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# Tackling absence is not a quick fix

**Caroline Voogd**, editor

**P**ersistent school absence has serious and long-term consequences on children and young people. The latest data (Department for Education [DfE], 2024) shows a 20.5% persistent absence rate.

In January, a joint letter was sent by senior MPs Robin Walker and Steve Brine (2024), who chair the Education and Health and Social Care committees, to the Health and Education Secretaries suggesting that physical health-related persistent absence could be addressed by 'a national public awareness campaign that offers parents advice on what to do if their child is showing symptoms of a mild illness'.

The idea that coughs and colds are one of the lead causes behind persistent absence has been peddled by the government for months. Last year, our healthcare leaders wrote a letter aimed at headteachers providing advice along similar lines (DfE, 2023).

While they acknowledge that there is a range of complex factors behind persistent absence, I feel we are missing the point. Tackling the persistent absence that is afflicting schools – and in particular secondary schools – will need much, much more than a 'self-care public health information campaign'.

A student is persistently absent when they miss more than 10% or more of their possible school sessions. Yes, illness may be one of the big reasons for daily absence but this is a red herring. Not only are many students absent for other reasons, but we must remember that 'illness' is also a go-to excuse used by many when the real reasons might be difficult to explain.

The real problem is multifaceted. We are in the midst of a mental health crisis with NHS data suggesting that one in five children and young people aged 7 to 16 have a probable mental health condition (Newlove-Delgado et al, 2023). Within this anxiety is soaring with Childline's latest statistics showing that its counsellors fielded 105 000 calls in 2022/23 about mental and emotional health, including 31 000 specifically related to anxiety and thousands more relating to low mood and stress. The National Parent Survey (Parentkind, 2024) of more than 5 000 parents found that 44% were concerned about anxiety in their children.

Poverty and the cost of living crisis is undoubtedly playing a role – especially when the Parentkind survey warns that significant numbers of parents cannot afford essentials such as school uniform, transport costs, learning materials and stationery and the technology required for schooling.

And the big elephant in the room is that parental attitudes have changed. Last term, research warned of 'a profound change in parental attitudes to the idea of full-time school attendance in the years since the Coronavirus pandemic' (Burtonshaw and Dorrell, 2023). It says that parents of all economic backgrounds are 'frustrated and despondent with a system which is under-funded and lacks nuance'. As this research concludes: 'Tackling absence isn't a quick fix. It takes time, trust and understanding.'



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