

Senedd Cymru

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Absenoldeb Disgyblion

Ymateb gan Undeb Addysg Cenedlaethol

Welsh Parliament

Children, Young People and Education
Committee

Pupil absence

Evidence from National Education Union

NEU Cymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry, ahead of our oral evidence session. We have highlighted a series of issues below, structured around the terms of reference.

- Reasons for and levels of persistent absenteeism

COVID-19

NEU Cymru notes that the level of school absenteeism has increased since the start of Covid-19, and is particularly high in years 11 and 13¹. The reasons why these year groups have the highest levels are addressed below.

Some of the high levels of absence is due to the prevalence of Covid-19 itself, which at the time of writing is higher than both England and Northern Ireland², according to the Office of National Statistics, at 1 in 55 of people.

One member commented that she had her whole class in for the first time since September in May this year – this is not a unique situation.

Whilst not everyone gets very ill from the disease, it is highly infectious, and if young people come to school with it, this can spread to other children and vulnerable family members, and education professionals, causing greater disruption, so rightly they are still asked to stay home, in line with Welsh Government Guidance.

¹ <https://gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools>

²

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronaviruscovid19/latestinsights>

For some children, there has been significant levels of disruption in the last two years – from bereavement, to a change in family circumstances, and illness. For those children who are clinically vulnerable or seriously clinically vulnerable to Covid-19, there has likely been longer periods when they were not in school. The virus was an unknown two years ago, when the schools were ‘closed’.

However, it is important to remember that schools were never closed to all children. Those children whose parents were key workers have always had a place in school, whilst those classed as “vulnerable” were quickly added. Whilst the first period of lock down causes immense disruption for everyone in society, including those education professionals who had never taught online before, and struggled to ensure all children had access to their free school meals provision, school laptops and appropriate resources, everyone in society, and education, has of course learnt an awful lot since March 2020.

Currently, children as young as 5 can receive a vaccination. But for younger children who live with vulnerable people, or have a serious health condition which makes them more at risk to the virus, some families will still be cautious about children attending school or nurseries. This may have also caused more children to be educated at home.

Individual school risk assessments, and those for vulnerable staff remain a significant measure. We have welcomed the roll-out of CO2 monitors, but it is important their use is monitored, as they provide a proxy measure for ventilation. Guidance on ventilation has been available from the HSE before the pandemic, and must be followed rigorously. WG has a roll to play here in ensuring this is closely monitored, to ensure the health of everyone in the education system is not impacted unnecessarily.

Register

We believe it is time that Welsh Government to implement plans³, delayed during the pandemic, to ensure all children are on a register, or ‘database’ – to ensure that the local authority knows if a child is being home educated. These plans were first drawn up in light of the case of Dylan Seabridge⁴, who’s existence was hidden from the authorities. To get a true picture of children in Wales, the register would enable local authorities to provide and plan provision, and should capture key

³ <https://gov.wales/local-authority-education-databases>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jan/22/concerns-raised-about-boy-who-died-of-scurvy-a-year-before-his-death-leaked-report>

information, such as whether children are disabled, have an additional learning need, or come from a specific background – to ensure Wales is capturing which children are less likely to attend maintained school settings.

School environment

NEU's research⁵ into the school environment has found that creating a sense of belonging in the whole school encourages lower levels of absenteeism in school. We are concerned that the reemphasis on Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) is unhelpful. FPNs should be an absolute last resort. At a time when families are struggling for money this is absolutely not helpful, and a focus should be on enabling schools to connect with families.

Schools can be a challenging environment for some young people, and whilst Wales does not have SATs, our members are clear that any form of testing, including online adaptive assessments, don't tell teachers any information they don't already know.

- Whether and if so, why, non-covid related absenteeism is higher than prior to the COVID 19 pandemic

WG measures of absence and Meilyr Rowlands Report, mentioned above, would confirm this is the case. We have set out a series of reasons for absenteeism above. However, there are also some additional reasons:

Exams

We are particularly concerned by the high levels of absenteeism amongst those young people in Years 11 and 13, which cannot be entirely attributed to high levels of Covid-19 in this age group. It would seem that young people are particularly concerned about taking their exams this year, having seen exams be cancelled for the last two years. These young people have faced an enormous amount of disruption, and are not used to taking exams.

They are now aware of the influence the unfair algorithm has over the exams, exposed by the difficult qualifications situation in 2020. This year, Qualifications Wales (QW) announced that students will receive lower grades than the cohort last year – unveiling to students that no

⁵ <https://www.neu.org.uk/place-belonging>

matter how hard they work, their results will not be as high as last year's cohort. This will likely be adding to anxiety and causing some to avoid school.

Other reasons

In answer to the questions below we address a range of reasons for children more likely to be absent from school, including ALN, poverty and mental health difficulties.

Since we do not have a register of children with each local authority, the numbers of children remains unknown.

- Whether and if so, reasons why persistent absenteeism is more prevalent among particular groups of pupils (those with Additional Learning Needs, eligible for free school meals, boys and girls, specific age groups, ethnicity)

ALN

As Meilyr Rowlands report⁶ sets out, some children are more likely to miss school than others, including those with additional learning, or special, needs. As the report states, this group were more likely to be absent before the pandemic.

Some children may have found working at home more supportive for their specific conditions. But we know from members that young people need more support in school. The Additional Learning Needs and Tribunals (Wales) Act was meant to ensure that everyone with an additional need received the support they needed.

Data shows us that many (nearly 20,000⁷) young people are no longer being counted as having additional needs, and have not moved onto the new additional learning needs system.

Members still tell us more money is needed to support children with additional learning needs, and that the school environment can be a challenge for some learners. We are concerned that the way in which the ALNET Act works discourages schools from providing specific support for children which identifies them as having additional learning needs. More support is needed for schools, with easily accessible

⁶ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-04/attendance-review-implications-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-school-attendance.pdf>

⁷ <https://gov.wales/schools-census-results-february-2022-provisional>

funding for ensuring schools can access experts for diagnosis and specific interventions.

Poverty

We also know that students living in poverty are more likely for many reasons to miss more time out of school (eg caring responsibilities, uniform issues, hunger, not having school equipment etc). This is reflected in the high levels of absence in children eligible for FSM in Meilyr Rowland's recent report.

Schools and LAs which work closely with Traveller families and ensure their inclusion may also require greater flexibility as families travel and students may miss periods of schooling too, again reflected in the recent report.

- The short term and longer-term risks and consequences for learners for example in terms of mental health and well-being

NEU Cymru believes there are risks to learners' wellbeing when not in school, and have welcomed the Whole-school approach to mental health. Attending school involves following the curriculum, but also involves learning to mix with other children and making friends, which are important skills for life.

The last two years have caused anxiety for nearly everyone in society, and it is understandable that children have increased incidents of mental ill health. Schools can support wellbeing, but they cannot do this alone. Access to CAHMs and other services is totally critical.

- The impact on pupils' learning and attainment

The pandemic has exposed that children have different experiences of learning from home, and that not all homes are suitable spaces for children to learn. Access to resources, IT equipment, space and food can all be obtained through attending school, and can support children in their learning.

- Whether absenteeism has resulted in a higher level of pupil de-registration and any cross-over with elective home education

As we have already stated, NEU Cymru believes there needs to be a register, or database, of children, held by each local authority. We do not know how many children are learning at home at the moment in Wales, which is critical information in terms of children's learning and safeguarding.

- Effectiveness of existing Welsh Government policies and guidance

Funding

The issue of inadequate funding in local authorities to enable them to support schools effectively in tackling poor attendance also fails to be addressed adequately in the consultation. The government must make a commitment to fund local authorities sufficiently to enable them to work with schools and families collaboratively, and with appropriate professionals, on attendance issues.

Schools cannot tackle these issues alone. WG needs to ensure that support services, including social services and CAMHS, has sufficient funding to support schools, proactively offering support to schools to support whole school wellbeing.

Fixed penalty notices

NEU Cymru is concerned by the recent WG letter to effectively encourage the use of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN). We also question the evidence to support that enforcement of fines and prosecuting parents/families has any measurable effect on improving student attendance. Schools need time and expertise to work collaboratively with families and young people on the underlying causes of absence relating both to issues in school and outside school, not simply fine families. Since we know that these children are more likely to be eligible for free school meals, causing greater financial hardship at a time of such economic instability cannot be justified.