



NATIONAL ATTENDANCE PORTAL · SEPTEMBER 2026

The State of School Attendance 2026

England — attendance, absence, belonging and a new public health paradigm



Contents

In this report	Page
Foreword and executive summary	3
Where England stands	5
Who is missing school, and why	9
A new paradigm for attendance	15
Priorities, questions and conclusion	19
About this report	22

How to read this report

The first section sets out the national position. The second examines where absence concentrates: disadvantage, SEND, special schools and severe absence. The final section sets out a preventative approach for England, schools and trusts.

Figures draw principally on Department for Education attendance statistics available at September 2026. The latest full-year figures are provisional.

Foreword

Attendance is not simply an administrative measure. It is a measure of access, belonging and whether children are able to benefit from education.

A new phase of recovery

England has made meaningful progress since the height of the post-pandemic crisis. More children are in school, and the system has learned much about the scale and complexity of absence. But the national picture has not returned to its pre-pandemic position. The gaps by disadvantage, SEND and phase remain too large to treat as a marginal issue.

Attendance data tells us who is absent. It does not, on its own, explain what is preventing a child from attending. Behind a falling percentage may sit illness, anxiety, poverty, transport, family difficulty, bullying, unmet need or a weakening sense of belonging.

Access and belonging

High expectations matter. So do the conditions that make those expectations achievable for every child.

This report argues for a public-health paradigm: prevention for every pupil, earlier help when patterns begin to deteriorate, targeted intervention for persistent absence and intensive coordinated support for severe absence.

Colin Cattnach · Founder, National Attendance Portal

Executive summary

93.07%

Overall attendance in 2025/26

6.93%

Overall absence

19.05%

Persistent absence, almost one pupil in five

Pupils in England spent 4.38 million more days in school than in 2023/24, assuming equal pupil numbers. This is meaningful progress. But overall absence rose from 6.87% in 2024/25 to 6.93%, and persistent absence rose from about 18.7% to 19.05%.

The headline figure conceals sharp gaps. Secondary attendance is the sharpest phase divide. Roughly one in three pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) was persistently absent. More than a third with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) were persistently absent, alongside almost three in ten receiving special educational needs (SEN) support.

Source: Department for Education (DfE), 2025/26 attendance statistics. Full-year figures are provisional.

The central task

The response now needs to move beyond percentages, letters and sanctions. It needs earlier identification, a clearer understanding of barriers, coordinated support and a stronger focus on belonging.

01

Where England stands

The national picture, phase by phase, group by group.



Progress, but no recovery

The DfE estimates the 2025/26 absence rate represents roughly **4.38 million more days in school** than 2023/24, assuming equal pupil numbers.

Meaningful progress

The additional days in school matter. They represent more access to teaching, routines, relationships and support for pupils across England. The rapid post-pandemic rebound delivered real gains.

The recovery has slowed

Overall absence rose from 6.87% in 2024/25 to 6.93%. Persistent absence rose from about 18.7% to 19.05%. Before the pandemic, national absence sat consistently below 5%; England remains some distance from that position.

The next response needs to change

England is no longer in the phase of rapid rebound. It needs sustained prevention, earlier help and intensive support where absence is most entrenched.

National progress should not obscure the uneven distribution of absence. The sharpest gaps now sit between phases and among pupils facing disadvantage, SEND and severe absence.

The national headline numbers

Overall attendance in 2025/26 was 93.07%. The national figures show a clear gradient by phase, with absence highest in special schools and secondary schools.

Measure	2025/26
Overall attendance	93.07%
Overall absence	6.93%
Persistent absence	19.05%
Primary absence	5.31%
Secondary absence	8.57%
Special-school absence	13.19%

Source: Department for Education, *Pupil attendance in schools, 2025/26* (provisional).

The overall measure is important, but it is not sufficient. Persistent and severe absence, as well as variation by group and phase, show where the most urgent attention is needed.

Secondary attendance is the sharpest divide

Almost one quarter of secondary pupils were persistently absent in 2025/26, nearly double the primary rate.

Measure	Primary	Secondary
Overall absence	5.31%	8.57%
Persistent absence	13.90%	24.21%

Source: DfE, 2025/26 attendance statistics (provisional). Year-group figures below refer to autumn 2025/26.

The preventative window

Persistent absence reached 24.67% in Year 10 in autumn 2025/26. Year 11 recorded 9.26% overall absence and 4.13% severe absence. The transition into secondary, and Years 7–9, are the key preventative window before disengagement sets in.

Secondary schools need approaches that recognise the particular pressures of transition, adolescence, curriculum access, relationships and belonging. Waiting for a pupil to cross a formal threshold risks missing the period when patterns can still be changed.

02

Who is missing school and why

Disadvantage, SEND and severe absence are where the national gap concentrates.



The disadvantage gap

Pupils eligible for free school meals recorded overall absence of 10.87%, against 5.26% for other pupils.

33.84%

FSM-eligible pupils persistently absent

12.80%

Pupils not eligible for FSM who were persistently absent

Roughly one in three FSM-eligible pupils was persistently absent. The persistent-absence gap is substantially wider than the overall-absence gap and should sit at the centre of disadvantage strategy.

Attendance belongs inside pupil premium

Attendance needs to sit inside pupil-premium strategy, not beside it. Pupils cannot benefit from teaching and tutoring investment when they are not present. Schools and trusts need to connect attendance data, barriers to attendance and the use of pupil-premium resources.

SEND: one of the defining challenges

Pupil group	Overall absence	Persistent absence
EHCP	13.64%	36.94%
SEN support	10.07%	29.34%
No identified SEN	5.80%	16.11%

SEND: special educational needs and disabilities. EHCP: education, health and care plan. Source: DfE attendance statistics; see page 22 for data caveats.

More than a third of pupils with an EHCP, and almost three in ten receiving SEN support, were persistently absent. These figures require a strategic response from schools, trusts, local authorities and health partners.

High expectations with the right support

The response is reasonable adjustments, curriculum provision, health support and multi-agency working, not lowered expectations.

Attendance is an important signal of whether provision is accessible. A pupil's absence may reflect a mismatch between need and support, not a lack of ambition for their education.

Special schools need their own lens

Special-school overall absence reached **13.19%** in 2025/26, with persistent absence at **36.25%**.

The pupil population includes children with complex medical, health and educational needs. Direct comparison with mainstream settings therefore requires caution. The causes, patterns and practical barriers to attendance may be different.

Inside the national conversation

Caution does not mean exclusion. Absence still means lost access to education. Special schools belong inside the national attendance conversation, not treated as an exception to it.

The appropriate response needs to hold two ideas together: the complexity of children's needs and the importance of access to education. Attendance improvement in special schools depends on understanding health, transport, reasonable adjustments, curriculum access, family experience and coordinated support.

A single national headline cannot replace an informed lens for special schools.

Severe absence: the case for more attention

A severely absent pupil misses at least half their possible sessions. In autumn 2025/26, roughly 151,000 pupils, 2.12%, were severely absent.

1.02%

Primary

3.16%

Secondary

6.55%

Special

Severe absence by phase, autumn 2025/26. Source: DfE attendance statistics.

A generic attendance letter is unlikely to help at this level. These children need intensive, individualised responses: family engagement, health, SEND assessment, social care, alternative provision and reintegration planning.

They need to be known, understood, planned for and reviewed. Severe absence should sit at the top of attendance strategy, with clear ownership and coordinated local response.

Illness and the summer slide

Illness absence fluctuated sharply across the year, rising from about 1.9% at the start of autumn term to around 4.7% in the week of 1 December 2025.

7.42%

Summer 2026 overall absence

22.51%

Summer 2026 persistent absence

Attendance deteriorates further through the year. Summer 2026 overall absence reached 7.42% against 6.83% in spring. The week of the late-June heatwave recorded absence of roughly 11.8%.

Summer needs deliberate attention

Summer attendance needs sustained attention through curriculum, enrichment and family communication. It should not become a wind-down after Easter. Patterns that deteriorate through the summer term can shape a pupil's return in the autumn.

SECTION 03

A new paradigm for attendance

Moving beyond percentages, letters and sanctions towards prevention and belonging.

Attendance is frequently a lagging indicator

Attendance is what we measure, not necessarily what has gone wrong.

Behind a falling percentage may sit SEND, anxiety, illness, poverty, family difficulty, transport problems, bullying or a weakening sense of belonging. The percentage is an important signal, but it is not a diagnosis.

Two pupils can share an identical attendance percentage and need entirely different responses. A system designed only around thresholds can miss the difference between their circumstances.

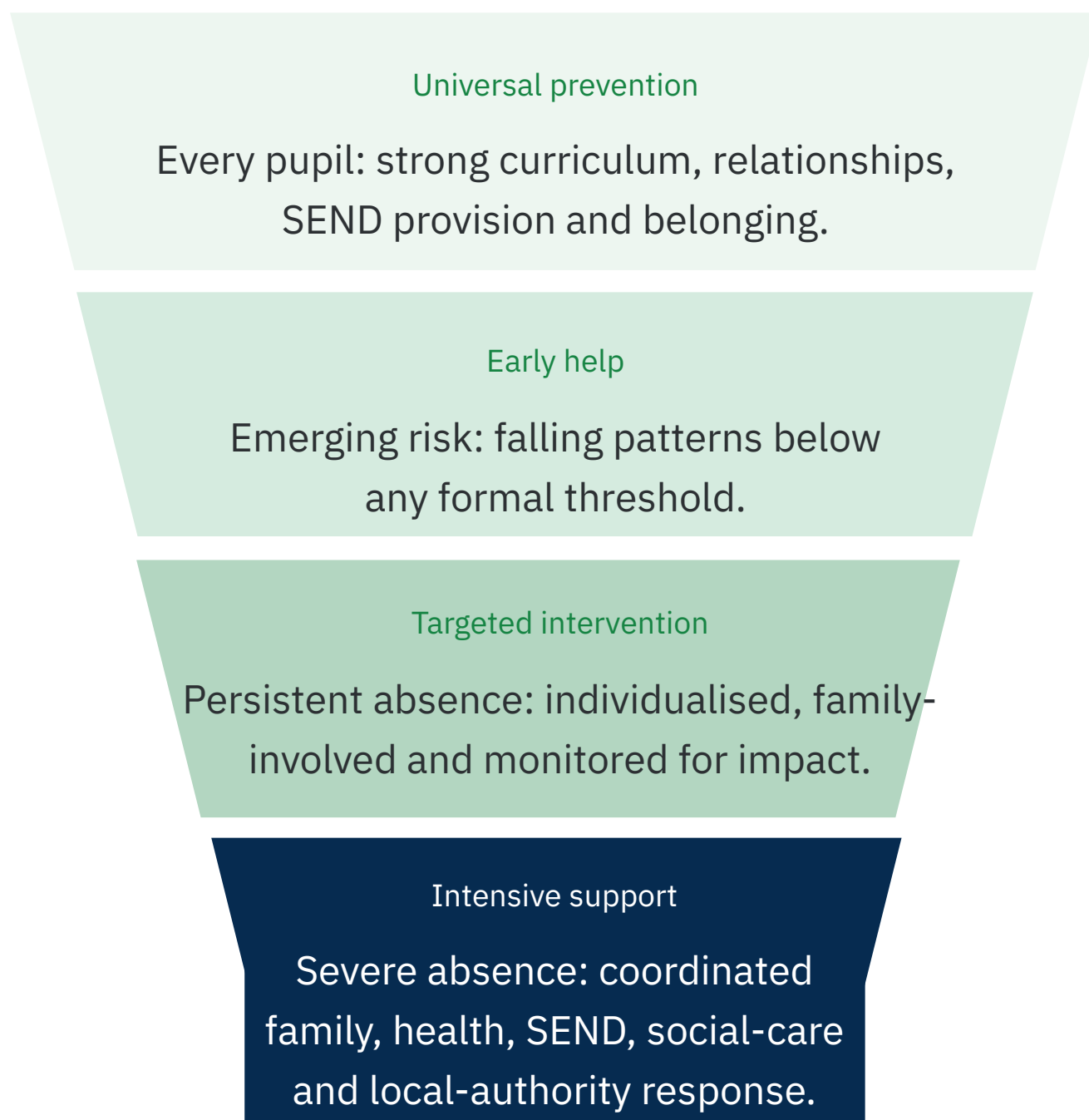
A better question

What is preventing this child from attending?

Belonging is one of the conditions that makes high expectations achievable. It is not a soft alternative to them. Schools need to hold high expectations alongside curiosity, practical support and an understanding of barriers.

The Attendance Prevention Pyramid

A public-health model for attendance, in four levels, moving from every pupil to the most severely disconnected.



From thresholds to trajectories

Traditional systems ask whether a child has crossed a threshold. Preventative systems ask where a child is heading.

98% → 96% → 94% → 91% → 87%

An illustrative trajectory: deterioration is visible before the persistent-absence threshold is reached.

Waiting for the threshold means missing the warning. Systems should weigh trajectory, acceleration and pattern alongside fixed thresholds.

Curiosity before categorisation

A rapid fall from 99% to 94% deserves more curiosity than a steady 94%. The first pattern may indicate a new barrier, a change in health, family circumstances or a weakening connection to school. The response should begin before a child's attendance crosses a formal line.

Thresholds remain useful. They should not be the sole trigger for attention.

Ten priorities for England, 2026/27

The priorities below bring national evidence into a practical agenda for schools, trusts, local authorities and government.

- 01 Intervene before persistent absence, not at 90%.
- 02 Put severe absence at the top of the agenda.
- 03 Make SEND attendance a strategic priority.
- 04 Connect attendance and disadvantage through pupil premium.
- 05 Prioritise secondary attendance, especially transition and Key Stage 3.
- 06 Measure belonging alongside attendance.
- 07 Work with families earlier through timely, clear communication and trusted relationships.
- 08 Use data intelligently: trajectory, groups, days, patterns.
- 09 Make attendance everyone's business, not one officer's.
- 10 Measure impact, not just activity.

Five questions for every school and trust

These questions shift attention from compliance alone towards risk, barriers, impact and what will change for pupils.

- 01 Which pupils are currently most at risk of disengaging?

- 02 Which groups have the largest attendance gaps, and why?

- 03 Which attendance interventions are demonstrably working?

- 04 What are pupils and families telling us about barriers?

- 05 What will be measurably different by year end?

Each answer should lead to a named action, a clear owner and a way of judging whether the action has improved access to education.

Conclusion: the next attendance chapter

England has made progress: millions more days in school than at the height of the post-pandemic crisis.

But the recovery remains incomplete. Almost one in five pupils was persistently absent. A third of FSM-eligible pupils, almost three in ten on SEN support, and more than a third with an EHCP were persistently absent.

The next phase must be earlier, smarter, more inclusive and more preventative. It must combine high expectations and accountability with prevention, early identification, targeted intervention, intensive support and belonging.

The ambition

**Every child able to attend,
belong, engage and succeed.**

This is the next attendance chapter: a system that notices risk earlier, understands barriers more clearly and acts with greater precision where children are most disconnected from education.

About this report

The State of School Attendance 2026: England is an independent National Attendance Portal publication, drawing principally on Department for Education attendance statistics available at September 2026, statutory attendance guidance and Ofsted's September 2026 inspection materials.

The latest full-year DfE figures are provisional and may be revised.

Interpreting the evidence

Persistent absence means missing 10% or more of possible sessions; severe absence means missing 50% or more. Rates for the full year, individual terms and individual weeks describe different periods and should not be treated as directly comparable. Special-school comparisons also require care because pupil needs differ.

Independence and attribution

This report presents National Attendance Portal's independent analysis and recommendations. It is not a Department for Education or Ofsted publication and does not imply endorsement by either organisation.

Photographs are AI-generated illustrations, not evidence of particular pupils or schools.

National Attendance Portal

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