blame for system failures that aren't your responsibility.





Tells It straight..... No Spin, No Nonsense

Welcome to the most brutally honest section of this magazine .Each month, our Agony Uncle receives scores of questions from school leaders grappling with attendance challenges that don't have neat policy solutions.

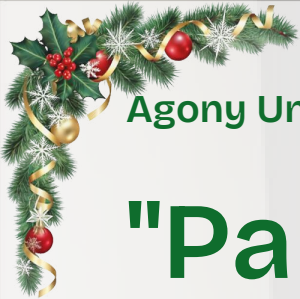
No jargon. No management speak. No platitudes about "working together" when the actual answer is harder than that. Just straight talking advice from someone who's been in the trenches and knows what actually works versus what sounds good in meetings.

This December edition features five problems that capture the reality of attendance work in 2025. Brace yourself.....these answers don't pull punches.

The Gloves are off, Agony Uncle is here to give you the answers



The Attendance Agony Uncle



"Parents say they 'can't get their child out of bed'. What do I even say to that?"

Agony Uncle's Answer:

You say the truth: "Getting out of bed isn't the problem. Something is making your child not want to get up. Let's find that."

Because here's what's actually happening; no teenager in human history has been physically unable to rise from a horizontal position. The "can't get out of bed" narrative is the family's way of describing a situation they don't understand and you haven't yet diagnosed.

Stop accepting the symptom as the problem. Dig deeper.

Possible Underlying Issues:

Social Worries

Friendship breakdowns, social exclusion, bullying (real or perceived), anxiety about peer judgement can all create avoidance behaviours that manifest as "can't wake up".

Learning Gaps

Feeling lost in lessons creates daily dread. Why face another day of public incomprehension when bed is safe?

Sensory Overload

Undiagnosed autism or sensory processing difficulties make school environments genuinely overwhelming. Bed isn't laziness; it's recovery.

Sleep Hygiene

Late-night gaming, doom-scrolling on phones, irregular sleep patterns and genuine sleep deprivation does make morning rising extraordinarily difficult.

Gaming Addiction

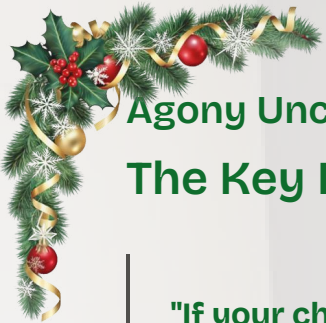
When virtual worlds provide more reward than real-world school, biological rhythms shift. The dopamine hit from gaming creates genuine withdrawal symptoms.

Autistic Burnout

Masking all day is exhausting. Many autistic students reach a point where they physically cannot sustain the energy required to appear neurotypical at school.

Anxious Avoidance Cycles

Each day missed makes returning harder. Anxiety about being behind creates more avoidance. The cycle self-perpetuates.



Agony Uncle Problem 1 (continued)

The Key Line to Use with Parents:

"If your child can't come in, not 'won't come in', then we need a plan, not a punishment."



This single sentence reframes the entire conversation. It acknowledges the parent's experience whilst insisting on problem-solving rather than acceptance. It separates inability from defiance, opening space for honest exploration.

Then Ask These Diagnostic Questions:

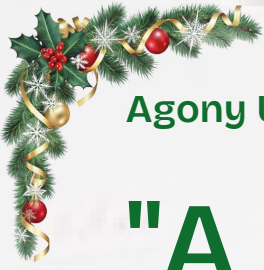
- 1.What time does your child go to bed? What do they do on devices before sleep?
- 2.When did the difficulty waking start? What else was happening at that time?
- 3.Has anything changed in their friendships recently?
- 4.Do they talk about any lessons or teachers they particularly worry about?
- 5.How is their mood generally; are they withdrawn, irritable or flat?
- 6.If they could change one thing about school to make attending easier, what would it be?

Parents often haven't asked these questions themselves. You're modelling curious investigation rather than judgement.

Always Practical. Always Human.

Once you've identified the actual barrier not "can't get up" but "is being excluded by friendship group" you can intervene effectively. Fix the social issue and the morning waking resolves itself.

The "can't get out of bed" line is never the whole story. Your job is getting to the story beneath the story.



"A parent has a doctor's note for literally everything. How do we challenge this?"

Agony Uncle's Answer:

Carefully proceed but you absolutely should challenge it. Medical notes aren't immunity from attendance expectations.

Let's be clear about what a GP letter actually is: it's a record that a parent presented their child to a doctor and the doctor declined to challenge the parent's judgment. It is not an independent medical assessment. It is not objective evidence that attendance is impossible. It is documentation of a conversation. Many GPs, under immense time pressure and reluctant to damage relationships with families, will sign notes parents request even when the medical justification is questionable. They're not education experts, they're making clinical judgements in isolated consultations without seeing the cumulative pattern.

Your Responsibility:

You are entitled, indeed, required to question whether absence is necessary and proportionate, even when accompanied by medical documentation. This isn't questioning the medical profession; it's questioning whether specific absences serve the child's best interests holistically.

The Conversation to have:

Acknowledge, Then Probe....

"I can see Dr. Smith has confirmed your child has been unwell. I'm not questioning that. What I need to understand is whether these absences are necessary and could they attend school with support? Are we missing underlying patterns?"

Highlight Cumulative Impact....

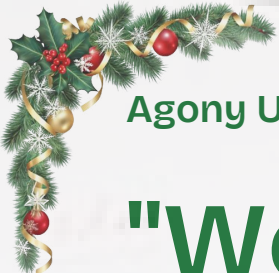
"Your child has had 14 medical absences this term. Each individual absence may be justified, but the cumulative effect is significant. We need a plan that balances health needs with educational continuity."

When to request School Nurse Review:

- When absence patterns repeat suspiciously (e.g., every Monday, before tests)
- When vague symptoms like "headache" or "stomach ache" persist without diagnosis
- When multiple medical notes come from different GPs
- When the parent resists any conversation about reducing absence

A school nurse assessment brings objectivity. They can identify genuine medical need versus health anxiety or strategic absence.

The Bottom Line: Respect medical advice. Question habitual medical excuses. There's a difference and families who are genuinely collaborative understand that difference.



"We're threatened with legal action every time we challenge attendance. How do we manage this?"

Agony Uncle's Answer:

Call their bluff. Because 95% of the time, it's exactly that a bluff.

Families who immediately threaten legal action are usually doing so because challenge is unfamiliar to them and they're escalating to create distance. It's a power move designed to make you back off. And it works because schools frequently retreat from legitimate concerns the moment solicitors are mentioned. Stop doing that.

What to Know:

Unless you are acting unlawfully (e.g., discriminating, breaching GDPR, making malicious allegations), you have legal protection for carrying out your statutory duties. Monitoring attendance, challenging patterns, requesting evidence and issuing warnings are all within your remit. No solicitor will take a case against a school simply for doing their job.

The Response Template:

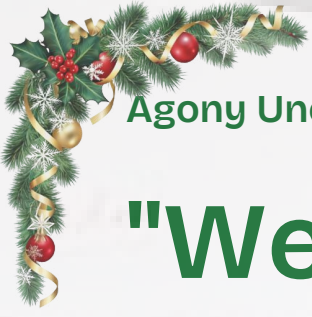
- ❑ "I understand you feel strongly about this matter and have sought legal advice. That's your right. I need to be clear, however, that we have statutory duties regarding attendance that we must fulfill regardless of legal threats. If your solicitor believes we're acting unlawfully, I welcome them to contact the school formally so we can address their concerns through proper channels. In the meantime, we will continue to monitor and support your child's attendance as required by law."

Then document everything:

- Every conversation, email and letter
- Dates, times and content of all contact attempts
- Support that was provided
- Reasonableness and professionalism

If the family does instruct a solicitor (rare), this documentation demonstrates you acted appropriately. More likely, the threat evaporates once they realise it isn't working.

Do not be Intimidated: Schools operating within statutory guidance have nothing to fear from threatened legal action. Stand firm, stay professional, document meticulously and carry on doing your job.



"We've done everything, meetings, plans, support and attendance hasn't budged. When do we give up?"

Agony Uncle's Answer:

When you've exhausted escalation options and documented everything. But "giving up" doesn't mean stopping; it means adjusting expectations.

This is the hardest truth in attendance work: sometimes, despite exemplary intervention, families don't engage and students don't attend. You cannot save everyone. Accepting this isn't defeatism; it's realistic resource allocation that protects your capacity to help students who will engage.

Before you step back, ensure you've.....:

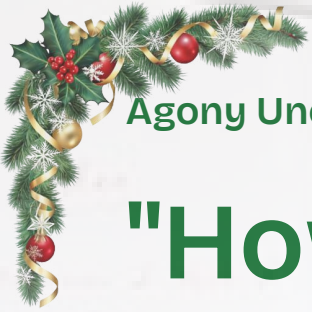
Exhausted Internal Escalation Has a senior leader met the family? Has the headteacher made contact? Have you offered every reasonable adjustment?	Requested Multi-Agency Support Referrals to Early Help, social care (if safeguarding concerns exist), school nurse, educational psychologist? Have external agencies confirmed there's nothing more they can contribute?
Considered Penalty Notices or Legal Action Enforcement isn't punishment; it's sometimes the catalyst for engagement when support alone hasn't worked. Have you consulted your local authority attendance team about next steps?	Documented Everything Comprehensively If you do step back, Ofsted, governors or future reviews will ask what you tried. Your chronology should show relentless, creative, proportionate effort before concluding intervention has reached its limit.

Then adjust expectations:

Move this student to a "monitor only" category. Stop intensive intervention. Send statutory letters. Maintain safeguarding vigilance. But release yourself from the impossible responsibility of fixing what cannot currently be fixed.

This frees capacity for students where intervention will make a difference. **You are not failing:** Some families need to experience consequences before they engage. Some students need to mature before they're ready to attend consistently. Some situations are beyond school capacity.

Knowing when you've done enough isn't giving up; it's professional judgement.



"How do we stop attendance admin from consuming our lives?"

Agony Uncle's Answer:

Stop doing things that don't improve attendance. Seriously. Most attendance admin is performative theatre for accountability audiences, not effective practice.

Attendance teams spend hours producing reports, tracking spreadsheets, formatting letters and updating systems and then wonder why they have no time for relationship-building conversations that actually change behaviour. Here's the uncomfortable question: if you stopped producing that weekly attendance report for SLT, would attendance improve or worsen? If the answer is "it wouldn't change" stop producing it.

Admin you can stop right now:

- Daily attendance registers sent to SLT: Use exception reporting. Only flag significant issues.
- Bespoke letters for every individual absence: Use template letters with mail merge. Manually contacting every family for first-day response:
- Automate this with text messaging systems. Colour-coded spreadsheets tracking micro-changes:
- Your MIS already does this. Use built-in analytics.
- Weekly update meetings about students everyone already knows about: Meet fortnightly. Use the saved time for family conversations.

Admin you should start doing:

- Brief, brutal chronologies: Date, event, outcome. That's it. Detailed narrative is unnecessary.
- Automated pattern alerts: Set up your MIS to flag when students hit attendance thresholds. Stop manually checking.
- Single-page intervention records: What barrier? What action? What happened? Next step? One side of A4 maximum.

The Rule: If admin takes longer than 10 minutes per student per week, you're over-processing. Simplify ruthlessly. Attendance improves through relationships and intervention, **not through beautifully formatted spreadsheets that nobody reads.**

Your time is your most valuable resource. Spend it on humans, not on systems.



Guest Contributors

Expert Voices from the Frontline

This edition features exclusive contributions from some of the most respected voices in attendance, behaviour and inclusion. Each brings unique expertise, hard-won experience and a commitment to honest, practical guidance.

No theoretical abstractions. No academic detachment. Just grounded wisdom from leaders who do this work daily and understand the complexity you navigate.

In this edition Dr Neil Alexander-Passe and Paola Venables give us their expert insights.





Dr Neil Alexander-Passe gained his PhD researching 'Dyslexia, School-based trauma, and Post-school Success'. His background includes 15 years as a qualified teacher, 14 of which were spent as a special needs teacher across mainstream, special, and pupil referral units (PRUs), and 10 years as a SENDCO and Assistant Headteacher in both mainstream and independent schools, spanning primary and secondary education. He is currently an Examination Access Assessor' at a large sixth-form college in central London. He is also a consultant 'Inclusion Expert' for the Department for Education, in addition to serving on the academic boards of several charities and peer-reviewed journals. He is now completing the writing of his 20 th book and has published extensively on school-based trauma, on those with dyslexia, ADHD, and autism.

Persistent Disruptive Behaviour – an epidemic?

By Dr Neil Alexander-Passe

If you examine UK government data closely, a serious issue emerges in schools and among today's youth.

The latest Department for Education (2025) statistics reveal:

- 955,000 suspensions in the 2023/24 academic year—a 21% increase from the previous year, equating to 1,131 suspensions per 10,000 pupils.
- 10,900 permanent exclusions—a 16% rise from 2022/23, or 13 exclusions per 10,000 pupils.
- The most common reason for both suspensions and exclusions was persistent disruptive behaviour, accounting for 51% of suspensions and 39% of exclusions.

Anna Freud (2025), a respected mental health provider, defines Persistent Disruptive Behaviour as including: frequent tantrums, aggression, defiance, lying, cruelty, poor concentration, risky behaviour, and even risk of self-harm or suicide. These behaviours often reflect deeper struggles rather than simple defiance.

Catch 22 (2023), citing National Statistics, highlights troubling disparities:

- Gypsy/Roma children had the highest exclusion rate (18 per 100), followed by Irish Traveller children (12 per 100).
- Black and mixed-race Caribbean pupils had exclusion rates of 0.05 and 0.09 per 100, respectively. Demie (2019) found Black Caribbean students are nearly four times more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers.
- Pupils with SEND but without an Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plan had a high exclusion rate of 0.12 per 100.
- Suspensions were four times more common among FSM-eligible students.
- Male pupils were more than twice as likely to be excluded as female pupils (0.05 vs. 0.02).

Clearly, schools are struggling. Yet the response from senior leaders often involves stricter behaviour policies. In one school where I was SENDCO, a system called SNAP was introduced to support a two-strike rule. After one warning, students were removed from class. When a teacher called "SNAP," students had to sit up straight, place arms on the table, and pay attention.

But let's take a step back.

Many of these young people are disengaged and communicate in ways they've learned to survive. They lack the confidence or advocacy to say, "I can't do this," fearing embarrassment. Instead, they misbehave or play the joker to save face.

If teachers looked and listened more closely, they might see a student who is unable to access the lesson, rather than one who is simply being defiant. These students may be struggling across multiple subjects and have lost trust in teachers. Trust is hard to build and easy to lose.

Often, these students have unidentified learning difficulties and have experienced repeated failure. If they have ADHD, they are likely to be struggling with a medical problem, a dopamine deficit, and this causes impulsivity, severe attentional difficulties, and the inability to sit still. If they have dyslexia, they may be unable to record their thoughts on paper, read what is put in front of them, or spell accurately. With autism, they may struggle severely with constant change, crowds, and sensory overload. Each fall further behind each year and eventually stop trying.

Many students sent to pupil referral units fall into one of three categories:

- Those with an EHCP who haven't been properly supported.
- Those with a diagnosis (e.g., autism or ADHD) but no EHCP, and thus inadequate provision.
- Those with undiagnosed SEND needs who see school as a social space rather than a learning environment.
- Teachers and school leaders must understand that students will engage if learning is pitched at their level and they feel heard. Misbehaviour is a form of communication—it's up to educators to listen.

In my recent book chapters on SEND and ethnic minorities in schools, to be published, I examined the ethnic breakdown of UK school-aged students (Department for Education, 2024a):

- 61.3% White British
- 7.2% White Other
- 4.6% Asian-Pakistani
- 4.8% Black African
- 4.0% Asian-Indian
- 2.8% Mixed
- 2.4% Other ethnic group
- 2.2% Asian-Other
- 1.8% Asian-Bangladeshi
- 1.6% Mixed White and Asian
- 0.9% Black Caribbean

However, when examining diagnosed SEND data across these groups (see Table 1), some significant discrepancies emerge. While some may argue the total white group is overdiagnosed, others suggest ethnic minority students are severely underdiagnosed. Buditu (2025) found that Black and mixed Caribbean boys are often perceived as older than they are, leading to lower expectations and increased scrutiny, a phenomenon known as adultification, where Black students are perceived and treated as adults by teachers, despite being children (Gillborn et al., 2021).

Qualitative studies on Black African Caribbean pupils' exclusion experiences reveal perceptions of unfairness, lack of care, low expectations, and inconsistent policy enforcement (Bottiani et al., 2017; Demie, 2022). Gaffney et al. (2021) found racial bias in exclusions remains even after controlling for other factors. The Race Disparity Audit (Cabinet Office, 2017) and The Timpson Review (2019) also highlight disproportionate exclusion rates for Black pupils, yet little has changed.

Table 1

PRIMARY NEED	TOTAL WHITE (White British, Irish, Traveller of Irish decent)	TOTAL MIXED (White/Black Caribbean, White/Black African, White/Asian, Other Mixed)	TOTAL ASIAN (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Other Asian)	TOTAL BLACK (Black Caribbean , Black African, Other Black)
National school population	68.5%	13.2%	12.6%	5.7%
Autistic Spectrum Disorder	80.04	6.80	5.31	4.06
Hearing Impairment	70.21	5.08	15.31	4.04
Moderate Learning Difficulty	73.25	5.60	10.50	5.63
Multi-Sensory Impairment	82.37	5.36	5.78	3.10
Physical Disability	76.60	5.43	10.14	4.08
Profound & Multiple Learning Difficulty	61.57	6.64	15.29	8.45
SEN support, but no specialist assessment of the type of need	72.53	7.18	9.21	6.49
Severe Learning Difficulty	68.72	6.26	12.98	6.46
Social, Emotional and Mental Health	80.11	7.80	3.85	4.41
Specific Learning Difficulty	83.89	5.81	3.94	3.17
Speech, Language and Communications needs	65.39	6.68	13.58	8.51
Visual Impairment	72.33	5.11	13.88	4.68
Other Difficulty/Disability	76.88	7.02	6.92	5.00

Table 1: Special educational needs in England data for 2023/24 (mainstream secondary schools), percentage data (Department for Education, 2024b).

So, do we have an epidemic of Persistent Disruptive Behaviour in UK schools?

No. What we have is a failure to early screen for learning difficulties, especially among ethnic minority students. Many teachers lack the training and confidence to identify struggling students and ask why they're struggling. Research also suggests racial bias influences how behaviour is interpreted and punished, contributing to higher exclusion rates and poorer attendance among certain groups.

Until schools shift from punishment to understanding, and from reaction to reflection, the cycle will continue.

Misbehaviour isn't the epidemic; misunderstanding is.

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Paola Venables, an IASTI-accredited Solution Focused Practitioner based in Bath, working with young people in primary and secondary settings. With nearly two decades of experience in local authority schools – specialising in pastoral care, safeguarding, and child wellbeing – I bring a deep understanding of the systems and pressures young people face. My practice offers a calm and compassionate space for young people to talk, and focuses on helping them discover their strengths, build confidence, and move toward meaningful change in their own time and in their own way. For more information or to discuss working with me, you can visit: <https://www.paolavenablesft.com/>

Small Steps, Big Change: A Solution-Focused Approach to Attendance

How conversations about hope, not problems, can help young people find their way back to school

For many young people, the thought of walking through the school gates can feel overwhelming. Sometimes, it's not about defiance or avoidance at all; it's fear, exhaustion, or the sense that no one quite understands how heavy school life feels. Over the years I've spent working in education, I've seen how quickly attendance can become a battleground, when what's really needed is understanding, curiosity, and a way forward that feels possible.

That's where the Solution-Focused approach comes in. It's not about analysing what's gone wrong but discovering what's already working, however small, and building on it. When we shift the focus from problems to possibilities, young people often begin to rediscover their own strengths - and with that comes confidence, hope, and, very often, better attendance. Focusing on What's Strong, Not What's Wrong

The Solution-Focused approach grew from the work of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, who believed that people are the experts in their own lives. Rather than exploring the roots of a problem, we explore the presence of hope: What would be different if things were better? What's already helping, even just a little?

In my sessions, I invite young people to imagine their "best hopes": what they'd like life to look like if things were going well. For some, that might mean feeling calm enough to get through a full lesson, or being able to walk into school without the knot in their stomach. These hopes become our guide-posts.

We use scaling questions - "If 10 is where you'd like to be and 2 is where things are now, what would a 3 look like?" - to make progress visible and realistic. It's a small, hopeful framework; but one that encourages change to happen gently and at the young person's pace.

A Small Story: Finding the Next Step

One Year 9 student I worked with had been out of school for several months due to severe anxiety. In our first session, she couldn't look at me, let alone talk about returning to lessons. So instead, we spoke about her interests; drawing, animals, and the comfort of routine. Over time, through small Solution-Focused conversations, she began to describe what "a good day" might look like. We explored what would tell her that she was coping a bit better, and what others might notice when that happened. Gradually, she started going for short visits to school. The first time she walked through the door for ten minutes, we celebrated it as a huge success - because for her, it truly was.

A few weeks later, she told me, "I think I could manage an hour next time." That's the beauty of this approach: progress grows naturally when young people begin to notice what they can do.

The Power of Feeling Understood

Parents often tell me how different things feel once their child begins to engage in this kind of conversation.

One recently shared:

"My daughter met Paola at school and instantly felt comfortable with her. She felt safe and understood right from the start... After every session, my daughter comes home feeling lighter, calmer, and more in control of her emotions and life."

Another parent simply said:

"My daughter was in a low place and Paola helped her to see a more positive side to herself and how she can continue to improve her outlook and wellbeing."

These reflections mean so much to me. They remind me that while attendance data might capture who's in the building, it doesn't show how they got there - or how much courage it took. For many young people, turning up again is the result of being truly heard and encouraged to see themselves differently.

Why It Works

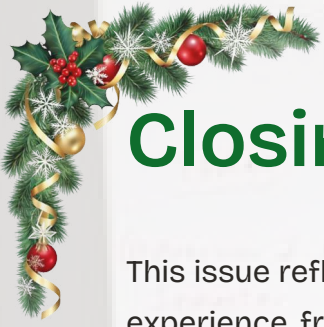
Solution-Focused work sits beautifully alongside attendance support because it shares the same goal: help young people feel capable, connected, and ready to move forward. Attendance officers and pastoral teams often face the difficult task of balancing empathy with accountability. What I've found is that when we introduce hope and collaboration into those conversations, the tone shifts - from pressure to partnership.

It's not about fixing or rescuing; it's about amplifying what's already working. Sometimes that means helping a family notice a calmer morning routine or a teacher recognising a student's effort to communicate. These moments, though small, build momentum; and it's that momentum that carries young people forward.

Moving from Stuck to Hopeful

The Solution-Focused approach isn't a magic wand, but it creates the conditions for change. It reminds young people that they are resourceful and resilient, even when things feel hard. When we focus on small steps, change feels achievable; and school begins to feel possible again.

In my work, I see this spark of hope every day. It's in the quiet confidence of a young person who says, "I think I can try again tomorrow." Those moments are where attendance work truly starts - not with rules or threats, but with the belief that every young person already holds the seeds of their own solution.



Closing Thoughts



This issue reflects a profession that wants solutions, not slogans. School leaders are exhausted by glossy PR that contradicts their lived experience, frustrated by policy expectations that ignore resource reality and searching for credible, implementable ideas that actually work. Attendance will not improve through national spin, superficial PR, pressure without capacity or initiatives without evidence. These approaches have been tried extensively, they don't work.

Attendance will improve through credible ideas shared generously between practitioners. Through genuine community and peer support. Through innovation like Kane Hudson's that prioritises psychological insight over bureaucratic compliance. Through belonging-focused cultures that make students want to attend. Through relationship rebuilding that treats families as partners, not problems. And through leaders who tell the truth about what works, what doesn't, and why the gap between policy rhetoric and practice reality undermines trust.

We have those leaders in abundance. This magazine exists to amplify their voices, celebrate their innovations and provide the honest professional conversation that national policy discourse too often lacks.

To every school leader reading this whilst simultaneously managing attendance crises, pastoral emergencies and impossible workloads, thank you. Your work matters profoundly. The students you support, the families you engage, the staff you sustain through relentless challenge; this work changes lives even when the data doesn't immediately reflect that impact.

Keep going. Keep innovating. Keep telling the truth. And know that across the country, thousands of colleagues are navigating the same complexity with the same determination.

You're not alone in this work. Have a Merry Christmas and a healthy and prosperous New Year!





Next Issue Preview

Coming in January 2026..... and much more!

Alternative Provision Attendance Crisis

Why AP settings face unique challenges and what national policy gets wrong about measuring their success.

The role of Behaviour & Attendance Hubs in England

Are these hubs delivering on Attendance improvement. We investigate and evaluate the evidence.

Parent Voice Panel

We interview parents whose children have attendance challenges. What do they need from schools? What helps? What makes things worse?

Technology Solutions Review

Comprehensive evaluation of attendance software, apps and tracking systems. What's worth the investment? What's expensive? What's going on with AI and attendance?

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