

November

Issue 3

Attendance

Centre stage in the new
Ofsted framework

The New Ofsted Framework: Attendance Centre Stage

CANDID CORNERS: Uncomfortable truths back by popular demand!

Fabulous Expert Guest Contributors

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2025 Ofsted Special

Understanding the 2025 Attendance & Behaviour element through the lens of Attendance

The new 2025 Ofsted Framework for England's schools introduces a sharper inspection lens on attendance; not as an administrative duty, but as a core indicator of culture, belonging and trust in the school community. The new judgement language of **Exceptional, Strong Standard, Expected Standard, Needs Attention and Urgent Improvement** invites leaders to move beyond talking about percentage figures and instead evidence the conditions that generate daily presence.

Inspectors are now asking: "To what extent do pupils feel recognised, welcomed and expected in school, and does this contribute to sustained presence?" This represents a cultural shift. In previous frameworks, attendance could be presented as a static data point. Under the 2025 model, attendance must be shown as a **lived experience**; visible in corridors, evident in tutor interactions, and spoken with authenticity by pupils themselves. Inspectors are not only looking at registers; they are watching for routines that signal belonging.

This is your opportunity to demonstrate that presence in your school is engineered through intentional design, not assumed through policy statements alone. The contents of this magazine are based on the interpretation of the 2025 Ofsted toolkit and ideas suggested for leaders are based on this interpretation and not evidenced from real inspections.



For our international readers, while the inspection landscape may differ, we hope this case study provides insight into how one national system is placing attendance centre stage, not as a compliance metric, but as a barometer of belonging, culture and ambition.

As always, share, tag us on LinkedIn and tell us what you think. Spread the word and repost the magazine across your social and professional networks. Your feedback shapes each issue. And brace yourself: Our December issue is going to be a game changer for schools everywhere!

With thanks and solidarity,

Colin | Editor, Attendance Magazine



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'Some children walk through the school gates with calm minds, full bellies and steady hearts. Others carry the weight of sleepless nights, fear, loss or trauma.

Before they can learn, they need to feel safe.
Before they can engage, they need to feel seen.
Before they can achieve, they need to belong.

Schools are not just places of instruction; they are anchors in the storms of children's lives.

Let's never forget that attendance is not just about being present; it's about being ready to learn, ready to connect and ready to heal.

♥ Safety first. Connection first. Belonging always.

Design for presence!'



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2025 Ofsted fact file

"Persistent absence will be considered in relation to the school's graduated response, partnership with families and culture of noticing."



November Guest Contributors

Guest Contributors – November Edition of Attendance Magazine

In this month's Attendance Magazine, we're delighted to feature four outstanding guest contributors, each offering a unique and thought-provoking perspective on attendance and engagement from across the education landscape.

Russell Hobby – CEO Perspective: The Simplicity of Hard Work

We open this edition with Russell Hobby, CEO of TCAT, a large multi-academy trust in the South East of England. Formerly CEO of Teach First and General Secretary of the NAHT, Russell offers a grounded, CEO-level perspective on attendance. Initially hesitant to contribute, believing that “the real work happens in schools” Russell modestly underplays his own role. His article reminds us that CEOs make things happen by creating the conditions for success. He writes candidly about his first year leading TCAT, sharing that the “recipe” for good attendance is no mystery; just consistent, deliberate hard work. Monitoring, checking, calling, visiting, celebrating, and sometimes having the difficult conversations. His reflections on organisational mastery; embedding priorities deeply before moving to the next are a timely lesson for all leaders navigating change.

Cath Kitchen OBE – Including Learners with Medical Needs

Next, we hear from Cath Kitchen OBE, an eminent figure in hospital and medical education and Chair of the National Association for Hospital Education. Cath's article, Including 'Learners with Medical Needs in School', explores the experiences of children and young people living with long-term physical health conditions—an estimated 1 to 1.17 million pupils across the UK. Cath draws on her national leadership, DfE advisory work, and recent research to reveal the psychological and systemic barriers that these pupils face. Her piece is both compassionate and challenging, urging schools to replace adversarial attendance practices with supportive, relational approaches that promote belonging and wellbeing. It's a vital read for all who want to ensure every pupil, whatever their health condition, feels part of the school community.

Antony Little – Making School Your Happy Place

Our third contributor, Antony Little, Principal of Hewett Academy in Norwich (part of the Inspiration Trust), brings an energising, story-driven account titled 'Making School Your Happy Place'. Antony charts the school's transformation over four years—same pupils, same challenges, but radically improved attendance now standing at 94.6%. He attributes this success to reshaping leadership structures around attendance, embedding a culture of happiness and belonging, and treating attendance as a proxy for school joy. Through pragmatic examples and staff reflections, Antony demonstrates how a relentless focus on relationships, enrichment and optimism can re-engage even the most reluctant learners.

Dr Alexander-Passe – Attendance and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Finally, Dr Alexander Passe, researcher, author, and consultant inclusion expert for the DfE, provides an unflinching exploration of attendance within the school-to-prison pipeline. Drawing on his PhD in dyslexia, trauma, and post-school success, Dr Passe challenges schools to look beneath the surface of attendance data and behaviour logs to understand the unmet needs driving absence. His article interweaves research, case studies on ADHD and undiagnosed autism—especially in girls—and post-COVID reflections. His message is clear: only when schools dismantle barriers to inclusion can we prevent exclusion and enable neurodiverse learners to thrive.

Guest Contributor: Russell Hobby

Expert opinions

Russell has just started as CEO of TKAT, a large multi academy trust in the south east of England. Before that, he was CEO of Teach First and General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers.



Attendance and the Trust

When I saw the call for CEOs to write about attendance, I was a little reluctant at first. The real work to support attendance takes place in schools (and in the communities around them), not in the CEO's office. On the other hand, why not take the opportunity to say this, and to celebrate the hard work of colleagues in schools? So take this as a thank you note to TKAT schools.

Last year, like almost everyone else in the country, we found attendance a challenge. By Christmas last year, 27.5% of secondary pupils were persistently absent, along with 20% of primary and 29.6% of special. Following the pandemic, attendance has somehow become optional. The 'contract' between schools and families has shifted, lives are hard, and alternatives are alluring. Yet we also know that a well run school is a good place for young people to be. It keeps them safe. It gives them a space for relationships to grow. And most critically it is where they learn. We want children in school.

So, I guess you are waiting for the secret recipe, the silver bullet. Like so much else of importance in school: there is none. It is not complicated; it is just really, really hard work. You do know what to do already. The question is whether it is actually done – every day, by every person. The tracking, the checking, the planning, the monitoring. And the calls and the visits and the follow ups. The celebrations and the stern words.

As a CEO, I can help this, of course. We've built the data dashboards, we've provided the training, we've shared good practice. We've celebrated the success. Perhaps more to the point, though, I can hinder it. A big part of our work has been getting out of the way. We've reduced the number of priorities we focus on as a whole trust and are working overwhelmingly on attendance and on the quality of teaching and learning. We see them as foundations of lots that we will want to do later, and we'll work on them until we get them right.

*"It's early days, and we'll
experience ups
and downs, but there are over 300
more young people 'persistently
present' than there were
this time last year."*

Russell Hobby, CEO



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Guest Contributor

Expert opinions

We often talk about mastery in the context of pedagogy. However, there's a kind of 'organisational mastery' too. We can rush from idea to idea, pursuing each new thing and leaving shaky foundations behind. Or we can work at each priority until we've 'got it', consistently, before moving to the next. I think this latter way better suits how schools thrive – with calmness, consistency, attention to detail, pride in the work. It is not that we can't be bold and innovative, but that we earn that one step at a time.

We've got off to a decent start this year. Of course, we look at percentages, trends and demographics. But the most powerful data we have is simply the actual number of pupils in our schools each day. An actual person, not a statistic, doing something that will do them good instead of something that could do them harm. It's early days, and we'll experience ups and downs, but there are over 300 more young people 'persistently present' than there were this time last year. Thank you to my colleagues for making that happen.

Russell Hobby

CEO, The Kemnal Academies Trust



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2025 Ofsted fact file

"As part of the evaluation of leadership, governance will also be reviewed. Governing body minutes should clearly demonstrate consistent and challenging scrutiny of attendance data and the actions taken by leaders."



Attendance Magazine

Editor's Call to Action – November Edition

Our four guest contributors this month truly encapsulate what Attendance Magazine stands for. Each piece reflects our shared mission: to improve attendance through understanding, compassion, and rigour. There are no quick fixes, no silver bullets but as our writers remind us, there is wisdom, courage and a growing 'collective will' to make every school a place where pupils want to be.

As Editor, I want to extend heartfelt thanks to **Russell Hobby, Cath Kitchen OBE, Antony Little and Dr Alexander Passe** for their thoughtful, professional and inspiring contributions. Their work reinforces our core message: that designing for presence, our defining mantra, is about making school irresistible for children, to children and from the school itself. Attendance is not just about compliance; it is about connection.

Yet, we know the world we are working in is complex. Improving attendance is hard, determined work but it must also be smart work. Schools are not factories; they are living, breathing communities. This means looking again at the very structures that shape school life; the curriculum, relationships, ethos, culture and atmosphere. We must ask ourselves: what kind of learning truly prepares our children for the 21st century? How do we reconnect with families where trust and agency between home and school have broken down? How do we ensure our children see school not as an obligation, but as an opportunity to grow, belong and thrive? We need to have hope our political masters make good decisions.

The new Ofsted framework, with its rightful focus on inclusion, presents both challenge and opportunity. It brings fresh expectations around attendance, safeguarding and quality assurance. However, we must take care that this does not become a framework that overwhelms schools or places intolerable pressure on already stretched leaders. Accountability should be about improvement, not punishment. Inclusion should not be something manufactured for inspection; it must be lived daily as the moral and relational DNA of every good school.

At Attendance Magazine, this edition focuses on how we interpret the new Ofsted framework, and how schools can prepare for the quality assurance it brings. We offer practical strategies to manage this change with confidence; balancing accountability with authenticity.

The call to action is clear. We need enhanced resourcing, not rhetoric. Schools need the capacity, time, and expertise to meet the scale of the attendance challenge before us. This is not just about data or sanctions; it's about investing in the people and systems that help children feel safe, seen, and valued.

Our collective mission must be to create schools that are centres of joy, purpose, and belonging. Because when we design for presence, we design for possibility and when we get that right, attendance will follow.

What each new judgement level is likely to look like in Attendance Culture



Exceptional

Attendance is anchored in a visible culture of belonging. Pupils speak confidently about feeling noticed and expected. Leaders can point to case studies where strategic actions led to measurable movement between attendance bands. Tutor time is intentionally relational and described by pupils as a meaningful moment of check-in rather than admin or English/maths cover.



Strong Standard

Attendance systems are intelligent and proactive. Band movement is tracked and understood. Leaders can narrate why attendance improved, not just that it did. Parents report early, partnership-based engagement. Middle leaders understand their role in presence, not just register accuracy. Some narrative evidence present.



Expected Standard

Attendance processes are compliant and functional. Registers are accurate and intervention steps are in place, but narrative evidence is limited. Tutor time follows expected routines but lacks relational depth. Leaders can account for persistent absence figures but not always link them to belonging or cultural touchpoints.



Needs Attention

Attendance is monitored but interventions are reactive. Leaders know the numbers but lack compelling case narratives. Tutor time is administrative rather than relational. Parental engagement begins late into absence. Band movement is not systematically analysed.



Urgent Improvement

Attendance processes are fragmented or inconsistent. Leaders cannot articulate a clear picture of who is at risk or why. Case data is incomplete. Tutor time lacks purpose. Parents feel contacted only when things go wrong. No sense of belonging strategy.

"Presence is engineered, not assumed." – Senior Ofsted Lead Inspector (2025 Pilot Commentary)

The cultural shift: From monitoring to momentum

What Inspectors used to look for....

- Attendance percentages reported correctly
- Policy documentation in place
- Letters sent at statutory thresholds
- Persistent absence figures tracked
- Register accuracy verified

What Inspectors now likely to seek..

- Movement between attendance bands over time
- Narrative evidence linking actions to outcomes
- Early belonging interventions before thresholds
- Cultural indicators of belonging
- Pupil voice describing emotional safety



Inspectors under the 2025 framework will speak less about monitoring and more about **momentum of presence**. They will look for movement between attendance bands and within bands, not simply static figures.

They will shadow pupils, asking questions such as "Who notices when you're not here?" and "If you're late or struggling to attend, who checks in—not just calls home?"

They will observe tutor time and look for signals of genuine connection. A tutor who knows the stories behind the data will contribute to a stronger inspection narrative than one who simply records codes. This is the essence of the cultural shift required under the new framework.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Governance will be evaluated on how well leaders are held to account for culture, inclusion, attendance and wellbeing, not only academic outcomes."



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Language Matters: From Compliance to Connection

Many schools still present attendance in compliance terms: "We follow up after X days," "We issue letters," "We track persistent absence." Under the new framework, inspectors are listening for a language of intentional culture building that demonstrates strategic leadership and belonging architecture.



Old Compliance Language

"We have procedures in place to monitor attendance and issue warnings when thresholds are reached."



New Belonging Language

"We have designed routines so that presence is noticed and absence feels unusual. Tutor time is where we generate check-in moments that shift attendance behaviour."



Inspection-Ready Language

"Our dashboard doesn't just show numbers—it shows movement, and every movement has a leadership action attached to it."

- ☐ **Critical Inspection Question:** "If an inspector followed one pupil from your 90–94.9% attendance band throughout the day, what would they see that tells a story of belonging rather than monitoring?"

This question captures the heart of the new inspection era. Attendance is no longer about chasing absence. It is about designing for presence. Schools that can articulate their approach using belonging language, supported by concrete examples of relational routines and cultural touchpoints, will position themselves strongly for inspection under the 2025 framework.



Attendance Intelligence & Data

Narrative: Turning banding movement into inspection language

Under the 2025 Ofsted Framework, attendance must be presented as a story of movement and leadership impact—not simply a static statistic. Inspectors expect leaders to demonstrate **narrative intelligence**: the ability to explain which pupils moved between attendance bands, why that movement happened, and which adult action led to that change.

Inspectors are shifting from asking "What is your persistent absence rate?" to "Which pupils shifted attendance patterns and how did your leadership generate that movement?" This is attendance intelligence—the capacity to narrate causation, not just correlation.

The Old Model (Pre-2025)

- 93.2% overall attendance reported
- 17% persistent absence figure stated
- No band movement insight provided
- No narrative of leadership action
- Data presented as endpoint rather than journey

The New Model (2025 Framework)

"We had 64 pupils in the 90–94.9% watch band in October. By January, 23 had moved to 95%+ following our tutor belonging intervention. Each movement is linked to a named adult and recorded action."

This demonstrates cultural intelligence and proactive leadership worthy of Strong Standard judgement.



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Banding analysis as narrative evidence

The power of banding analysis lies in its ability to transform raw attendance data into a strategic narrative. Each band represents not just a statistical category, but a distinct phase in a pupil's relationship with school presence. Understanding these bands allows leaders to respond with precision rather than blanket interventions.



95%+ Secure Presence

"We sustain presence through culture. Tutors reinforce belonging daily. These pupils experience school as a place where they are recognised and valued."



85–89.9% Emerging Disengagement

"Each pupil has a presence plan with a named adult. We treat this band as active disengagement requiring immediate belonging response."



90 – 94.9% Watch List (Occasional absence)

"These pupils receive targeted relational check-ins to prevent drift. Early intervention at this stage prevents escalation to persistent absence."



<85% Severe Disconnection

"We initiate multi-agency presence work rooted in belonging. These cases receive coordinated support across pastoral, SEND, and external services."



Inspectors will ask: "Show me how you know which pupils are about to slip into persistent absence before they do."

This question tests whether your attendance system is predictive or merely reactive. Schools operating at **Strong** or **Exceptional standard** can answer this with confidence, pointing to specific early warning indicators and the belonging interventions triggered at the first signs of drift.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Inspectors will look at how the school works in genuine partnership with parents, particularly around attendance, behaviour and inclusion."



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Guest Contributor: Cath Kitchen, OBE

Expert opinions



Cath is an experienced leader in hospital education, representing the sector at the DfE. She has recently published 'Including learners with medical needs in school.' Cath is the Chair of the National Association for Hospital Education, a NLE and was a pathfinder for the Ethical Leadership Framework. She gave evidence at the All Parliamentary Committee investigation into Alternative Provision and was awarded an OBE for services to children and young people in 2022.

School attendance challenges for young people with long term physical health conditions

This article explores the findings of paper 'Qualitative Study Examining Attendance for Secondary School Pupils With Long-Term Physical Health Conditions (Hopwood et al, 2024)' which was part of the INSCHOOL project, a 5 year National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) funded research programme. The research is being led by Dr Simon Pini and has involved interviews with 89 young people aged 11-18 living with long term conditions across Leeds Children's Hospital. They have shared with researchers what school life is like for them, and are helping in the development of recommendations for policies and practices to support them and their peers more effectively in school.

Setting the scene

We know that there is increasing pressure on schools from the government and accountability systems to address absenteeism which is sensible, given that research indicates that consistent school attendance is linked to better educational and social outcomes. But what about that cohort of young people who often do not have a choice about whether they attend school or not? Who have no choice about when they are admitted to hospital for an inpatient stay or for their regular appointments? These are one of the groups that are disproportionately affected by absenteeism and are often overlooked.

What does the data about this cohort tell us?

There is no official agreed data but it is estimated that 1-1.7 million young people in the UK have long term physical health conditions, which represents about 11-17% of pupils in England. These are just those we are aware of, as the registration coding is not refined enough to identify this cohort specifically. As you would expect, this cohort often experiences lower attendance rates and associated lower academic attainment compared to their peers. In addition to this, there is a lack of comprehensive data on how schools manage attendance for these particular pupils.

Guest Contributor

Expert opinions

What has the research shown us so far

This research showed that young people with long term health conditions often have unmet health, academic, psychological, and social needs within school. Importantly it also showed that all young people face largely the same challenges, regardless of what specific health condition they have. Those interviewed were clear on the strategies that schools can use to support them to attend when they are well enough and to feel included in the school community.

Reasons for absence

The young people reported various reasons for their absence from school which included both health issues and the psychological impact of their condition. Absences were frequently due to illness, treatment, or medical appointments, as expected but some shared that they experienced anxiety about returning to school, following the period of absence. For some, anxiety was increased because of worrying about being subjected to unkind comments from peers because of visible signs of their condition, and bullying and stigma because they look different. Most of those interviewed expressed a strong commitment to their education, and made every effort to schedule health appointments to minimize school disruption. Some talked about making compromises between health and education needs when making decisions about attending school, which meant sacrificing one area for the other. Some made determined efforts to carry on with life in the same way they would if they did not have a long term physical health condition, at times even to the detriment of their health. Alongside their internal motivation to attend school for their own benefit, several felt “pressured” to attend school by teachers or parents. Some worried that they would be perceived as if they “didn’t care” about education. This meant going to school when they did not feel well enough. Others considered health the main priority and had accepted, or “resigned” themselves to, the necessity of time away from school.

2025 Ofsted fact file

“Inspectors will focus on what is actually taught and learned day to day, not on curriculum documentation alone.”



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Guest Contributor

Expert opinions

Schools responses to absenteeism

The majority of young people interviewed felt that school responses to their absences were more adversarial rather than supportive, including:

- Being pressured to justify their absences, and that they were not believed.
- Home visits feeling unsupportive like checking up where their parents were challenged about their attendance.
- Having to seek GP and consultant support from their doctor to justify reason for absence.
- Punitive measures for low attendance, which exacerbated their feelings of exclusion and stigma.
- Being included or excluded in certain lessons or permitted to attend school
- Having a personal responsibility to catch up on missed work, despite the challenges posed by their health conditions.
- Negative impact of incentives and reward schemes because they cannot whether they were ill
- Actively disciplined or cautioned for having low attendance, chastised in class for missing work.

However, some schools were really supportive adopting strategies such as:

- Flexing the curriculum and support around the needs of the young people's health condition.
- Authorising absence without question enabling young people to come back into school on phased returns
- Not marking them down as late as they recognised that their being late was due to their condition or adverse effects of medication.
- Support to catch up
- Supply of notes/presentations for lessons missed
- Access to online learning options
- Recognising the social interactions and maintaining of peer relationships is as important as academic progress
- Reasonable adjustments so that young people can access all areas of the curriculum - including PE!
- What do young people with long term physical health conditions need from their schools to support their attendance?

A thematic analysis of the interview outcomes generated these key 'needs':

- Need to safely manage my health at school;
- Need for a flexible education pathway;
- Need to be acknowledged and listened to in the right way;
- Need to be included in and supported by the school community;
- Need to build towards my future;
- Need to develop attitudes and approaches to coping in school and have good mental health.

And the next stage in the research is to develop an audit and support tool for schools, based on these key themes

Guest Contributor

Expert opinions

What can you do as a school?

Consider these key questions to ask yourselves about young people with long term physical health conditions in your school, and how you can support their attendance:

- Do you know how many pupils in your school have a long-term health condition?
- Have you collaborated with the cohort to develop your systems and processes?
- How many have Individual Healthcare Plans (IHPs)? How happy are you with the current IHP process in your school?
- How are their absences recorded and managed?
- How well do you think your school meets these 6 needs above?
- Can you review your attendance policy to ensure that it includes the support you are providing for pupils with long term physical health conditions?
- Is your current reward system flexible and adaptive enough that pupils with long term physical health conditions do not feel stigmatised?
- What is your system for supporting this cohort with catching up on work they have missed?
- What would you need in order to improve provision for these pupils in your school?

References:

Hopwood, V., Pini, S., Spencer, B. K. C., & Kitchen, C. (2024). Qualitative Study Examining Attendance for Secondary School Pupils With Long-Term Physical Health Conditions. *Continuity in Education*, 5(1), pp. 76–89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/cie.111>

2025 Ofsted fact file

“Pupils should be able to talk about their learning, their safety, and their sense of belonging with confidence and authenticity.”



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The Movement Dashboard: Leadership Evidence in Action

A strong dashboard is not simply a collection of numbers—it is a visual narrative of leadership impact. It should tell the story of how your school actively engineers presence through strategic, belonging-focused interventions. The movement dashboard represents the difference between recording attendance and actually influencing it.

What a movement dashboard must show

Pupils moving between bands weekly

Movement arrows (up/down) clearly visible
Action tags next to each movement

Leadership narrative attached to shifts
Named adults responsible for interventions

Timestamp of when action was taken

Action Tag examples

TC – Tutor Check-in (relational greeting and recognition)

BC – Belonging Call (early parental contact before enforcement)

MA – Mentor Attachment (key adult assigned to pupil)

PR – Presence Routine (morning welcome protocol activated)

SC – SEND Consultation (emotional barriers identified and addressed)

- ❑ **Strong Standard Example:** "This dashboard shows that 14 pupils moved up from 85–89% to above 90%. Each movement is linked to a staff-led belonging intervention logged within 48 hours of risk detection."

During inspection, leaders should be prepared to walk through their dashboard with confidence, selecting individual pupils and narrating the specific actions that generated movement. This demonstration of causal understanding—knowing not just what changed, but why it changed—is what distinguishes **Strong** and **Exceptional** practice from merely compliant systems.



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Inspector Focus: Live Verification of Attendance Intelligence

Under the 2025 framework, inspectors will not simply accept attendance data as presented. They will actively test whether the narrative you provide matches the lived reality of your school culture. This means live verification during the inspection visit, with inspectors requesting real-time evidence and following specific pupil journeys.

Pre-Inspection Request

Inspectors request live dashboard or printout focused on movement, not just overall percentage figures. They want to see which pupils shifted bands in recent weeks.

Leadership Questioning

Inspectors ask: "Can you show me where this movement was discussed at leadership level? What specific action was taken? Who was responsible?"

1

2

3

4

Pupil Selection

Inspectors select pupils who recently moved bands—either up or down—and ask to follow their journey through documentation and observation.

Cultural Verification

Inspectors shadow selected pupils during the day, observing whether belonging routines are visible in practice, not just documented in policy.

Weak Response (Compliance-Focused)

"Our persistent absence figure has dropped from 18% to 15% this year. We've improved our processes."

Strong Response (Culture-Focused)

"In October, 39 students were in the 85–89 band. We introduced a relational tutor check-in model. Within six weeks, 14 moved into the 90–94.9 band. We can show you each linked action note."



The strong response demonstrates narrative intelligence—the ability to connect leadership action to measurable outcome. This matches the language of Strong Standard inspection criteria and positions the school as culturally mature rather than merely procedurally compliant.

Building an Ofsted-Ready Self-Evaluation narrative for Attendance

The 2025 Ofsted model expects leaders to speak about attendance as a cultural design decision, not just a statutory process. The Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) must move away from procedural phrasing and instead demonstrate intentional belonging work and narrative clarity. Every sentence should communicate leadership understanding of how presence is generated through culture.

Inspectors want to hear language that links strategy to lived experience. Statements such as "We issue letters after X days" are no longer considered strong evidence. Instead, your SEF should articulate how belonging is engineered, how movement is tracked, and how pupils experience recognition as a daily routine.

Outdated SEF Language

"We have procedures in place to monitor attendance. Registers are taken each morning and afternoon. We follow statutory guidance on persistent absence."



2025-Aligned SEF Language

"Attendance routines are designed to generate early belonging cues; pupils at risk of disengagement are noticed quickly, and relational contact begins before absence accumulates. Movement between bands is our primary metric."

Outdated SEF Language

"We track persistent absence figures and report them to governors each term. Letters are sent when thresholds are reached."



2025-Aligned SEF Language

"We monitor movement between attendance bands weekly and can show how belonging interventions led to upward shifts. Each improvement is linked to a named adult action and recorded as leadership evidence."

Model SEF Extract: Inspection-Ready Language

The following extract represents Strong Standard language that demonstrates cultural maturity, strategic intelligence, and belonging-focused leadership. Use this as a template when drafting or refining your own self-evaluation narrative around attendance.

"Attendance at our school is addressed not simply through monitoring absence but by intentionally designing presence. We analyse movement between attendance bands fortnightly and link each improvement to a named adult action—typically rooted in relational check-ins or pastoral belonging work."

"Our approach begins before statutory thresholds are reached: pupils at risk of disengagement are identified early through tutor observation and low-level attendance fluctuation. Parents report that contact feels like partnership rather than enforcement. Tutors are trained to use belonging scripts rather than reprimands, and pupils describe feeling 'noticed' as a defining characteristic of our school culture." "We can demonstrate through case studies how specific leadership actions—such as attachment to a key adult or proactive belonging calls—have generated measurable upward movement across attendance bands. This narrative intelligence forms the foundation of our attendance strategy under the 2025 framework."



- ❑ **Key Elements Present:** Intentional design language, movement tracking, named adult actions, early identification, partnership with parents, belonging scripts, pupil voice, case study evidence and narrative intelligence.



Guest Contributor: Antony Little

Expert opinions

Antony Little is an experienced school leader and the Principal at Hewett Academy in Norwich, part of the Inspiration Trust.



Making school your happy place

How one school, bursting with challenges, became one of the top attending by making “happiness” its focus (without compromising on standards)

I am sure that this is a familiar feeling, had by school leaders across the country – We’ve put in the hard yards, we are confident in the quality of education in our school and yet outcomes still don’t match inputs. And then the dawning realisation – that attendance of students is so low, it doesn’t matter how good the practice in the classroom is, if the students aren’t there to benefit from it.

That’s where my school, Hewett Academy, was four years ago. We had all worked so hard to create a fantastic school experience and yet the attendance rate of 86.9% showed us something deeper about how our students felt. Of course, we trotted out the usual excuses – we have a PP rate twice the national average, four times the national rate of EHCPs and a school with over a third as SEND-k. If you took every low attending sub group in a school, we had loads of them.

But I can remember the day that we drew a line in the sand. Stop accepting excuses; that disadvantaged kids don’t attend school as much as we had to deal with that and start to do something about it. Something had to change, and maybe that something was us?

Four years on and our attendance last year was 94.6% - same kids, same disadvantage and same leaders. So, what changed? How did one of Norwich’s most challenging schools buck the trend on attendance?

The first thing we did was sort the leadership of attendance and then start to plan. We appointed a new Attendance Officer, promoting one of our best and most organised admin team members to the role. We needed consistency and relentlessness in that role. I then got my “SLT trouble shooter” into the job as Assistant Head focusing just on attendance. Suzy Pearce, a science teacher by trade, was often the person I asked to sort out the ‘wicked problems’ in school. Now, she took her practical, analytical mind to the issue of attendance.

Guest Contributor

Expert opinions

And then, the analysis began. We trawled through the MIS system looking for patterns and indicators. And we did focus groups of students over, and over, again. We spoke to the 100%'ers - why do you attend school? We spoke to the 90-95'ers who took the odd day off. And we spoke to the sub 90 students to dig deeper into their reluctance to attend. We asked for honesty – and we got it. Their feedback shaped the whole strategy. Interestingly, when each group created their “top 10” reasons to attend school / “top 10” reasons why they don't attend school, rewards didn't feature at all. They didn't want a Freddo on Friday or a certificate at the end of term.

What they told us; I summarised in a single phrase - “attendance is a proxy for happiness.”

They didn't attend when they weren't happy. When they didn't feel safe. When they didn't feel a part of what we were doing as a school. For the first time, we stepped back from thinking about this purely in the terms of FPNs or fast track prosecutions (although we still do both!) but in terms of why they should attend school.

Happy children attend school. Happy children behave. Happy children do their homework.

And so the planning started.

What would bring them in early in the mornings? A free breakfast club – no booking required – drop in style. No “Premier Inn” breakfast I'm afraid but a reliable and friendly welcome to the school, before the government even clocked the idea. We put sports equipment on the playgrounds so they could come and play football, or shoot some hoops. We opened the computer rooms for general use (which turned into de facto homework clubs, weirdly). We opened some of the art rooms for use. We even created “bright mornings” where the TAs were available to help students (not just with SEND) prep for the day ahead, sort equipment and help with any incomplete homework.

2025 Ofsted fact file

“The focus is on typicality — inspectors want to see what happens every day, not a staged or one-off version.”

Guest Contributor

Expert opinions

We then introduced “kit check” for the first 5 minutes of the school day. Despite the military-sounding name, this was done with the period 1 teacher and involved a slide show of messages about the day ahead (assemblies, drop down sessions, upcoming competitions, etc) along with a check on uniform and equipment. One thing we were told is that some students avoided school when they knew that they would be sanctioned for certain things. So, at Kit Check if you don’t have a pen you get one, for free and with no sanction. I’m not saying the pen is nice, but it would get them through the day without 5 or 6 other teachers having to lend them out and collect them in. If they lost the equipment through the day, they do get sanctioned. But everyone starts the day ready to learn and consequence free.

Next job – what’s their “get out of bed” subject? We looked at which subjects and which days certain classes liked and come to school for. And then I adjusted the timetable to ensure a proper balance, not just across the week but on each day. For example, we noted that on one day one class had all “desk based” subjects. So we worked to ensure a spread of, say, PE, Art, DT and Drama so that the day would be broken up. Even better, putting those subjects on period 1 for key groups has transformed their desire to come to school, and come on time. “Come for the PE, stay for the English!”.

We worked hard to transform language. “You’ve got to be in it, to win it” was Suzy’s mantra. We don’t berate those who didn’t come in, we made sure those who did were praised and when others returned that they felt seen and appreciated. As Headteacher, I would check attendance at least three times a day to do this. On the gate at the end of the day we would start with “see you tomorrow” rather than “goodbye” and some light heralding of what was to come “don’t forget you have double Art tomorrow!”.

We stopped getting kids to note their own attendance and up in form rooms went the most positive variance we could find. Be that House, year group or form group. Telling a student “You are only at 80%” didn’t have the impact we wanted. Saying “you are part of a 96% for group” did. And every time we got a good day, boy did we celebrate. It was like an Ofsted “outstanding” every day of the week. Messages to staff, texts to parents, bigging it up with students. Banners, badges, posters ... every 0.1% increase was treated like we had won the lottery.

Expert opinions

We rolled out a programme of house events and competitions that created a sense of belonging as students represented their house or form. Pumpkin carving, gingerbread house making, eater bonnets, welly wanging (no, really) - we did it all. And we filmed it, clipped it and shared on social media for the parents to see. Being at school is great! When the football team win, we do everything short of parading them into the assembly on sedan chairs. They needed to know that staff see them and support them. Their school – Hewett Academy – was going up in the world, they saw success and felt a part of it.

And then, after school. We invested heavily, financially and in staff time, on a fantastic enrichment programme that catered for lots of tastes. The traditional football and netball, but also AI, coding, gaming, cricket, arts, sculptures, boxing, softball, swimming and – much to my surprise – triathlon took off (thanks, Brownlee brothers!). Now roughly a third of my school stays late each day to do something. We build a drone, learnt Cantonese and started a marching band. Our school production went from 5 students auditioning to 50. We did it all, to make them happy.

Creating happiness is one thing; maintaining it was another. We know that things go wrong in school. We noted how many of the students would take time off in the face of difficulties, such as bullying. So, we set out to teach resilience. But we also put their feelings first. I challenged the pastoral team – could we have a 24-hour bullying response time? Could we say that no student should ever take time off for being upset at school? We don't get it right all of the time and maybe we aren't at 100% but now I would say it is "rare" that students miss school for this reason. And here, I may not be popular with my feel Heads. To support this, I blocked out period 1 on my calendar to help deal with attendance issues. If a parent emails with a problem on Wednesday and is told that the Headteacher will see them at 9am on Thursday, which parent isn't going to turn up for that? In my experience, not only can the issue be sorted quickly but in the vast majority of cases the student stays in school that day.

The result isn't just felt in attendance. Our P8 went to +0.56 (third most improved school in England last year), outcomes tripled and went to well above average, parent satisfaction surveys massively improved and suspensions fell. And all from that one thought – attendance is a proxy for happiness – so what can we do to make our school a happier place?

Yes, we still suspend, we still issue FPNs, we still have very challenging meetings with parents. But for most of the students, most of the time, Hewett Academy is a happy place to be.

And, being an attendance optimist, all school can be too.

Leadership script bank for inspection dialogue

During inspection, leaders will face direct questioning about attendance culture. The quality of your responses—specifically your ability to speak with narrative clarity rather than compliance rhetoric—will significantly influence judgement outcomes. Rehearsing inspection-ready language across your leadership team is essential preparation.

Inspector Question:

"How do you know your attendance work is making a difference?"

Strong Standard Response:

"Because we track movement, not just position. For example, 11 students moved from 85–89% into higher bands after tutor belonging scripts were introduced. Each movement links to a named adult action, visible in our dashboard logs."

Inspector Question:

"What role does tutor time play in your attendance strategy?"

Strong Standard Response:

"Tutor time is our relational frontline. Rather than admin, we train tutors to begin with 'I'm glad you're here today.' That micro-intervention is logged and forms part of our belonging architecture. Pupils describe it as a meaningful check-in rather than register-taking."

Inspector Question:

"Which pupils are at risk right now, and how would I see that?"

Strong Standard Response:

"Our 90–94.9 band is our watch list. Tutors greet these pupils by name and use belonging scripts during morning arrival. You will see that routine in action during tutor time today. Each pupil in this band has a named adult responsible for weekly check-ins."



Notice how each response connects practice to culture, names specific actions and offers evidence that can be verified through observation. This is the standard of fluency likely expected at Strong and Exceptional levels under the 2025 framework.



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SEF preparation checklist for Leadership Teams

Before inspection, leaders should conduct an internal audit using this checklist to ensure your self-evaluation demonstrates cultural maturity rather than procedural compliance. Each element should be evidenced through specific examples, not generic statements.

1

Intentional Design Language

Does your SEF reference "designed presence," "belonging architecture," and "movement, not position" rather than "monitoring" and "procedures"?

2

Movement Data Narrative

Can you point to specific sections where band movement is described, with interventions clearly linked to outcomes?

3

Middle Leader Fluency

Can middle leaders narrate attendance data through story, not just percentage? Test this through rehearsal questioning.

4

Embedded Voice Evidence

Are parent and pupil quotes embedded as cultural verification throughout the attendance section, not just listed separately?

5

Tutor Time as Cultural Practice

Is tutor time mentioned as purposeful and relational, with specific examples of belonging scripts or recognition routines?

6

Case Study Integration

Are 2-3 attendance case studies referenced by name, showing clear cause-effect relationships between leadership action and attendance movement?



Critical Reflection: "Could every member of SLT confidently talk through three attendance movement stories using relational language rather than administrative terminology?"

High-Impact Attendance Case Studies: Turning real pupils into Inspection Evidence

In the 2025 Ofsted Framework, inspectors expect schools to present attendance not only through data but through narrative evidence. Case studies are now a high-value inspection asset when they demonstrate a clear cause-and-effect relationship between leadership action and attendance movement. Numbers without narrative are considered insufficient.

Inspectors want to hear which pupil moved from one band to another, what relational or cultural intervention caused that movement, which adult was responsible, and what changed for that pupil emotionally and socially—not just statistically. This is the essence of narrative intelligence.

Context Setting

"In September, Mia was in the 85–89% attendance band. She had limited peer connection and anxiety around tutor time. Previous interventions focused on letters home."

Leadership Action

"Instead of issuing attendance alerts, we attached Mia to her tutor using a belonging script during morning check-ins. The tutor began each day with recognition: 'Good to see you, Mia.'"

Cultural Shift

"Mia reported feeling noticed for the first time. In pupil voice survey she said, 'My tutor actually sees me now.' This emotional shift preceded attendance improvement."

Measurable Movement

"Within six weeks, she moved to 93.6% attendance and is on trajectory to reach 95%+ by end of term. Movement logged in dashboard with tutor action tag."

Leadership Reflection

"This case shows our shift from chasing absence to engineering presence. It demonstrates belonging as a strategic intervention, not just a value statement."

This five-step structure—the 90-second inspection case study formula—provides a repeatable template for capturing and presenting attendance movement stories that resonate with inspectors operating under the 2025 framework.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

It's disappointing how often tutor time is underused in secondary schools. In too many settings, it has quietly become a holding slot — or worse, repurposed as an extra English or Maths session in the name of intervention. At that point, it's not tutor time at all; it's a cover lesson with a new label.

The schools that get it right treat tutor time as strategic. They plan it with intention — not around content, but around connection. They create space for meaningful conversations, personal check-ins, and a sense of belonging. They understand that attendance isn't just about chasing absence — it's about making sure every young person feels seen in those first few minutes of the day.

When tutor time is reduced to worksheets, admin and register-taking, we shouldn't be surprised when relationships feel thin and attendance patterns don't shift.

Tutor time should be one of the most relationally powerful parts of the school day. Used well, it builds commitment, connection and presence. Used poorly, it becomes a missed opportunity we can't afford — especially when attendance and belonging are two sides of the same coin.

We don't need more reactive interventions. We need intentional moments that make young people want to turn up in the first place.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Judgements will be made against whether the school meets the expected standard first, before considering whether it reaches strong or exceptional standard."



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Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

“When Inclusion becomes containment ”

I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve seen schools proudly announce the launch of their new “Inclusion Room”. There’s a photo, some new paint, maybe even a slogan on the wall about belonging or nurture. And everyone breathes a little easier, as if having a designated space means inclusion has been achieved.

But let’s just tell the truth: most inclusion rooms are used for the exact opposite of inclusion.

They are not designed as hubs of reintegration or belonging. They are used, more often than not, as spaces of separation — a place to send the child who can’t cope, who disrupts, who doesn’t “fit” the pace or behaviour pattern of the mainstream classroom.

We tidy exclusion up and give it a softer name.

And I don’t say this to criticise schools — I say it to call out a national culture of pretending that proximity equals belonging. That putting a child in a side room is better than facing the uncomfortable systemic truth: that we do not have the specialist provision, the therapeutic workforce, or the curriculum flexibility to meet need in a meaningful way.

Mainstream leaders are then encouraged to celebrate these rooms publicly, as though a door and a sign equals transformation. But children don’t experience architecture — they experience culture. They know when they have been placed, rather than included.

If a child spends more time in the “inclusion room” than in a classroom with their peers, then we haven’t built inclusion — we’ve built containment.

And this links directly to attendance.

Children do not return to school for bolt-on spaces. They return when the core of school life feels safe, relational, and built with them in mind. They return when their presence in the main classroom is genuinely wanted, not conditionally managed.

We need a more honest conversation in education. Not about rooms, but about belonging as a lived experience. Not about creating annexes, but about asking why children are being annexed from the life of the school to begin with.

Inclusion without presence is a myth.

Presence without belonging is supervision, not education.

A child who belongs will attend. A child who does not feel seen will drift.

DESIGNING FOR PRESENCE

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Attendance Leadership is not for the faint of heart.

Leading on attendance is one of the most misunderstood leadership roles in education.

You don't just deal with data.

You deal with emotion, perception, pressure and resistance — often all in the same conversation.

When you challenge absence, you may be accused of being too harsh, not understanding family context, or lacking empathy.

When you speak about belonging, connection and dignity, some will suggest you're too soft, making excuses, or not holding the line firmly enough.

You quickly learn that attendance leadership sits in permanent tension:

- Expect high standards — but do so with humanity
- Advocate for inclusion — but speak honestly when the system cannot meet need
- Challenge persistent absence — while understanding attendance is often a symptom, not a cause
- Drive improvement — knowing the external support you need often doesn't exist

And yes — you will be misunderstood, criticised, and occasionally shut down.

But you keep going.

Not because it's easy, but because attendance is the gateway to everything.

No curriculum, no intervention, no inclusion strategy works for a child who isn't there.

Attendance leadership is not administrative. It is moral.

It is about saying — even when unpopular — that presence matters, because belonging begins at the point of entry.

If you lead attendance, you are not just monitoring numbers.

You are holding a line on opportunity, on equity, on future life chances.

And that is leadership in its purest form.

**You cannot
mandate
presence—
you must
design for it.**

DESIGNING FOR BELONGING

ATTENDANCE
MAGAZINE

Guest Contributor: Dr Alexander-Passe

Expert opinions



Dr Neil Alexander-Passe gained his PhD researching 'Dyslexia, School-based trauma, and Post-school Success'. 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 of Education, in addition to serving on the academic boards of several charities and peer-reviewed journals. He is completing his 20 th book and has published extensively on school-based trauma, on those with dyslexia, ADHD, and autism.

Attendance and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

I approach this topic as the author of three recent books on the school-to-prison pipeline, examined through a SEND lens: *Autism Awareness and Crime* (2025), *ADHD and Crime* (2024), and *Dyslexia, Neurodiversity, and Crime* (2023).

My background includes 15 years as a qualified teacher, 14 of those 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, primary and secondary.

I began writing these books after COVID, having witnessed how many students, especially those with diagnosed or undiagnosed ADHD, were struggling not only in the classroom but with school attendance. As SENDCO in a secondary school, I saw students and parents feeling unsupported and disengaged. Many were referred to PRUs after receiving frequent negative feedback from teachers for impulsive and perceived dangerous behaviour. I saw a lack of expert help and teachers feeling ill-equipped to support these students.

With no support from the local authority (LA), whose educational psychologists had no ADHD training, I allocated £10k from my SEND budget to pilot an ADHD mentoring project. After discovering that some mentors charged £200 an hour, I partnered with ADDISS, a local ADHD charity. For one academic year, they provided:

ADHD-trained mentors one day a week for 1:1 or paired sessions, supporting self-esteem and strategy building (many mentors were parents of ADHD children or had ADHD themselves)

- Free parent training courses
- A free parent helpline (also used by teachers)
- Teacher training, including medication awareness
- Free school-standard fidget toys

Guest Contributor

Expert opinions

The results were remarkable. Parent courses had waiting lists, families felt heard, students felt worthy and listened to, attendance improved, teachers felt more confident, and negative feedback decreased. I documented the project for my NPQSL award. ADDISS called it innovative, noting no other UK school offered such a programme. In year two, local charity funding and support from governors allowed us to expand to two days a week of on-site mentoring.

This experience demonstrated that schools can effect meaningful change, even without the assistance of LA ADHD specialists, who do not exist, by thinking creatively and proactively.

ADHD remains a major challenge in schools. The gap in understanding between “naughty boys” and “boys struggling” is vast. Common traits, such as fidgeting, impulsivity, shouting out, poor turn-taking, and distractibility, are often mislabelled as disruptive behaviour.

While boys are more visible, girls are frequently overlooked, who may be mischaracterised as daydreamers, shy, inattentive, or unintelligent.

For ‘emotionally based school avoidance-EBSA’, research suggests the term ‘school-distress’ is a more accurate term, as what happens at school is the reason for their non-attendance – sensory overload causing masking and emotional shutdowns.

Often, these are girls with undiagnosed autism. The lack of autism awareness, especially regarding girls, is a significant barrier to attendance. The issue extends beyond schools to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), where long waiting lists and triage systems mean young people are often treated for symptoms rather than underlying causes. In one school, I worked with twins in Year 9. The boy had been diagnosed with autism at age three and quickly received an EHCP. His sister was considered ‘normal’ by teachers and parents. But by Year 8, she developed severe anxiety and an eating disorder, leading to poor attendance. It took persistent advocacy, meetings with social workers and CAMHS, and a reassessment before her autism was finally confirmed.

2025 Ofsted fact file

“Persistent absence will be considered in relation to the school’s graduated response, partnership with families, and culture of noticing.”

Guest Contributor

Expert opinions

Attendance issues demand a deeper investigation. Research suggests 80% of students with ADHD and/or dyslexia leave school undiagnosed. Many young people referred to PRUs for “persistent misbehaviour” have undiagnosed SEND needs. SENDCOs in PRUs often recognise these needs but lack the means to expedite CAMHS assessments.

I've also witnessed schools persuading parents to send children to PRUs without understanding the root of their struggles, often without any diagnosis, so how do they know the PRU is where they should go? I've sat in those meetings, and it's disturbingly common. So, next time attendance is raised in a meeting, ask: What are the barriers to attendance? Is there undiagnosed ADHD, autism, or dyslexia? If identified and supported, would the student feel more confident about attending?

For undiagnosed autism, sensory overload from assemblies, corridors, and playgrounds can make school feel threatening. Do they lack friends as they prefer to be left alone? Do they struggle with jokes and take everything literally? Do they struggle with last-minute changes (supply teacher, sudden group sessions, room changes)? Has a CAMHS referral been made? If not, not, why? If on a waiting list, why are they not supported as if they were autistic? For undiagnosed ADHD, consider whether movement breaks are allowed, standing desks are available, or students are permitted to answer first. Are they self-medicating with caffeine? Are they punished for impulsivity?

For undiagnosed dyslexia, do teachers understand the challenges of recording thoughts on paper, remembering verbal instructions, or managing time? Do they recognise phonetic spelling and the emotional toll of repeated academic failure?

These are not just learning differences; they're barriers to inclusion. Schools must look beyond behaviour and attendance data to uncover the unmet needs beneath. Only then can we begin to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and build environments where neurodiverse students can thrive.

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- Alexander-Passe, N. (2023). *Dyslexia, Neurodiversity, and Crime: Investigating the 'School to Prison. Pipeline'*. New York: Dio Press

Dr Neil Alexander-Passe's call to action is appropriate and justified, no matter how uncomfortable it may make policy makers and those working in education, social or health care and justice feel.

Dr Phillip Anderton is a former senior police officer and renowned expert on the links between ADHD and crime.

Dr Neil Alexander-Passe's combination of qualitative and quantitative data, along with a detailed overview of our current scientific understanding of ADHD, provides an insightful introduction into the experience of living with ADHD. I was particularly pleased to see the inclusion of positive attributes of ADHD, that can flourish in the right environment. This book is a robust exploration of the journey of a person with ADHD from childhood, through the education system and into the criminal justice system and should be required reading for anyone with the slightest interest in how we can build a society that is fairer, safer, and more equitable for all.

Angela Kirwin, Author, *Criminal: How Our Prisons Are Falling Us All* (2022)

This much-needed deep dive by Dr Neil Alexander-Passe has created a bible of information crucial to understanding what is causing individuals to be trapped in the criminal justice system. Dr Neil Alexander-Passe's passion for this topic is evident through his ability to consolidate much-needed evidence and reasoning in one place. The statistics in this book tell a chilling story of generations of children who have been let down. This book helps dispel stigmas that are still misunderstood by many; there is much hope to reduce crime and protect victims. I couldn't help but nod endlessly at what Dr Neil Alexander-Passe wants to tell us. If you work within the criminal justice system, this book should be made available in your workplace at the earliest opportunity. Every parent should read this book, your child's future may depend on it. I am convinced that Dr Neil Alexander-Passe's work is a pivotal step towards reshaping our perception of ADHD within the criminal justice system. It's my hope that this book serves as a catalyst for positive change, improving understanding, empathy, and change within the criminal justice system.

Police Constable Carl Mumford, founder of the national ADHD Alliance, a support group dedicated to changing the understanding of ADHD within the criminal justice system

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ADHD & Crime: Investigating the 'School to Prison Pipeline'

Dr. Neil Alexander-Passe

ADHD & Crime

Investigating the 'school to prison pipeline'



Dr. Neil Alexander-Passe

Further reading opportunities

This important book focuses specifically on the relationship between dyslexia, neurodiversity, and the criminal justice system.

Neil takes us on a step-by-step journey, allowing us to understand where there are key points in a young person's life that can lead to moving away from a more positive path, and why someone could end up on the school-to-prison pipeline.

Neil in this comprehensive book considers these different and often complex routes into crime in an erudite manner and considers importantly how we could potentially change the trajectory. Read it slowly. Read it again and think about what we can do as a society to make lasting change. This book should be read by politicians, those working in education, social work, police, law, prison and probation, and anyone interested in being a part of the change required to stop this tragic and preventable train of events for this generation, and future generations.

Professor Amanda Kirby, Honorary Professor, Cardiff University

The timely nature of this book does not go unnoticed. Neil writes as young people are picking themselves up after a global pandemic, where there is a tangible and very palpable cost of living crisis ripping through the country, and real-terms cuts in funding to support children with special educational needs and/or disabilities in schools are decimating the fabric of extant support. This book tackles the effects of insecure home-lives, lack of support in school and the potential journeys that young people can take as a result.

However, as is so clearly and eruditely demonstrated by Neil in this book, professionals along the pathway do not (or cannot) take holistic views of young people in their charge. In school, lack of resources (both time and training) mean that young people's dyslexia are highly unlikely to be identified.

This book is a call to arms. For those working in school with young people, for those working in social care, for those associated with the criminal justice system and to the curators of those fields in government who set policy, allocate resources, and create the structures which could facilitate pathways away from prison for young people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties.

Dr Helen Ross, Consultant & Researcher, Expert SEN & Dyslexia Advisor, Co-Vice Chair, British Dyslexia Association

In his latest book, *Dyslexia, Neurodiversity and prison: investigating the school to prison pipeline*, the author Neil Alexander-Passe provides a fascinating insight into a system that seems designed to discriminate against those with dyslexia, autism and neurodiversity. Outlining the constraints in the legal process which place poor readers at a substantial disadvantage in understanding the full implications of even 'adopting a plea bargain', the author presents an authoritative analysis of failures in the system, richly illustrated with up-to-date official reports and qualitative data from the offenders themselves, which suggest many offenders may even be innocent of the charges they face. This book is unique in taking the reader through the complexities of the system, identifying risk factors not only for failure, but also for recidivism.

Overall, Neil Alexander-Passe paints a sad and gloomy picture of a continuing lack of opportunity within the UK system, with a number of simple solutions to address this, in an important book that is a 'must read' for anyone with an interest in the area of literacy. I cannot recommend this book too strongly!

Angela Fawcett, Emeritus Professor, University of Swansea

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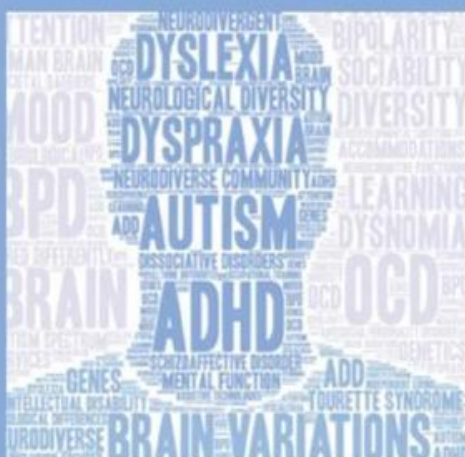


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Dyslexia, Neurodiversity, and Crime

Neil Alexander-Passe

DYSLEXIA, NEURODIVERSITY, AND CRIME



Investigating the 'school to prison pipeline'

Dr. Neil Alexander-Passe

Further reading opportunities

Case Study template for schools

To build inspection-ready case studies, schools should use a consistent template that captures both quantitative movement and qualitative cultural shift. This template ensures that each case study provides the narrative depth inspectors expect whilst remaining concise enough to present confidently during inspection dialogue.

Quantitative Elements

- **Pupil Band Position:** Before and after (e.g., 87% rising to 93.6%)
- **Timeline:** Specific date range showing speed of change
- **Movement Evidence:** Dashboard screenshot or log extract
- **Named Adult:** Tutor, pastoral lead, or mentor responsible

Qualitative Elements

- **Belonging Indicator:** What emotional barrier existed? (e.g., low engagement, anxiety, isolation)
- **Intervention Type:** Specific action taken (belonging call, tutor script, mentor attachment)
- **Voice Evidence:** Short direct quote from pupil or parent
- **Cultural Reflection:** How this reflects leadership intent and belonging strategy

❏ **Template in Action:** Each case study should fit on one page or screen, combining movement data with voice evidence and cultural commentary. This format allows rapid presentation during inspection whilst maintaining narrative depth.



Real Example: A Somerset Academy

'At a secondary Academy, 18 Year 9 pupils were identified in the 87 – 89% band at the start of autumn term. Rather than issuing absence reminder letters—our previous default response—tutors initiated belonging scripts twice weekly as part of morning registration.'

"The script was simple but intentional: 'I noticed you weren't here yesterday. Good to see you today. How are you settling this week?' This shift from recording absence to recognising presence represented a fundamental cultural change." "Within four weeks, nine of these 18 pupils moved into the 90–94.9 band. Each movement was logged with the tutor's name and dated action note. Inspectors in a MAT pilot review described this as 'clear evidence of cultural intelligence and proactive belonging architecture.'" "One parent commented: 'This is the first time I felt the school was helping rather than warning us.' One pupil said: 'My tutor knows my name and actually cares if I'm here.'"

This example demonstrates all the elements of a strong case study: specific data, named intervention, measurable movement, voice evidence and cultural reflection. Schools should aim to develop 3-4 case studies of this quality across different attendance bands and year groups before inspection.



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2025 Ofsted fact file

"Inclusion is not a place or a room; it is a culture demonstrated in daily practice."



Voice as inspection currency

Under the 2025 framework, even one pupil or parent quote can increase the credibility of attendance evidence significantly. Voice transforms data from abstract numbers into human stories that inspectors can verify through their own conversations with pupils and families during inspection.

Pupil Voice (Movement from 87% to 93%)

"I used to think no-one cared if I was here or not. Now my tutor says my name when I arrive and asks how I am. It sounds small but it makes me actually want to come in."

Parent Voice (Early Belonging Contact)

"I used to get calls only when my daughter was absent. Now the school rings to check how they can help before it becomes a problem. That made all the difference to how we engage with school."

Tutor Voice (Cultural Shift)

"We used to just take the register. Now we're trained to notice and greet. When pupils feel seen, they show up. It's changed how I think about my role completely."



These quotes should appear strategically next to band movement data in dashboards or case study sections. They provide emotional texture that data alone cannot convey, and they signal to inspectors that belonging culture is embedded in daily practice, not just written in policy documents.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Attendance and behaviour will sit within the evaluation of culture and climate, considering not only data but the school's approach to belonging and presence."



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The four-Story Rule for Leadership Teams

Every member of the Senior Leadership Team should be able to present four specific case studies from memory during inspection. This demonstrates cultural fluency and ensures consistency of narrative across all leadership conversations with inspectors. The four stories should represent different attendance contexts.

Story 1: Watch List Success

One pupil from the 90–94.9% watch band who moved to 95%+ following early belonging intervention. Shows preventative work before persistent absence threshold.

Story 2: Emerging Disengagement Recovery

One pupil from the 85–89% band who moved upward after attachment to a key adult and relational check-ins. Shows strategic response to disengagement signals.

Story 3: Persistent Absence Reversal

One pupil who recovered from below 85% through coordinated multi-agency support rooted in belonging. Shows capacity for intensive intervention.

Story 4: Prevented Decline

One pupil whose attendance was maintained through early contact when micro-drops were detected, preventing downward movement. Shows predictive intelligence.

- ❑ **Leadership Rehearsal:** Test each SLT member by asking them to present their four stories in under 10 minutes total. This rehearsal builds confidence and reveals gaps in narrative knowledge before inspection.



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Questions Inspectors will likely ask senior leaders

1

Inspector Question

"How do you know your attendance strategy is making a difference?"

Leadership-Aligned Response

"We track movement, not just position. Fourteen pupils moved from 85–89% into the 90–94.9 band after we introduced relational tutor check-ins. Each movement links to a named adult action, visible in our dashboard logs. We can show you specific case studies where belonging interventions generated measurable change."

2

Inspector Question

"Which pupils are at risk right now, and how would I see that in your routines today?"

Leadership-Aligned Response

"Our 90–94.9 band is our watchlist. These pupils are greeted by name each morning and tutors use belonging scripts during arrival. You will see that routine in tutor time today. Each pupil in this band has weekly check-ins recorded in our system with a named responsible adult."

3

Inspector Question

"How do tutors influence attendance beyond taking registers?"

Leadership-Aligned Response

"We train tutors to conduct belonging check-ins. Instead of a procedural register, they begin with recognition language: 'Good to see you today.' That emotional cue has shifted attendance behaviour. Tutors describe feeling like they have agency in attendance outcomes, not just recording responsibility."

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Inspectors will rely on professional conversation to understand the school's work, testing it through observation and evidence."



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Questions Inspectors will likely ask middle leaders

Inspector: "Talk me through your Monday attendance routine."

Strong Response: "We open with the movement dashboard. I note any pupil who has shifted band and ensure those returning from absence receive direct recognition at tutor time. I follow up with tutors by mid-morning to check belonging conversations happened. We review micro-drops—two absences in 14 days—as early disengagement signals."

Inspector: "How do you know before a pupil becomes persistently absent?"

Strong Response: "We track micro-drops and tutor concern notes. Two absences in a fortnight triggers a belonging call—not a warning letter—to parents. We treat that as early disengagement. Our dashboard flags these pupils in amber before they reach persistent absence thresholds."



Notice how middle leader responses demonstrate operational knowledge combined with cultural understanding. They speak about routines, systems, and data—but always through the lens of belonging and relational intervention. This balance signals maturity at middle leadership level.



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Questions Inspectors will likely ask tutors

Tutors are the frontline of attendance culture. Inspectors will test whether belonging routines are genuinely embedded at tutor level or exist only in senior leadership narrative. Tutor responses carry significant weight in cultural judgement.



Inspector: "What do you do when a pupil is often late or occasionally absent?"

Strong Tutor Response: "I greet them by name and check in. We use a relational prompt rather than reprimand—'Glad you're here today, how are you settling in?' Our training focused on welcome rather than warning. I log the check-in so pastoral teams know connection has happened."



Inspector: "How do you know which pupils to keep an eye on?"

Strong Tutor Response: "We're given the watch list weekly—pupils in the 90–94.9 band. I make sure to notice and greet them directly at least twice each week. It's part of our belonging routine, not something I decide on my own. Leadership makes it clear which pupils need extra recognition."



Inspector: "What does tutor time feel like in your form?"

Strong Tutor Response: "It's a check-in, not just admin. I aim for every pupil to feel noticed in the first five minutes. Register happens, but connection comes first. Pupils say they feel seen rather than counted. That's the culture we're building."

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Leaders are expected to model a culture of transparency and improvement, not one of performance for inspection."



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Questions about parental engagement

Inspectors will explore how schools engage parents before absence escalates. The quality and tone of parental communication is now a key cultural indicator under the 2025 framework. Schools must demonstrate partnership rather than enforcement as their default position.

Inspector Question:

"How do you engage parents before absence escalates?"

Strong Leadership Response:

"We make what we call a **belonging call**—"We've noticed your child hasn't been with us as often recently. We value their presence and want to check if there's anything making mornings harder.' That precedes any enforcement letter. Parents tell us this feels supportive rather than threatening."

Inspector Question:

"What feedback do parents give about your communication?"

Strong Leadership Response:

"We collect voice data after belonging calls. 72% of parents report feeling supported rather than blamed. One parent said: 'This is the first school that called to help rather than warn us.' That feedback directly informs our communication training for pastoral staff."



Critical Reflection: "Could every member of my pastoral and tutor team answer these questions fluently using cultural language rather than administrative language? This is the new baseline expectation for inspection fluency under the 2025 framework."



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A Day in the Life: How Inspectors will shadow pupils

Under the 2025 Ofsted Framework, inspectors are instructed to test attendance culture through live observation, not just data files. This means they will select specific pupils, particularly those identified in attendance band movement dashboards, and follow their school day to verify whether belonging and presence are actively engineered rather than simply monitored.

This shadowing approach is designed to catch the gap between policy and practice. Schools that have embedded belonging routines will shine under this scrutiny. Schools that have strong attendance policies but weak cultural implementation will be exposed.

Morning Arrival

Inspector observes gate or entrance. Are pupils greeted by name? Is lateness met with welcome or irritation? Does body language signal warmth or enforcement?

1

Corridor Transitions

Inspector walks between lessons. Do staff acknowledge pupils? Are isolated pupils re-engaged? Is language positive or disciplinary?

2

3

4

Pupil Conversations

Tutor Time

Inspector sits in tutor period. Is register-taking administrative or relational? Do tutors use belonging scripts? Are specific pupils from watch list visibly noticed?

Inspector asks: "Who notices if you're not here? What happens when you return after absence?" Responses verify whether belonging culture is felt or fabricated.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Communication with families should reflect respect, clarity and early engagement, rather than escalation after thresholds are breached."



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Preparing for shadowing: The presence profile

Schools should pre-prepare one-page profiles for selected pupils to hand to inspectors at the start of shadowing. These profiles demonstrate confidence and narrative clarity—they show that your attendance strategy is rooted in knowing individual pupils, not just tracking cohorts.

Profile Components

- Band position and recent movement
- Named adult attached to pupil
- Timeline of interventions
- Parent voice line (if available)
- Pupil quote or reflection
- Leadership commentary

Example Profile Extract

Pupil: Aisha M, Year 9

Band Movement: Moved from 88% (Oct) to 93% (Dec)

Intervention: Tutor belonging script introduced week 3, weekly pastoral mentor check-ins from week 5

Named Adults: Mr Jenkins (tutor), Ms Patel (pastoral mentor)

Parent Voice: "The school called to ask how they could support Aisha, not to tell us off. That changed everything."

Pupil Voice: "My tutor knows my name now and actually cares if I'm here."

Leadership Reflection: "This case reflects our shift from chasing absence to engineering presence through relational work."



Inspection Handover Script: "These three pupils represent different attendance journeys. Each movement in their attendance was due to relational belonging strategies rather than enforcement alone. You're welcome to follow any of them today—you will see the routines in action."



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Cultural Indicators Inspectors will watch for

During shadowing, inspectors are trained to notice micro-behaviours that signal whether belonging culture is genuine or performative. These indicators are subtle but powerful—they reveal whether presence is truly valued or merely enforced.



Pupil Arrives Slightly Late

Weak Signal: Staff express frustration or issue reprimand publicly

Strong Signal: Staff greet pupil by name without immediate reprimand—"Good to see you, let's get you settled in"



Pupil Returns After Absence

Weak Signal: Absence ignored or pupil sent directly to lesson without acknowledgement

Strong Signal: Tutor acknowledges absence with care—"We noticed you weren't in, hope things are okay now, glad you're back"



Pupil Isolated at Social Time

Weak Signal: Pupil remains alone, staff walk past without intervention

Strong Signal: Staff actively re-connect—"Would you like to join this group? Let me introduce you"



Staff Language in Corridors

Weak Signal: Language focused on compliance, control, or absence enforcement

Strong Signal: Language emphasises recognition, welcome, and belonging—"Good to see you here today"



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Leadership Reflection: Are we ready for shadowing?

"If Ofsted followed one of our watch-list pupils tomorrow, would they see belonging in action or procedural attendance compliance?"

This reflection is critical. Under the 2025 framework, attendance is judged not just on paper, but in real time through lived pupil experience. Schools should conduct internal shadowing exercises before inspection—following pupils from your watch list through a full school day and honestly evaluating what would be visible to an external observer.

Internal Shadowing Exercise

Select three pupils from different attendance bands. Ask a middle leader or governor to shadow them for half a day. Record observations without judgment, then review as SLT: what would an inspector see?

Staff Briefing on Shadowing

Inform all staff that inspectors may shadow pupils. Emphasise that this tests cultural consistency, not performance. Strong schools will show the same belonging routines whether inspectors are present or not.

Pupil Preparation (Light Touch)

Brief pupils that inspectors may ask about attendance. Encourage honest responses. Authentic voice is more valuable than coached answers—inspectors are trained to detect scripted responses.

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Belonging as an inspection lens

Inspectors will assess whether pupils feel recognised by name, expected and welcomed each morning, emotionally safe enough to return after absence and part of a community rather than a register number. Presence is no longer judged through compliance measures but through emotional connection and cultural signals.

Recognised

Pupils can name adults who notice their presence. Staff know names and use them consistently in greetings.

Connected

Pupils describe feeling part of something bigger than themselves. Community identity reinforces attendance.

Expected

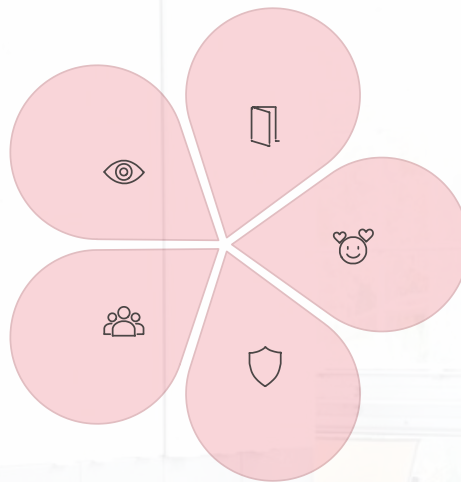
Absence feels unusual rather than anonymous. Pupils sense they are missed when not present.

Welcomed

Daily arrival routines communicate warmth. Lateness or return after absence is met with care, not censure.

Safe

Pupils feel emotionally secure enough to return after difficult periods. School is experienced as refuge, not threat.



Inspection Reality: Inspectors will test these five belonging indicators through pupil interviews, staff observation, and shadowing exercises. Schools cannot fake this—it must be genuinely embedded in daily practice.

2025 Ofsted fact file

“Wellbeing will not be judged through provision lists but through the degree to which pupils feel known, safe and included.”



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Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Schools are working relentlessly to improve attendance — but it's exhausting them.

Let's be honest.

Every week, leaders push attendance messaging.

Every morning, admin teams absorb the emotional hit from calls and confrontations.

Every afternoon, attendance leads chase data, codes, clinics, escalation scripts...

Every evening, someone updates the tracker, ready to explain—again—why a child wasn't in school.

And all the while, the message from the system is the same:

👉 "Attendance is everyone's business."

Yes, it is.

But very few are given the time, tools or emotional infrastructure to do it sustainably.

- Heads are exhausted.
- Pastoral teams are running on fumes.
- Admin and attendance officers are absorbing daily emotional strain.
- Teachers are told to intervene, escalate, analyse... on top of everything else.

We say attendance follows belonging — and I believe that deeply.

But we must also face a harder truth:

Belonging cannot be sustained when the adults holding the system together are quietly burning out.

Attendance improvement isn't just a technical challenge.

It's a human stamina challenge.

If we don't design attendance systems that look after the adults as much as they look after the children, we will continue to lose good people — not because they don't care, but because they cared beyond the point of sustainability.

💬 Is this what you're seeing in your school or trust right now?

Let's talk honestly. The system needs to hear it.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

There's a growing belief that the answer to rising complexity in mainstream education is to build bolt-on SEND or nurture units on site. A few rooms set aside, a renamed space, a sign on the door. It looks like provision — but is it?

Let's be honest. These spaces are not specialist environments. They don't come with specialist staffing ratios, access to therapeutic professionals, or the curriculum flexibility that real provision offers. They are a response to system failure, not a strategy.

A child sitting in a side room at the edge of a mainstream school is not included. They are simply nearby. Proximity is not belonging.

And this matters, especially when we talk about attendance.

Because children don't come to school for bolt-ons. A renamed room doesn't change how it feels to walk through the main gate, the corridor, the classroom — or how it feels to constantly feel 'other'. Attendance isn't driven by the existence of a unit. It's driven by connection, belonging and a school culture that genuinely sees every child.

We need to stop pretending that repurposed classrooms are a substitute for a broken specialist system.

Mainstream schools cannot keep absorbing responsibilities that were never designed to sit within a standard funding model, timetable or staffing structure. If we keep widening expectations without widening support, we will keep losing children at the point of attendance.

Children return to school when school feels like it was built with them in mind — not when an annex has been created for them out of necessity

2025 Ofsted fact file

Inspectors will start by looking at the 'expected standard' ... Once your school meets the 'expected standard' ... inspectors can consider evidence in the 'strong standard' category for that area.
Source: The Key.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

What's behind this quote?

"The best headteachers don't chase attendance; they design for presence.

They know that attendance follows belonging and belonging follows leadership."

I've been asked a lot about the thinking behind this.

For me, attendance isn't a behaviour issue – it's a leadership and culture issue.

You can chase numbers with letters, fines and spreadsheets.

Or you can design conditions that make presence the natural outcome.

- When a child feels seen, they come.
- When they feel missed when they're not there, they come.
- When school feels like their place, they come.
- Belonging drives attendance far more powerfully than any policy ever will.

And belonging doesn't appear by accident. It is designed — through leadership choices, language, rituals, curriculum, relationships and expectation.

That's why I say:

Attendance follows belonging.
Belonging follows leadership.

The schools with the strongest attendance aren't just good at enforcement, they are exceptional at designing environments where students want to be present.

Maybe it's time we ask less, "How do we get them in?"

And start asking, "What are we creating that makes them want to come in?"

The best headteachers don't chase attendance; they design for presence.
They know that attendance follows belonging and belonging follows leadership.

Colin Cattanach
Attendance Magazine

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Inclusion will be evaluated as a separate area of judgement, assessing how well the school removes barriers for pupils who may face disadvantage or require additional support."

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Stop Rewarding 100% Attendance. Start Recognising Presence.

I've just seen a school proudly celebrate handing out chocolate bars to students who achieved 100% attendance this week. I understand the sentiment but it's a bit misplaced. Why?

But here's the question nobody asked:

What do you hand the child with Type 1 diabetes who desperately wants to be in school, but has to attend hospital appointments to stay alive?

Or the pupil managing a chronic condition who misses one morning because their blood sugar dropped during the night — is their effort suddenly worth nothing?

When we only reward 100%, we unintentionally send a message:

"Perfection is valued. Resilience isn't."

Some children haven't missed a minute.

Others have fought through medication, medical routines, pain, exhaustion and still made it to lesson two, determined not to fall behind.

Who showed the greatest act of presence?

Attendance policies should never punish disability, long-term illness or medical necessity. Attendance policies should recognise engagement and improvement.

We need a new language in schools, one that recognises effort, return, determination and belonging, not just a clean register.

Stop rewarding perfection. Start honouring resilience

Because attendance should be about being seen, known and valued not just ticking a box.

Key cultural signals of strong Attendance Culture

Inspectors are trained to notice micro-indicators that reveal whether belonging is performative or authentic. These signals appear throughout the school day and are difficult to manufacture if not genuinely embedded in staff practice and school routines.



Staff Greeting at Gates or Tutor Doors

Impact: Shows pupils are expected and noticed. First contact of the day sets emotional tone for presence. Pupils entering anonymously signals weak culture.



Tutors Use Belonging Scripts Over Reprimands

Impact: Establishes emotional safety and trust. Pupils learn that attendance conversations are supportive, not punitive. Language shapes culture.



Visual Messaging Celebrates Presence

Impact: Attendance becomes part of positive identity, not punishment avoidance. Messaging focuses on "we missed you" not "you will be sanctioned."



Staff Intervene in Social Isolation

Impact: Belonging is actively curated during unstructured times, not left to chance. Isolated pupils are noticed and reconnected, preventing emotional withdrawal.

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The three layers of belonging architecture

Strong attendance culture operates across three interconnected layers. Each layer reinforces the others, creating resilient belonging systems that withstand staffing changes, cohort differences, and external pressures. Schools operating at **Strong or Exceptional standard** can articulate all three layers with clarity.



Layer 1: Rituals of Welcome

Morning greetings, named recognition, micro-check-ins. These daily routines communicate "you are expected here" without words. Consistency matters more than perfection—pupils need predictable welcome rituals.



Layer 2: Relational Authority

Adults balancing boundaries with belonging—firm but warm tone. High expectations combined with emotional safety. This is the hardest layer to embed because it requires sophisticated staff skill and emotional intelligence.



Layer 3: Community Signalling

Visual culture where "being here" is spoken of positively and publicly. Assembly messages, corridor displays, celebration systems all reinforce presence as valued identity, not compliance requirement.

Inspectors will look for evidence of all three layers during their visit. Schools strong in Layer 1 but weak in Layer 2 may achieve Expected Standard but struggle to reach Strong. All three layers must be present and visible for Exceptional judgement.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Ambition is judged by what pupils experience, not how leaders describe their intentions."

Threshold Moments: The first five minutes

The first contact a pupil has with school each morning sets the tone for their entire day. Weak provision sees registers taken in silence or lateness met with irritation. Strong provision sees tutors greet pupils, re-establish connection, and confirm their presence matters. This threshold moment is where culture becomes visible.

Weak Threshold Practice

"Why are you late again? Sit down. Get your planner out. I'll mark you down as late."

This language communicates frustration, focuses on failure, and reinforces negative identity. The pupil learns that arrival generates stress for staff and for themselves. This reduces future presence motivation.

Strong Threshold Practice

"Glad you made it in today. Let me get you settled. How are you doing this morning?"

This language communicates welcome, assumes positive intent, and opens space for connection. The pupil learns that their arrival matters and that adults are genuinely interested in their wellbeing. This strengthens presence motivation.



Training Implication: All tutors should receive specific training on threshold language. This is not about being "soft"—it is about being strategically relational in service of sustained presence. Five minutes of tutor training can transform a year of attendance outcomes.

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Leadership Reflection: Belonging or policing?

"Does our school feel like a place where pupils are called into belonging, or policed into attendance?"

This distinction defines whether a school remains at Expected Standard or moves towards Strong/Exceptional status under the new framework. The language, routines, physical environment, and staff body language all communicate one of these two messages. There is no neutral ground.

Audit Your Language

Review letters, phone scripts, assembly messages. Do they emphasise partnership or warning? Belonging or enforcement?

Adjust Based on Evidence

Use findings to refine scripts, train staff, and shift messaging. Cultural change requires iterative adjustment, not one-off initiatives.



Observe Threshold Moments

Conduct learning walks focused only on first five minutes of tutor time. What tone is set? What messages are communicated?

Listen to Pupil Voice

Ask pupils directly: "How does it feel to arrive at school each morning?" Answers will reveal whether culture is experienced as welcoming or stressful.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Inspectors will explore whether the school takes a preventative approach to absence rather than a reactive one."



Parental engagement & the attendance partnership model

The 2025 Ofsted Framework reframes parental engagement in attendance: contact must be rooted in partnership, not penalty. Inspectors will evaluate not just whether parents were contacted, but how they experienced that contact. The tone, timing, and intention of parental communication now carry significant cultural weight in inspection judgement.

Schools that continue to lead with enforcement language—"failure to improve may result in penalty action"—will be identified as culturally immature regardless of attendance percentages. Schools that lead with partnership language—"we've noticed and want to help"—signal cultural sophistication that aligns with **Strong and Exceptional** standards.



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2025 Ofsted fact file
"Inclusion is not a place or
a room; it is a culture
demonstrated in daily
practice."



From enforcement to partnership: The communication shift

Old Enforcement Model

- Letters sent at 90%, 85%, 80% thresholds
- Formal legal tone throughout
- Escalation language prominent
- Contact triggered only after persistent absence
- Parents positioned as problem

New Partnership Model (2025)

- Early belonging calls after 2-3 absences
- Conversational, supportive tone
- Partnership language throughout
- Contact before procedural thresholds
- Parents positioned as partners

The shift from enforcement to partnership is not about reducing expectations or avoiding difficult conversations. It is about sequencing contact so that support precedes sanction, and ensuring that when enforcement becomes necessary, it occurs within an established relationship rather than as first contact.



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Script transformation examples

The following examples demonstrate the linguistic shift required to align with 2025 framework expectations. The difference is not just tone—it is strategic positioning that either opens or closes collaborative pathways with families.

Old Enforcement Script

"Your child's attendance has fallen below expected levels. Failure to improve may result in penalty notices being issued. You are required to attend a meeting to discuss this matter."

Impact: Parent positioned as failing. Language creates defensiveness. Meeting framed as requirement, not support.

New Belonging-Based Script

"We noticed your child hasn't been with us as often recently. We value their presence and want to check how we can support them returning to routine before it becomes harder. Could we have a conversation about what might help?"

Impact: Parent positioned as partner. Language invites collaboration. Meeting framed as problem-solving, not accountability.



Evidence Requirement: Schools should prepare examples of early belonging call scripts and template letters for inspection. These should be dated and show contact before statutory thresholds. Parent voice feedback on communication tone strengthens evidence significantly.



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Inspector questions on parental engagement

Inspector Question

"When do you first engage parents about attendance concerns?"

Strong Leadership Response

"We contact families at the micro-drop stage—typically after two absences within a fortnight. This is a belonging call, not a warning letter. We have found early relational contact prevents escalation and families appreciate being involved before thresholds are reached."

Inspector Question

"How do parents describe your attendance communication?"

Strong Leadership Response

"We collect parent voice after belonging calls. 72% report feeling supported rather than blamed. One parent told us: 'This is the first time a school called to see how we were coping rather than to warn us.' This feedback directly informs our communication training."

Inspector Question

"What happens if early partnership contact doesn't improve attendance?"

Strong Leadership Response

"We continue partnership work through multi-agency coordination before moving to enforcement. If statutory action becomes necessary, it happens within an established supportive relationship, not as first contact. Parents understand we exhausted partnership routes first."



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Evidence schools should prepare

To demonstrate strong parental engagement culture during inspection, schools should have the following evidence immediately accessible. This evidence transforms parental engagement from policy claim into verifiable practice.

Parent Voice Quotes

1

Include 3-4 parent quotes reflecting partnership tone collected after belonging calls. These should appear in your attendance evidence pack, ideally with dates and context. Authentic voice is more powerful than survey data.

Early Contact Logs

2

Show dated records of belonging calls made before statutory thresholds. Highlight use of partnership language. Include brief notes on conversation content—this shows contact is meaningful, not box-ticking.

Before/After Comparison

3

Present a graph showing reduction in cases reaching enforcement stage after new script introduction. This demonstrates that partnership approach is effective, not just well-intentioned.

Staff Training Evidence

4

Show that staff receive specific training on belonging-based communication. Include training materials, script examples, and evidence of quality assurance through call monitoring or feedback.



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Real Case Example: Somerset School

"After shifting to belonging-first parental contact in September, the school saw a 27% reduction in cases reaching enforcement stage by end of autumn term. Early belonging calls were logged and monitored for quality, with staff receiving coaching on partnership language."

"Inspectors during a trust-wide review noted that families described communication as 'human and respectful' rather than procedural. One parent commented: 'They rang to ask what they could do to help, not what we'd done wrong. That completely changed how I felt about working with the school.'"

"This evidence was referenced in inspection feedback as a marker of strong culture. The school was able to present both quantitative evidence (reduced escalation rates) and qualitative evidence (parent voice) demonstrating that partnership approach was both values-driven and strategically effective."

This case demonstrates how schools can evidence the cultural shift from enforcement to partnership using multiple data points. The combination of numerical outcomes, parent voice, and inspector observation creates compelling narrative evidence aligned with Strong Standard criteria.



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Leadership Reflection: warning or welcome?

"If Ofsted asked three parents today what attendance communication feels like in our school, would they describe warning or welcome?"

This reflection determines whether parental engagement sits at Expected or Strong Standard under the new framework. The answer must be tested through actual parent voice, not assumed through policy review. Schools confident in their partnership approach will actively collect and curate parent voice as evidence.

Test Your Communication Tone

Send a sample of recent attendance letters and call scripts to a critical friend outside education. Ask: "Does this feel like partnership or penalty?" External perspective reveals what internal familiarity obscures.

Collect Voice Systematically

After every belonging call, staff should log one sentence of parent response. Patterns will emerge quickly—either positive partnership responses or defensive, frustrated reactions. Data informs cultural adjustment.

Train for Partnership Language

Investment in staff communication training is essential. Partnership tone cannot be mandated through policy—it must be modelled, practised, and refined through feedback and coaching.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"A school cannot be judged as meeting a strong or exceptional standard if safeguarding culture is inconsistent or compliance-driven rather than preventative and relational."



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Attendance Curriculum: Teaching presence through PSHE

The 2025 Ofsted Framework recognises attendance not just as a behavioural expectation, but as a learnable habit. Inspectors will evaluate whether schools explicitly teach presence routines, executive function, belonging, and readiness to attend—not simply punish absence. This represents a fundamental shift from reactive discipline to proactive skill-building.

Schools that can point to a structured attendance curriculum sequence demonstrate strategic cultural maturity. This positions attendance as something pupils develop capacity for, rather than something demanded of them without support or teaching.

Week 1: Why Presence Matters

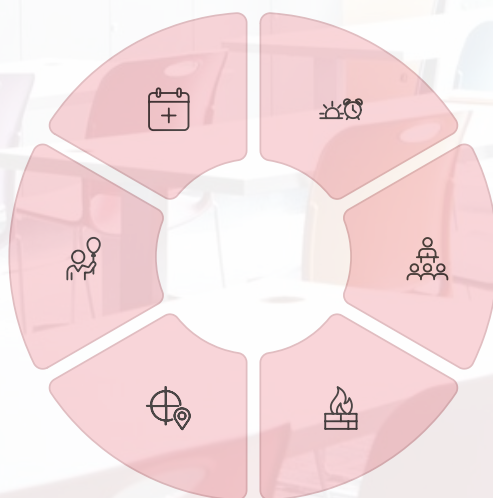
Discussion: "Being on roll vs being present in life." Pupils explore difference between physical attendance and engaged presence. Connection to future outcomes explored.

Week 2: Morning Routines

Practical strategies for readiness: packing bags evening before, emotional check-in with self, identifying barriers to morning routine. Executive function explicitly taught.

Week 6: Reflection & Celebration

Narrative focus on personal change rather than compliance: "This is what helped me show up more often." Pupils articulate their own presence strategy.



Week 3: Belonging & Identity

Tutor dialogue: "Who notices when you're not here?" Pupils reflect on their place in school community. Belonging framed as mutual recognition, not compliance.

Week 5: Presence Goal-Setting

Pupils set micro-goals linked to attendance and belonging: "I will attend every tutor check-in this week." Goals are personal, achievable, and reviewed in safe space.

Week 4: Barriers & Honesty

Safe reflection on reasons pupils disengage before absence takes hold. Normalising struggle. Identifying when to ask for help. De-stigmatising difficulty.

Inspector Questions About Attendance Curriculum

Inspector: "How do pupils learn to attend here?"

Strong Response: "We teach attendance as a habit, not a rule. Our PSHE sequence includes six weeks on belonging, executive function, and readiness routines. Pupils can articulate what helps them turn up consistently—they have language for it because we explicitly taught it."

Inspector: "Do pupils understand why attendance matters?"

Strong Response: "Yes—in week one or four presence sequence, pupils explore belonging and the concept of being part of something bigger than themselves. They understand attendance not just as compliance but as active participation in community."

Pupil Voice Example: "I didn't realise attendance was something I could actually learn about and get better at. Our tutor talked us through morning routines and what makes it hard to come in sometimes. That made it feel more achievable, like I had some control over it." – Year 9 Student



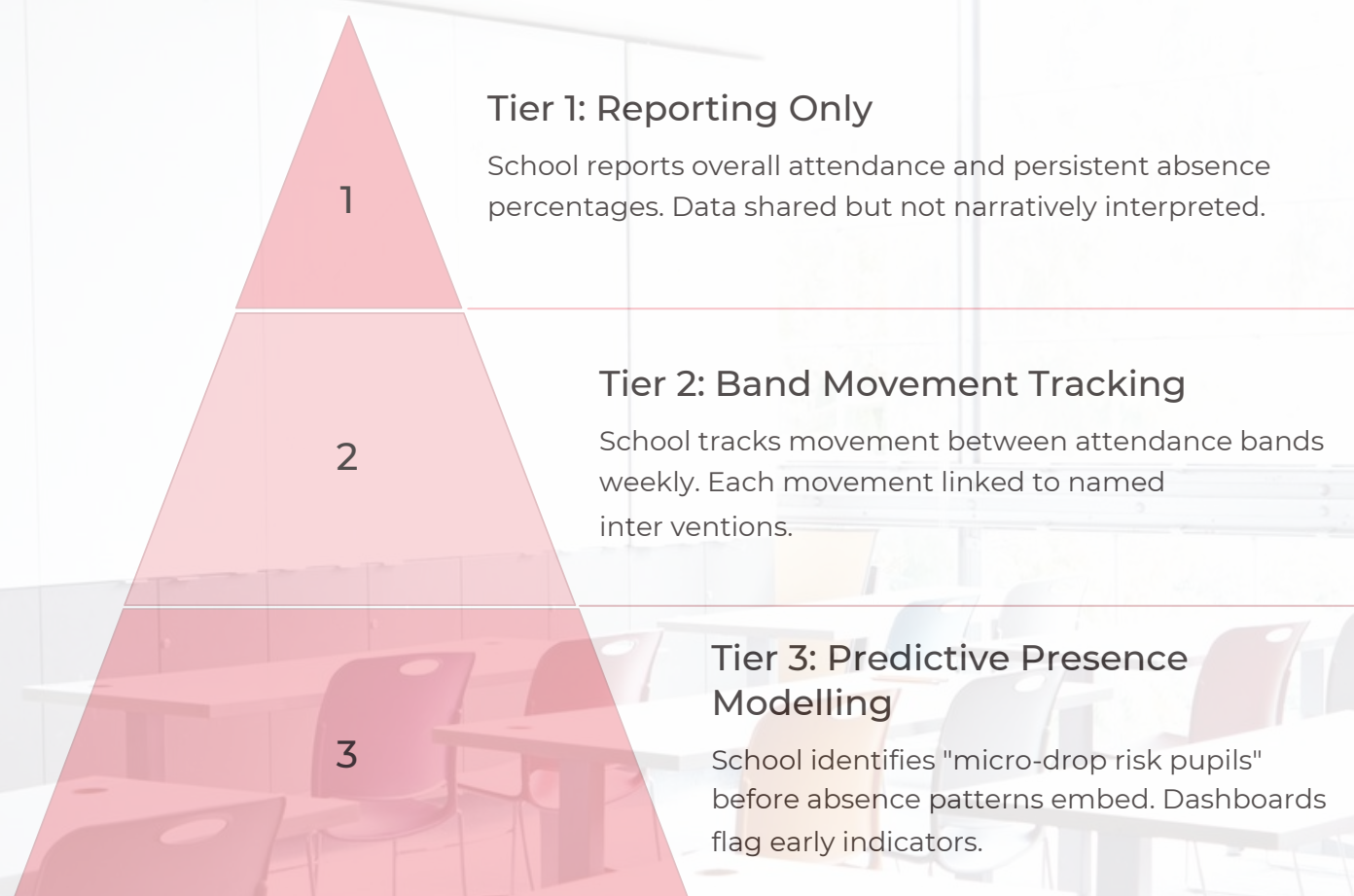
Implementation Note: This curriculum can be delivered through tutor time, PSHE lessons, or assembly sequences. The key is structured, progressive teaching rather than one-off interventions. Documentation of sequence and pupil responses strengthens inspection evidence.

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Data dashboards & predictive 'Attendance Intelligence'

The 2025 Ofsted Framework makes clear that inspectors are looking for schools that use data as narrative evidence of leadership action—not just as a record of figures. Dashboards must move from static reporting to dynamic, movement-led intelligence that demonstrates strategic thinking and cultural responsiveness.



Schools at Tier 1 may achieve Expected Standard with strong overall figures. Schools at Tier 2 position themselves for **Strong Standard** through narrative intelligence. Schools at Tier 3 demonstrate **Exceptional practice** by showing they can predict and prevent disengagement before it manifests as persistent absence.

Anatomy of a strong Attendance Dashboard

A strong dashboard is a visual story of leadership impact. It communicates priorities, actions, and outcomes at a glance. During inspection, the quality of your dashboard will be assessed within seconds—inspectors are trained to distinguish between reporting tools and strategic intelligence systems.

- **Essential Dashboard Components**

Band Breakdown: 95%+, 90–94.9%, 85–89.9%, <85% clearly displayed with pupil counts in each

- **Movement Arrows:** Visual indicators showing upward/downward movement between bands week-on-week
- **Action Tags:** Each movement annotated with intervention type (TC, BC, MA, PR, SC) showing cause
- **Named Adults:** Responsible staff member identified for each intervention, creating accountability
- **Movement Narrative:** Short text explaining patterns: "14 pupils moved up following relational script training"
- **Voice Annotation:** One pupil or parent voice quote reinforcing cultural shift visible in data



Design Principle: Dashboard should be comprehensible to an inspector within 30 seconds without verbal explanation. If it requires lengthy introduction, it is not yet inspection-ready. Simplicity and clarity signal confidence.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"The school's routines should promote attendance as a collective responsibility, shared by all staff and understood by pupils."



Inspector question alignment for data presentation

1

Inspector: "How do you know who is about to slip before persistent absence?"

Strong Response: "We use predictive flags in our dashboard. Two isolated absences or repeated late arrivals within a fortnight trigger a belonging call before statutory thresholds are reached. We treat that as pre-disengagement and respond relationally immediately."

2

Inspector: "What does your dashboard show this week?"

Strong Response: "This week, five pupils moved down a band—three due to illness, two showing disengagement signals. We have already assigned named staff and actions are logged within 48 hours. You can see the action tags here next to each pupil's movement arrow."

3

Inspector: "How do you use this data at leadership level?"

Strong Response: "We review movement dashboards in every senior team meeting. Each arrow represents a leadership conversation. We ask: why did this pupil move? What caused it? How do we replicate success or prevent further decline? Data drives our cultural strategy."



Data as narrative script for Inspection

"We don't just report attendance data. We narrate movement. In the last half-term, 14 pupils moved upward across bands after belonging intervention. Each arrow on our dashboard corresponds to a conversation or cultural action. This is how we demonstrate that our attendance strategy is working—not through static percentages, but through documented leadership impact on individual pupil journeys."

This script exemplifies inspection-ready language. It positions data as narrative evidence, connects movement to action, and demonstrates cultural maturity. Leaders should rehearse similar language so that data presentation becomes confident storytelling rather than nervous number-reading.



Leadership Reflection: "If an inspector saw our dashboard without explanation, would it communicate movement, belonging intervention, and leadership attention—or just numbers? This distinction marks the line between Expected Standard and Strong/Exceptional status under the new framework."



Stock Canva photos

Multi-Agency support & team around the child

The 2025 Ofsted Framework positions attendance not just as a behaviour metric, but as a barometer of inclusion. Inspectors now evaluate how schools build coordinated support around pupils at risk of disengagement, involving multi-agency alignment rather than sequential enforcement. This represents sophisticated cultural practice.

Schools demonstrating **Strong or Exceptional** practice show evidence of networked support where multiple professionals contribute to presence strategy simultaneously, rather than linear escalation where one intervention fails before the next begins. This proactive coordination is central to the new framework's emphasis on belonging and inclusion.

Old Linear Escalation Route

School → Warning letter → Education
Welfare Officer → Fines → Legal escalation

Each step waits for previous step to fail.
Parents experience contact as increasingly
threatening. No coordination between
agencies until crisis point.



2025 Networked Support Model

Tutor Check-In → Pastoral Mentor →
SENDCo Consultation → Early EWO
Partnership → Parent Belonging Meeting →
Multi-agency coordination

Multiple supports activated simultaneously.
Parents experience wraparound care.
Enforcement used only after demonstrated
partnership exhaustion.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Inspectors will look not only for
provision, but for evidence that
pupils with SEND feel they belong
and participate fully in the life of
the school."



What Inspectors want to see in Multi-Agency Work

Inspectors will ask: "Show me how you work with others to sustain presence ,not just enforce attendance." This question tests whether schools view attendance as isolated behaviour management or integrated inclusion work. Strong responses demonstrate coordination, early involvement, and relational partnership across agencies.



Early SEND Involvement

SENDCo consulted when patterns of emotional withdrawal appear, before persistent absence thresholds. SEND expertise applied to attendance difficulties as potential indicator of unmet need.



EWO as Relational Partner

Education Welfare Officer engaged early as support partner, not only as penalty agent. EWO attends belonging meetings with families, contributing expertise to problem-solving rather than arriving with enforcement role.



Parent Belonging Meetings

Parents invited through belonging conversations rather than formal summons. Meetings framed as "How can we work together?" rather than "What are you doing wrong?" Tone sets foundation for partnership.



Named Key Adult

Pastoral mentor or key adult allocated to each pupil in risk bands. This adult coordinates multi-agency input and maintains relationship continuity. Pupils experience consistency rather than rotating contacts.

Stock Canva photos



Presence Map template for Inspection evidence

Schools should create one-page presence maps for key pupils showing multi-agency coordination. These maps demonstrate that attendance work is sophisticated, coordinated, and rooted in belonging rather than isolated, reactive, and enforcement-focused. Format should be visual and immediately comprehensible.

Presence Map Components

- Pupil name and band position
- Movement trajectory with dates
- Key adults involved (with roles)
- Sequence of actions (chronological)
- Parent/pupil voice evidence
- Outcome and next steps

Example Narrative

"Aisha, Year 7: Began showing anxiety signs with two isolated absences in September. Instead of issuing threshold letters, tutor initiated belonging call (Week 2). SENDCo contributed proactive strategies around anxiety management (Week 3). EWO joined as support partner, not enforcement step (Week 4). Aisha moved from 87% to 93% within four weeks."

Parent Voice: "They brought everyone together to help, not tell us off. That coordination made us feel supported."



Inspector Observation: "This case reflects intelligent cultural response rather than procedural escalation. The school demonstrated capacity to coordinate support proactively, which aligns with Strong Standard expectations for inclusion and attendance integration."

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Inspectors will explore whether the school takes a preventative approach to absence rather than a reactive one."



Governor & MAT Strategic attendance Accountability

The 2025 Ofsted Framework makes explicit: attendance is now a strategic leadership and governance issue, not just a pastoral function. Inspectors will ask governors and trustees directly how they hold leaders to account for belonging culture and attendance movement. Governance scrutiny must demonstrate cultural intelligence, not just data review.

Weak governance asks about percentages. Strong governance asks about movement, case narratives, cultural shifts, and the quality of belonging work. The sophistication of governor questioning signals to inspectors whether attendance is treated as compliance duty or strategic priority at board level.

Weak Governance Behaviour

"We receive attendance reports each term and note the figures." → Passive receipt of compliance data → Likely judgement: Needs Attention/Expected Standard

1

2

Developing Governance

"We ask why figures dipped or improved." → Reactive number-based questioning → Likely judgement: Expected Standard

Strong Governance

"We review movement dashboards and ask what actions caused change." → Strategic accountability for culture → Likely judgement: Strong Standard

3

4

Exceptional Governance

"We request presence stories and ask how culture shifted attendance patterns." → Fluent in belonging narrative → Likely judgement: Exceptional Standard

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Inspectors will consider whether safeguarding is effective as a lived culture, not just a set of policies."

Final Inspection toolkit & leadership readiness

Attendance will no longer be judged on compliance alone. Inspectors will assess leadership narrative fluency, belonging architecture, movement intelligence, and the lived experience of pupils and parents. This final toolkit consolidates the strategic actions, narrative habits, and cultural signals required to present attendance confidently under the 2025 Ofsted Framework.

8

Core Evidence Elements

Movement dashboard, case studies, tutor scripts, parent contact logs, multi-agency maps, curriculum sequence, governor minutes, voice quotes

5

Key Inspection Questions

Leaders must rehearse responses to core questions about movement, belonging culture, early identification, tutor influence, and parental partnership

3

Cultural Layers

Rituals of welcome, relational authority, community signalling—all three must be visible and embedded in daily practice

90

Seconds to Present Case Study

Every SLT member should be able to narrate a compelling attendance case study in 90 seconds using the five-step formula

"If an inspector followed just three pupils through our school day tomorrow, would they witness a culture that calls pupils into belonging—or merely a process that records their absence? This question defines the new attendance era. Schools who design presence, narrate movement, and curate cultural evidence will step confidently into inspection under the 2025 framework."

Attendance is no longer a number to be chased. It is a culture to be designed. This document exists so that leaders can move from procedural defence to cultural leadership. Under the new framework, presence is not monitored—it is engineered through intentional belonging architecture, relational routines, and strategic narrative intelligence. Your inspection story begins with this understanding.

2025 Ofsted fact file

"Inclusion will be evaluated as a separate area of judgement, assessing how well the school removes barriers for pupils who may face disadvantage or require additional support."

A background image of a classroom. In the foreground, there are several rows of white desks with colorful chairs (red, orange, blue, and grey). In the background, a large whiteboard is covered with handwritten mathematical equations, including trigonometric and differential equations. A projector is mounted on the ceiling. The overall scene is brightly lit and clean.

Attendance Self Evaluation Workbook

Free Resource for all schools

Attendance Self-Evaluation Workbook

This workbook supports schools to evaluate attendance practice against the updated Ofsted framework (November 2025). Use RAG ratings, add evidence, and record next steps with owners and deadlines.

Strategic Leadership of Attendance

Criteria	Self-rating (R/A/G)	Evidence	Next Steps
Attendance and punctuality are prioritised at whole-school level.			
High expectations for attendance are clearly communicated to staff, pupils, and parents.			
Leaders have a clear, strategic plan for attendance improvement.			
Governors/trustees receive regular reports on attendance trends and interventions.			

Data and Systems

Criteria	Self-rating (R/A/G)	Evidence	Next Steps
Registers are accurate and monitored daily.			
First-day absence and follow-up processes are timely and effective.			
Leaders use detailed data analysis to identify trends, anticipate risks, and monitor groups.			
Attendance data informs targeted interventions and leadership decisions.			

Culture and Communication

Criteria	Self-rating (R/A/G)	Evidence	Next Steps
School culture encourages pupils to want to attend (safe, respectful, positive).			
Attendance expectations are reinforced consistently across assemblies, newsletters, and policies.			

Criteria	Self-rating (R/A/G)	Evidence	Next Steps
Policies are applied fairly and consistently by all staff.			
Pupils and parents understand the importance of attendance.			

Vulnerable Groups

Criteria	Self-rating (R/A/G)	Evidence	Next Steps
Attendance strategies specifically address disadvantaged pupils, SEND, young carers, and those known to social care.			
Barriers to attendance are identified and reduced through reasonable adjustments.			
Leaders collaborate with health professionals and agencies for pupils with mental or physical health needs.			
Impact of interventions for vulnerable groups is monitored and evaluated.			

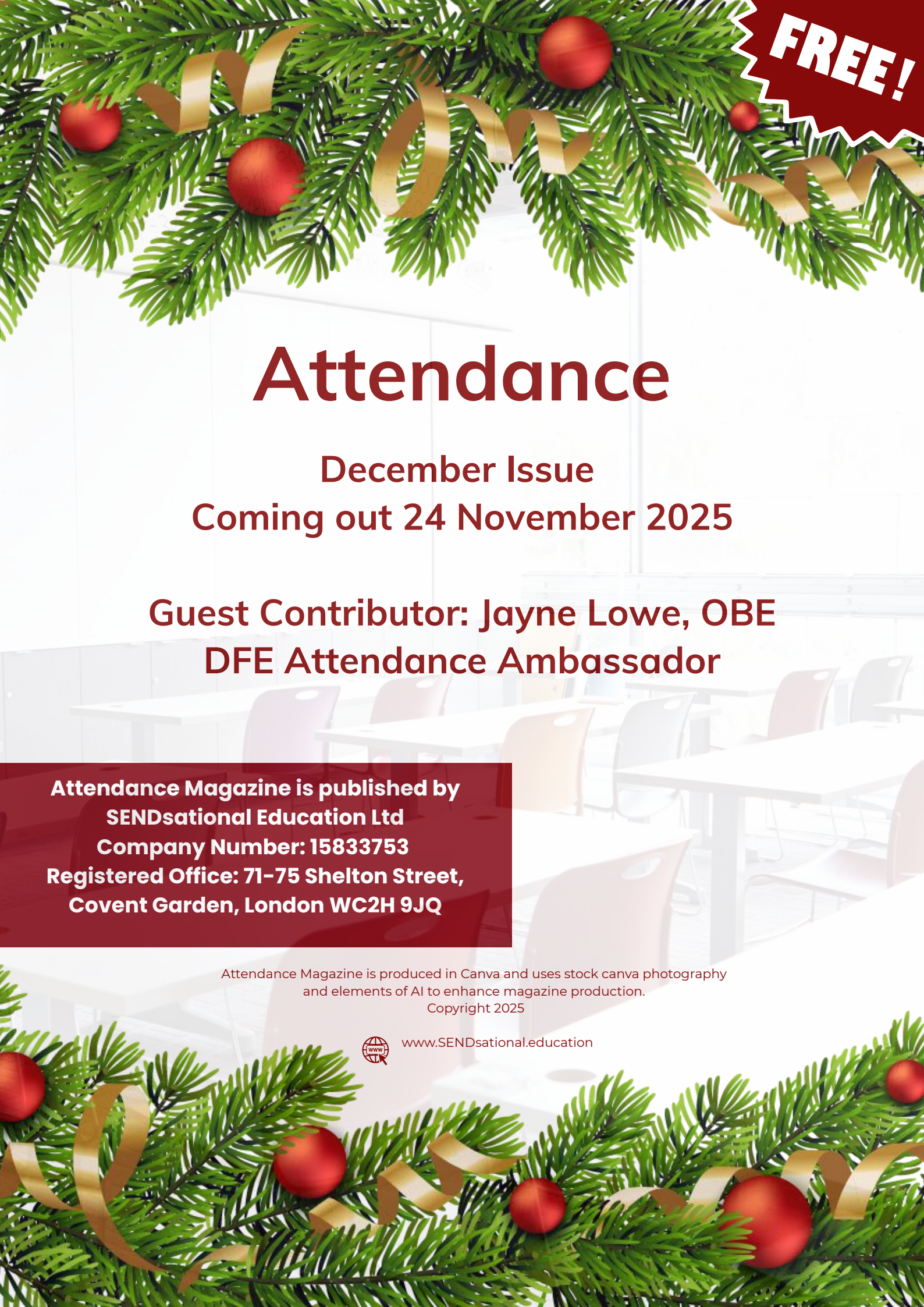
Multi-agency and Community Engagement

Criteria	Self-rating (R/A/G)	Evidence	Next Steps
Leaders work effectively with local authority services (EWO, social care, safeguarding).			
Partnerships with health professionals and community organisations are purposeful and timely.			
Parents are engaged positively in attendance improvement.			
Information-sharing and joint planning with external agencies is effective.			

Judgement Criteria

Criteria	Self-rating (R/A/G)	Evidence	Next Steps
Exceptional			
Strong standard			
Expected standard			
Needs attention			
Urgent improvement			

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09 October 2025



FREE!

Attendance

December Issue

Coming out 24 November 2025

Guest Contributor: Jayne Lowe, OBE
DFE Attendance Ambassador

**Attendance Magazine is published by
SENDSational Education Ltd
Company Number: 15833753
Registered Office: 71-75 Shelton Street,
Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ**

Attendance Magazine is produced in Canva and uses stock canva photography
and elements of AI to enhance magazine production.
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