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ATTENDANCE

Working in partnership: The bedrock of change

Strong partnerships between online alternative provision and schools, local authorities and academy trusts can and do make the difference for our most vulnerable learners...

Complexity is an enduring theme in education. This is not a surprise given the tapestry of ideas, interaction, and investment inherent in teaching young people and helping them to go on to lead fulfilling lives. This complexity brings challenges – challenges that schools navigate with care and purpose.

But the message from the sector is clear – change is required if we are to continue to cope with complexity and if we are to support all learners – especially those most in need.

This is because the pressures on our educational institutions are growing fast – more students requiring mental health support, more students persistently absent from secondary school post-pandemic, increasing costs of SEND provision, and significant budgetary pressures to name just a few.

At Academy21, in the alternative provision sector we work in, we are one such change – fully online alternative provision that meets need. We know our work requires a specific approach – partnering successfully and earnestly with schools, trusts, and local authorities.

Partnership elevates what we can achieve together for vulnerable young people. We can capitalise on the deep expertise and experience on both sides – a shared mission to support young people and a combined effort to overcome the barriers for each student and their school.

A school knows and understands deeply their context, the individual child, and that child's challenges. We combine that knowledge with our own understanding of how to implement flexible, quality online education to meet those challenges.

Moreover, when this combined effort is focused on a common aim – developing a young person's confidence, sense of direction, and their skills for transition – it ensures that trust and a shared vision are at the heart of the partnership.

A solution needs a challenge to make sense, a challenge needs a solution to be overcome. Partnership joins the two.

A versatile solution

Online alternative provision is uniquely placed to integrate with what a school, trust or local authority is already doing for a child; it is flexible enough to fit around other priorities – from intervention to a student's wider commitments.

Working with hundreds of schools and thousands of students in our fully live online lessons we see this writ large.

Be it young people learning in hybrid settings, blending Academy21 classes within school timetables, or an early intervention to break an intense situation, or using Academy21 at home to reconnect with learning ready for a phased return to school – our online alternative provision is versatile.

Our student surveys, with more than 700 responses to date, indicate that 9 in 10 feel more confident in their learning now they are working online with Academy21. And more than 90% of our schools agree that Academy21 is fulfilling the purpose they intended for our partnership. This "return", we feel, is founded in a strong relationship with those commissioning our services.

What makes our partnerships work?

First, effective communication and consultation at the enrolment point. We value this as it allows us to really understand a student's needs and capabilities, taking the school's rich knowledge of the child and using it to inform our induction, teaching, and their overall programme. Transparency in consultation breeds the trust that strengthens collaboration for the benefit of students.

Equally, we listen to our partner schools, not least through a user group and surveying to identify what flexibility and programming is needed.

Academy21's expertise and scale allow us to listen and adapt, for example with varied timetable options and contract lengths to meet need or to plan innovation based on what organisations and students demand. We regularly seek feedback from our students on what would improve their experience, using this as part of our development planning.

Finally, partnership is about enabling – helping our partner schools to do what they do best.

Our purpose-built mentor platform gives schools lesson-by-lesson feedback on students' engagement and understanding. It allows them to monitor attendance and the resources used in their student's placement, including recorded lessons. When combined with our comprehensive safeguarding approach, schools can oversee their student's experience to get the information they need to plan transition and support in context.

Final thoughts

Improvement comes from understanding and that is a collaborative endeavour. In more than a decade of delivering online alternative provision we have seen time and again how the right approach and the right tools used in partnership with schools can move the dial on the many challenges our students face and can begin to untangle the complexity of supporting vulnerable students. **SecEd**

Sandro Capozzi

...is executive headteacher at Academy21, a UK-wide provider of online alternative provision. Visit https://academy21.co.uk/

What am I walking into? Addressing student absence

Do you see a problem child in your classroom – or do you see a child with a problem? Do your vulnerable learners wonder what they will be walking into each day in your school? How must we change the way we think about school absence?

"Why are you late?"
"What time do you call this?"
"Ever heard of an alarm clock?"

Imagine your manager responding to you like this in front of your colleagues. How would you feel? Shocked? Bewildered? Distraught that your manager would put you in such a humiliating situation?

No "good morning". No "great to see you". Just a blunt response with no compassion or concern about why you are late.

Of course, when it comes to our students, we too often fail to extend this basic courtesy.

Imagine you are a single parent, barely holding everything together. You have complex personal issues which you keep private out of fear. Your child is equally affected by these issues and mornings are often difficult. They have good reasons for being late or absent, reasons that go beyond our superficial assumptions.

But if they are greeted this way when they do make it into school, they will soon ask themselves each morning: "What am I walking into?"

Let's explore five reasons that I often see as part of my work with vulnerable students for why they may be late or absent to school:
● "If I leave my dad alone, he will be drunk by the time I get home, so I'm either late or I don't come in."
● "I prefer facing the bullies on my screen because I can turn it off, but in school it's difficult to escape from them. Even after ▶

Steven Russell

...is the founder of Elements SEMH Support, a social and emotional mental health support service for young people. As a child, he lived with nine foster families, was placed in two children's homes and attended five schools. Visit https://elementssupport.com and www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/steven-russell

ALL IMAGES (UNLESS STATED) ADOBE STOCK

school, they follow me and call me nasty names."

● "I'm afraid to talk about my nightmares. I stay awake at night because I'm scared to sleep. Some nights, I don't sleep at all."

● "They don't understand how terrifying school is for me. I'm not one of those students who can pretend everything is okay when it's not. If I'm late, it simply means less time in school."

● "I feel uncomfortable sitting in the classroom, knowing that my mom is left alone with my stepdad. He's horrible to her. It's challenging to concentrate on work when my mom is being hurt like that."

Imagine being one of these students, so frightened that your teachers will discover the real reason for your lateness and that this will put others in danger.

So you decide to lie: "My alarm didn't go off, Miss. I missed my bus, Sir."

Safeguarding expert Elizabeth Rose wrote in *SecEd* recently that poor attendance and punctuality can often be a safeguarding issue: "Staff should understand that children with poor attendance may be more vulnerable – they need to know that poor attendance could be a sign of abuse or harm." (Rose, 2023).

When we challenge students in this way about lateness it compels them to lie if they fear that the truth will lead to more problems for them or their family. So what's the answer? Quite simply, all students should walk into a compassionate environment – whether they are late or not.

A compassionate response
What does a compassionate response look like for students who are late or have been absent?

● **Greet them with a warm smile:** ...and be proud of them. Yes, they are late, but they still made it in. Allow your first words to them to be warm and project a sense of belonging.

● **The double G:** "Good morning, Jake. It's Great to see you."

● **Curiosity:** When you get the chance to see Jake one-to-one, show curiosity about his lateness: "Hey Jake, I noticed you were late yesterday and

today, is everything okay? Jake may decide not to say anything, which is fine. But he now knows someone is curious and cares about him without expectation.

● **Humour and creativity:** ...as you welcome students into school. I have seen real comedians on the gate. I once even saw a teacher playing Ed Sheeran on the guitar! But maybe something as simple as some school gate trivia (what's the capital of Japan?) can help to create the right environment.

● **Positive affirmation through contact:** You will be surprised just how impactful a high five or a fist pump can be from a teacher to a student. It brings down so many barriers and gives way to validation and recognition. It also shows them you are not a threat.

The ghost children
Recent analysis reported in *SecEd* (2024) shows that during the autumn term 2023, secondary schools saw one in four students persistently absent (24.6%). This rises to 33% for students living in poverty.

The children's commissioner for England has also raised concerns about 125,000 "ghost children" who have not returned to school following the pandemic.

So, what are the main reasons behind children being absent from education? The usual suspects, which have all been exacerbated by Covid.

● Poverty.
● SEND.
● Mental health issues, particularly anxiety-related.
● Family breakdown.
● Lack of stimulation.

In the vast majority of cases, imposing punitive measures, such as fines for parents, only exacerbates the challenges. Often these families are already grappling with putting food on the table and paying the heating bill.

So do we foster compassion and understanding? Or do we adopt a system of punishment, shaming children for lateness or threatening parents with penalties.

The latter risks creating a dangerous cycle, forcing children away from schools and putting them at increased risk of becoming

> **"** *Staff should understand that children with poor attendance may be more vulnerable – they need to know that poor attendance could be a sign of abuse or harm* **"**

involved in county lines and sexual exploitation.

While working with children in residential care, I vividly recall a 14-year-old girl telling me that school was unnecessary because she could earn £50 by engaging in certain activities.

A year 10 student I supported in 2021 shared with me a chilling statement made by a local gang leader: "School is for idiots. Why bother with exams when I can pay you £2,000 a week to transport goods (drugs)."

For a harrowing insight into the world of county lines, see virtual school headteacher Darren Martindale's 2020 article for *SecEd* about this world of violence, intimidation and crime.

What has become glaringly evident is that schools are often oblivious to the daily struggles these children face outside their gates. School is frequently the last place these students want to be, purely because they fear the challenges and judgements they will encounter when they arrive each day.

So, I ask you – should students be enthusiastic about attending school? The pressure on schools and teachers is overwhelming and it is clear that the system needs more resources and some fundamental changes, but nevertheless if you believe that the answer to the question above is yes, then we must find the time to focus on making this a reality.

A vivid recollection of my own school days
Let me take you back to my childhood, a time when I spent my entire life in care. Throughout this journey, I attended a total of five different schools – three primaries

and two secondaries. School life wasn't easy as I became a target of bullying both in primary and secondary school. While, amid the struggles, I discovered a passion for creativity, flourishing in drama, sports, and music, I faced enormous challenges with subjects like maths, English, and science.

I remember vividly planning eagerly to skip school with my buddies, venturing into Birmingham to shoplift and smoke cannabis. The thrill of taking risks seemed far more appealing than sitting in a classroom and listening to a teacher who constantly shouted at me about subjects I loathed.

When you constantly change schools like I did, it is hard to feel that you belong. I made it a point to be rude, cause trouble, and intentionally land myself in detention just to leave school at the same time as my friends.

Many times, I found myself gazing out of the school window, feeling trapped; like I was in a prison. When the school bell rang, it brought a sense of freedom.

I still recall my maths teacher telling me: "Kids like you don't do well in exams." My science teacher said: "Throwing paper planes seems to be the only thing you're good at."

It was clear that there were no meaningful connections, no compassionate souls waiting at the gate to greet 12-year-old Steven with warmth. Well almost none.

Miss Garvey
There was one exception – Miss Garvey, my RE teacher. With her radiant smile, quick wit, and genuine nature, this short Irish lady made me feel welcome in her classroom.

Despite my negative outlook, she embraced me with open arms whenever I entered her room or she saw me in the corridor. "I hope you're keeping out of trouble, Mr Russell," she would say in her Irish tone. Miss Garvey's kindness wasn't expected. She could have easily sent me out of class a thousand times, yet she didn't.

She saw me, she heard me, and she valued me. I will forever hold her in my heart and she may never realise the profound impact she had on my life. If by chance she is

reading, I want to say: "Thank you for seeing Steven as a child with a problem, rather than seeing him as the problem."

Adult-child relationships
When it comes to children, we have two perspectives: seeing them with a problem or seeing them as a problem. The latter strains the relationship as the adult tends to impose sanctions, punishment, and shame. We blame the child for their behaviour.

However, there is another way – the adult who sees a child with a problem and who wants to understand what drives those behaviours.

They aim to develop a partnership with the child, working together to find solutions. We avoid blame and punishment as they hinder the relationship and erode trust. This process only works when we co-operate and co-regulate.

Instead of doing things "to" the child, where they have no choice, or doing things "for" the child, where they have no control, let's do things "with" the child to foster genuine connections.

I wrote recently in *SecEd* about how strong relationships are crucial to supporting our students, offering five approaches that will help teachers to build these connections and effective relationships (Russell, 2022)

Here I want to offer another list of five – five elements of connection. These are based on my 18 years of pain as a child in a chaotic care system and my 16 years of experience as an advocate for children. Practising these five elements daily with your students will give you the best possible chance of building and nurturing relationships that will help children to know that what they are walking into is a positive and caring environment.

Five elements of connection
Be patient. Be present. Be curious. Be creative. Be authentic. These are the five elements of connection.

We may not have control over their punctuality. We may not have control over what they are going through at home. Or their feelings of loneliness. Their choice of

associations. Or their decisions to skip school.

However, we do have control over the five elements of connection. All we need to do is practise and demonstrate them consistently, day-in, day-out.

How to cultivate patience
Take a deep breath and acknowledge that patience is a virtue that lies within you, not others. While your mind wants a quick resolution, remember that the child may not be ready. They require time to regulate their emotions. It is your role to co-regulate alongside them.

Control the pace of your speech, speaking slowly and deliberately. Instead of instructing them to calm down, focus on calming yourself. Let your serenity soothe them. Remember, patience begins and ends with you, not them.

> **"** *Instead of doing things 'to' the child, where they have no choice, or doing things 'for' the child, where they have no control, let's do things 'with' the child to foster genuine connections* **"**

How to cultivate presence
Perhaps the most challenging element to master, as the mind is incessantly active.

Similar to patience, we need to find a moment of serenity amid the chaos – a formidable task when confronted with a dysregulated student or an enraged parent.

Being present requires relinquishing concerns of the past and future. Instead, embrace the moment for what it is, not what it could or should be. Take a deep breath. In this moment, set aside answers, agendas, and facts and figures. It is time to shed the role of teacher and embrace your humanity. Exhibit empathy, slow the pace, and truly listen.

How to show curiosity
It is fine to be wrong and even take

a guess. Students would rather see you take a guess and be wrong than not say anything at all. So, what does it look like to take a shot in the dark?

"Hey Lacey, I've noticed you biting your nails and pulling your hair. Is everything alright?"

"Hey Dylan, I've noticed you spending extended periods of time in the toilets. Are you okay?"

Using "I've noticed" has proven effective for me when trying to show curiosity with young people. They may not choose to disclose right then and there, but it creates a connection. You have planted a seed.

How to unleash creativity
Creativity is the thrilling adventure where boundaries are pushed, imagination runs wild, and the curious mind of a child seeks connection.

Step outside the box and embark on a journey of creation with a student. But wait, here's the enchanting line that opens the gateway to the magic: "I need your help with a project that could be absolutely awesome."

Imagine a vibrant noticeboard in the reception area raising awareness about mental health. Or a captivating school radio station. Perhaps a thrilling chess competition across the school. Or an enthralling street-life play or drama for the end of term.

The options are limitless! Let your creativity soar and dare to do something new – and allow the students to lead the way.

How to show authenticity
So crucial when building connections, especially because children are perceptive to genuineness. Although children may not always express their emotions verbally, they possess an intrinsic understanding of whether someone is being authentic or simply telling them what they think the student wants to hear.

The reason I have been able to establish honest and open relationships with nearly all the young people I have supported is simply because I am true to myself. There are no pretences, no power dynamics of adult versus child, just the sincere act of being genuine.

I often tell young people: "I'm not sharing this with you because I want to, but because I need to.

Even though this news might upset you, I believe you will respect me more for being honest with you now."

Authenticity also entails taking ownership when we make mistakes and apologising to the child if necessary. It is disheartening to see that teachers rarely apologise to students out of fear of showing weakness.

A final challenge
The five elements are practices. You won't get them right every day, but the more you practise, the better you will become at embodying them.

I shall leave you with a challenge. Ask yourself each day after work the following questions and grow from there:
1. At what point today was I patient with a student?
2. At what point was I present?
3. At what point was I curious?
4. At what point was I creative?
5. At what point was I authentic?

Perhaps you can do this as a team and then, after say four weeks, you might share the results.

Remember, drip by drip, day by day, we find a way. *SecEd*

ⓘ **FURTHER INFORMATION**

► *Martindale: County lines: A world of violence, intimidation and crime, SecEd, 2020:* **http://tinyurl.com/4436nkpf**

► *Martindale: There may be trouble ahead: Getting attendance right, SecEd, 2022:* **http://tinyurl.com/3pfsphya**

► *Rose: A safeguarding-first approach to attendance, SecEd, 2023:* **http://tinyurl.com/58wzjwcs**

► *Russell: Five ways to build connections and stronger relationships with your students, SecEd, 2022:* **http://tinyurl.com/kxyu67uk**

► *SecEd: School attendance crisis: One in four secondary students persistently absent, 2024:* **http://tinyurl.com/2waz54ps**

► *SecEd Podcast: Trauma and adverse childhood experiences (with Steven Russell), 2022:* **http://tinyurl.com/y7uj3x3k**

Addressing the attendance gap

There are a number of reasons behind the significant attendance gap between different groups of students. What are these factors and what can schools do to address them?

Disadvantaged students are more than twice as likely to be absent from school as their non-disadvantaged peers. And, although there has long been an attendance gap, the divide has widened since Covid-19.

During the autumn term, 33% of disadvantaged students were persistently absent compared to 15.7% of non-disadvantaged children and young people (see *SecEd*, 2024).

What's more, whereas persistent absence rates among non-disadvantaged students have begun to fall since the pandemic, persistent absence rates for disadvantaged students have continued to grow. So, why has attendance got worse for all students but particularly so for disadvantaged students?

Parental attitudes

A report by the think tank Public First found that Covid had caused a seismic shift in parental attitudes to school attendance (Burtonshaw & Dorrell, 2023). The report concluded that it was no longer the case that every day mattered – at least from the perspective of parents. And this was, in part, because there had been a fundamental break-down in the relationship between schools and parents.

Mental health

An investigation by *The Guardian* last year sought to summarise other factors that have contributed to a growing attendance gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students.

The report (Weale, 2023) cited anxiety and mental health issues as a significant cause: "While poor mental health among young people was a growing concern before the pandemic, it has deteriorated since."

The author cites the annual NHS figures showing the extent to which children and young have a probable mental health disorder. In 2017, it was estimated that 12.1% of children aged seven to 16 did so. In 2022, this figure increased to 18%. The article suggests that "already overstretched NHS mental health services are unable to cope with rising demand". And since this article was published, the latest NHS figures for 2023 show a further rise to 20.3% – one in five students (see *SecEd*, 2023)

My first-hand experience in schools tells me that mental health and attendance are intersectional because, during the lockdowns, students' mental health issues were not being identified and this led to a bulge in the number of referrals being made post-lockdown.

What's more, more students begun to experience mental health problems because of the pandemic, particularly related to their lockdown experiences. Thus, the NHS has had to contend with a spike in referrals and yet funding cuts and a reduction in staffing levels have left them unable to cope with demand.

More students are therefore missing school while they await assessment and treatment. I know from schools I work with that, at the moment, the lag between referral and assessment can be as long as two years.

The impact on SEND

Students with SEND are also more likely to be absent. *The Guardian* investigation states: "It is well known that children with SEND are more at risk of absence from school, and that link has become more pronounced since the pandemic, which took a particularly heavy toll on many of these students.

"While some children were unable to attend because of healthcare appointments, more often their absence was because the school was unable to deliver the required adjustments or provide a suitable learning environment."

Cost of living crisis

The number of children living in relative poverty (families with a household income below 60% of median income after housing costs) has risen to 4.2 million in the period April 2021 to March 2022. This represents 29% of UK children (DWP, 2023). The cost-of-living crisis is making things worse for families already in poverty and is pushing many more across the poverty line.

The Guardian investigation cites the cost-of-living crisis as a key factor in low attendance: "Schools and charities say some parents cannot afford to ensure their child has a clean uniform or pay for bus fares every day. Given a choice of food or school, food wins."

The National Parent Survey recently identified the top 10 highest costs of schooling with uniforms topping the list. Other problematic costs for families include technology, transport, and the cost of stationery and materials (Parentkind, 2023).

Linked to this, insecure, poor-quality housing is increasingly a barrier to children going to school. The charity School-Home Support, which works with persistently absent students and their families, states: "Typical problems are that families who are moved into refuges because of domestic violence, or into emergency accommodation after an eviction, can find themselves long distances from their school, making journeys expensive. Also, children in cramped, unsuitable accommodation have nowhere to do homework, which can make it challenging for students to engage with their studies and attend lessons regularly."

My experience confirms the truth of this. Students living in poverty – of which there are an increasing number including many who are not in receipt of free school meals – find it far harder to attend school for a multitude of reasons.

Poor sleep and nutrition are a barrier to a child's ability to get up and get dressed and to school on time and to pay attention and engage in lessons if they do make it in. A lack of resources ranging from alarm clocks to cars also poses a barrier to attendance.

The lack of a quiet study space with access to the internet and a device can prevent children from completing homework or preparing for tests and thus they stay away from school rather than face the humiliation of failure. Children living in poverty often have parents who work multiple jobs or unsocial shift patterns who therefore cannot be present to support their child's morning routine or help them with homework.

If this is why – at least in part – disadvantaged students are more likely to be absent from school, what can we do to close this attendance gap?

What can we do?

In its report, Public First called for a review of how schools and the wider education system communicates with parents. Schools, it states, need to provide intensive, nuanced support to families for whom attendance is an issue. And, where attendance is a significant issue "schools need to be empowered to work with the family to address the underlying causes".

This, in part, requires "better joined up working and signposting to the appropriate agencies (which) would ensure that those best placed to offer support were doing so".

Better joined up working would also enable schools to "focus on providing the educational support they have expertise in" and avoid them being blamed by parents for failures in these other areas of the system.

I would add that improved parental communication also requires staff training. Staff need the requisite knowledge and skills to understand the issues leading to an attendance gap and they need to be able to have difficult conversations with students and families to address those issues and put in place targeted support to overcome them.

As a minimum, staff need training on how to complete accurate and timely registers and on how to quickly follow up any unexplained absences.

I would also suggest a "back to basics" approach to communications which begins with an explanation of the law. The law is simple: every child of compulsory school age is entitled to an "efficient, full-time education suitable to their age, aptitude, and any SEN they may have".

It is the legal responsibility of every parent to ensure their child attends school regularly – which means their child must attend every day the school is open, except when they are too ill or have been given permission for an absence in advance from the school.

A school's attendance policy therefore needs to define what "too ill" means and the NHS resource *Is my child too ill for school* (see further information) is a good starting point. When in doubt, parents should be encouraged – in a supportive not supercilious manner – to send their child to school to allow professionals to decide if they are well enough to attend.

Next, schools should explain *why* the law exists – why is attendance so important that it has been made a legal obligation? To help answer this question, there is no shortage of data which proves the link between good attendance at school and:

- Better educational outcomes.
- Better chances of progression to further and/or higher education.
- Better chances of finding meaningful, fulfilling employment – and earning more.
- Better health and wellbeing now and lifelong.

What's more, for the most vulnerable students, regular attendance at school is an important protective factor and the best opportunity for their additional and different needs to be identified and support provided.

In short, in order to tackle the attendance gap, schools should flip the conversation. Instead of talking in deficit terms about absences or sharing headline data, schools should promote the positive impact of good attendance.

And the best place to start flipping the conversation is in the school attendance policy...

The attendance policy

The best policies set out the school's expectations of attendance and punctuality and explain the procedures that it will follow whenever a student does not attend or is late for school and/or lessons.

The best policies are the result of a consultation with as wide an audience as possible and are then communicated widely and often and in a variety of forms. For example, relevant segments of the policy might be included in letters home and made easily accessible via the school website, perhaps as hyperlinked webpages rather than a downloadable document, making it easier for parents to find the section they need.

Short-form explainer videos, as well as dual-coded flow charts, are also great ways of reminding students and parents of the importance of attendance and of the procedures to follow in the event of an absence.

Although consistency is key, a good policy also acknowledges that different students have different needs and face different challenges in attending school and being on time. As such, every student should not be treated the same.

To this end, it is important to identify the barriers that individual students face – particularly those who are disadvantaged. In practice, and put simply, this means that for every student who misses school or is late to school, we ask "why?" – what has prevented this student from attending? Is it something at home or in school? Only by truly analysing the causes can we begin to find workable solutions.

Once the causes of non-attendance are known, the next step is to plan personalised strategies to help support the student back into school.

Here, it is crucial that attempts are made to involve – not just inform – parents and external agencies in the process, and to do so as early as possible.

Parents should be regarded as partners in the process of improving attendance because without parental support and understanding, it is unlikely that any strategies will be effective in the long-term.

Furthermore, a student needs to see that the school and home are united in common cause, working together and talking to each other.

SecEd

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FURTHER INFORMATION

► Burtonshaw & Dorrell: *Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis, Public First,* 2023: **http://tinyurl.com/2p9zjp6z**
► DWP: *Households Below Average Income,* 2023: **https://tinyurl.com/5ezubsyc**
► NHS: *Is my child too ill for school?* **www.nhs.uk/live-well/is-my-child-too-ill-for-school**
► Parentkind: *National Parent Survey,* 2023: **www.nationalparentsurvey.com**
► SecEd: *NHS warning: 23% of 11 to 16-year-olds have probable mental health condition,* 2023: **http://tinyurl.com/3b3kmtvf**
► SecEd: *School attendance crisis: One in four secondary students persistently absent,* 2024: **http://tinyurl.com/2waz54ps**
► Weale: *From Covid to poverty: why pupil absence in England is rising, The Guardian,* 2023: **http://tinyurl.com/598tb53d**

Tackling the links between attendance and poverty

What are the links between poverty and the attendance crisis in secondary schools and what best practice approaches can we employ to address these issues and support students?

As discussed already in this supplement, a quarter of students (24.6%) were persistently absent from secondary school during the autumn term 2023. These figures compare with an overall persistent absence rate of 12.7% before the pandemic (see *SecEd*, 2024).

Poverty and school absence

While poverty and disadvantage will not be a reality for every student facing attendance issues, it will be a genuine issue for many of these families. We know that social and economic upheaval since the pandemic has resulted in many more families struggling financially (Fitzpatrick et al, 2023; Lucas et al 2023).

And the data indicates that there are links to be made between poverty, disadvantage, and poor school attendance. The attendance figures cited above are even worse for students on free schools meals (FSMs) with one third (33%) being persistently

absent during autumn term (primary and secondary). This compares with 15.7% of non-FSM students.

It is an inconvenient truth that students eligible for FSMs are more than twice as likely as their affluent peers to be persistently absent from school. Why?

Poverty and disadvantage can create barriers to school attendance for a multitude of reasons:

- **Health:** Poverty can have a known impact on health and wellbeing in families. If health is poor then illness for students or in the wider family will likely be a more serious and genuine barrier to attending school (Marmot, 2021).
- **Food:** Poverty creates barriers to a healthy and balanced diet. The cost of living is having significant impact on low-income family's access to food and healthy eating (Trussell Trust, 2023).
- **Hidden costs:** Despite being supposedly free at the point of access, schools and state

education still have costs – a genuine issue facing many low-income families (CPAG, 2023). To take just one example, some students will miss school on event and non-uniform days because they cannot afford to partake.

- **Neurological development**: Poverty can have an impact on brain development and executive functioning (Blair & Raver, 2016; Harris, 2022). Students struggling to focus in school will arguably be less inclined to even want to attend.
- **School experience:** Achieving academic success at school can be hard for some students in sustained or long-term disadvantage. Therefore, the experience of school will likely

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be a challenging one for my students (Wagmiller, 2015).

Finally, Klein et al (2020) investigated the extent to which various dimensions of socio-economic background (parental education, parental class, FSM registration, housing status, and neighbourhood deprivation) predict overall school absence and different reasons for absenteeism (truancy, sickness, family holidays and temporary exclusion).

The research, involving more than 4,600 secondary school students in Scotland, found that all dimensions of socio-economic status were correlated with school absences.

Multiple measures were associated with truancy, sickness absences and exclusion – with social housing and low parental education identified as strongest risk factors.

What's your attendance story?

The DfE recently announced (DfE, 2024) plans to legislate to require all schools to share their daily attendance data in a bid to help school leaders identify and respond to absence trends.

Measuring absence is only one mechanism in a school's attendance strategy. Harvesting attendance data in isolation of interpretation is a pointless and time-consuming exercise. School leaders must consider what trends and patterns exist in the data in the context of their school environment.

Consider the story that your

data tells you and what questions pastoral leaders and teachers therefore need to be asking. While FSMs and Pupil Premium labels have their drawbacks (see Harris, 2021a), this data should be understood in the context of attendance trends and used to consider what specific barriers to attendance and learning exist for disadvantaged students.

It is important that these are sense-checked rather than built on vague ideas or pre and misconceptions that we have heard from other schools or areas or even the national picture.

Leading attendance culture

A culture of good attendance doesn't simply apply to students. I once served in a school where staff absence rates were poor. I recall a parent from a low-income household saying to me that "attendance isn't that important if the teachers here don't come in that often".

It is essential for leaders to offer a clear vision for attendance in the school and that the importance of attendance is understood by all staff and stakeholders.

Consider the extent to which the high value of attending school is recognised and championed when visitors and students first access the school.

One aside – it is important to consider the extent to which celebrating positive attendance might have a detrimental impact on low-income families. Publicly rewarding 100% attendance in schools can adversely impact some students for whom 100% attendance is genuinely impossible – for example those with health complications that prevent regular school attendance.

Alternative approaches to this might include:

- A focus on personalised affirmation for students that achieve improvements in attendance.
- Celebrating whole-school or year-group improvements in the attendance.
- Deploy attendance, pastoral and SEND staff skilled in supporting students and their families who can identify and affirm overcoming individual barriers to attendance.
- Steer away from events or

activities that could isolate or create further barriers for low income families (e.g. non-uniform days, reward trips).

- Consult students on attendance policy, practice, rewards, and sanctions so that they understand the value of attendance but also so that disadvantaged students can give you a valuable insight into school strategies.

Teaching attendance culture

The role of classroom teachers and form tutors is important in addressing barriers to attendance that might exist because of poverty and other facets of disadvantage.

- Ensure that teachers are supported to teach about the importance of attendance and its impact on attainment in their subject areas.
- Work with teachers to think about the concepts and topics that need over-exposure in the curriculum for disadvantaged students. At Tees Valley Education we are working with SHINE to carry out research in this area, working with teachers and students to better diagnose the misconceptions that might exist due to missing school or because of poverty (see Harris, 2021b).
- Equip teachers to follow up on absence and poor punctuality to lessons, ensuring that this is managed consistently and without discriminating against students.
- Regularly revisit attendance policies, processes, and research through staff meetings and CPD programmes. Staff induction is also an important place to ensure that this is understood.

In one school I work alongside, teachers make use of "sorry we missed you" coloured slips in student exercise books. This has two aims. To acknowledge that the teacher has missed the student and wants them in the lesson, and to highlight to the student a specific learning target that they need to complete to address a subject knowledge gap.

Strategy for tackling disadvantage

Attendance policies and processes need to be informed by a wider

strategy for tackling poverty and disadvantage in school. It is important that this strategy is rooted in a knowledge of the known needs of disadvantaged students and low-income families.

Marc Rowland (2022) challenges schools to secure a school-wide understanding of how disadvantage impacts on students' learning and broader experiences in school.

This is important irrespective of the numbers of disadvantaged students in the school and is an important part of tackling absence for disadvantaged students.

Marc Rowland has written extensively about this and with Unity Research School has produced a wide-range of blogs and resources to support school leaders and teachers in formulating their strategy for tackling educational disadvantage.

Research published by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), meanwhile, shows that reading and

attendance continue to be significant barriers to progress for disadvantaged students – this based on an analysis of schools' Pupil Premium statements.

The EEF has since produced a range of resources designed to support school leaders and teachers including an updated version of its guide to the Pupil Premium, a document for school leaders looking to maximise the impact of their spending (EEF, 2023).

At Tees Valley Education, a multi-academy trust in the North of England, we have made publicly available further information about our social justice and equity in education charter. The webpage (see further information) summarises the research-informed approaches we have adopted alongside information about how we work with other schools to develop their strategy for tackling the impact of poverty on learning, attendance, and other aspects of school life. **SecEd**

ⓘ **FURTHER INFORMATION**

► *Blair & Raver: Poverty, stress and brain development: New directions for prevention and intervention, Academic Paediatrics, 2016.*
► *Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG): School sums: What does going to school really cost families? 2023:* **http://tinyurl.com/y72ahnfw**
► *DfE: Major national drive to improve school attendance, 2024:* **http://tinyurl.com/sb3pfbs4**
► *EEF: The EEF Guide to the Pupil Premium, 2023:* **http://tinyurl.com/yu86kh6p**
► *Fitzpatrick et al: Destitution in the UK 2023, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023:* **https://tinyurl.com/4pfvuh33**
► *Harris: Doorstep disadvantage: Beyond the Pupil Premium, SecEd, 2021a:* **http://tinyurl.com/25upu5n3**
► *Harris: Crafting your curriculum with poverty in mind, SecEd, 2021b:* **http://tinyurl.com/35yksnp4**
► *Harris: Poverty on the brain, SecEd, 2022:* **http://tinyurl.com/j8wmr8nb**
► *Klein et al: Mapping inequalities*

in school attendance, Children and Youth Services Review, 2020: **http://tinyurl.com/4hn4tdcs**
► *Lucas et al: Cost-of-living crisis: Impact on schools (school staff), NFER, 2023:* **https://tinyurl.com/uu7vrush**
► *Marmot et al: Build Back Fairer: Covid-19, The Marmot Review, The Health Foundation, 2021.*
► *Rowland: Addressing educational disadvantage: From strategy to the classroom, Unity Research School, 2022:* **http://tinyurl.com/33dujxup**
► *SecEd: School attendance crisis: One in four secondary students persistently absent, 2024:* **http://tinyurl.com/2waz54ps**
► *Tees Valley Education: Social Justice & Equity:* **http://tinyurl.com/mrx98hxy**
► *Trussell Trust: Emergency food parcel distribution in the UK, 2023:* **https://tinyurl.com/bdhu7sk8**
► *Wagmiller: The temporal dynamics of childhood economic deprivation and children's achievement, Child Development Perspectives (9), 2015.*

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Academy 21

Small ideas with big impact

Small actions can often make a big difference for our most vulnerable learners. Here are 10 suggestions that you can feed into your teaching practice

Smaller interventions or actions can have a profound impact on our vulnerable students. The ideas below are designed to be practical, easy to implement, and highly effective in creating a supportive, inclusive, and understanding environment.

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1, Empathetic listening
Empathetic listening is about genuinely understanding a student's feelings and perspectives. It involves active engagement and a non-judgemental attitude so students feel heard and valued.
- **Reflective responses:** Echo back what the student says in your own words to show you are listening and to check for misunderstanding.
- **Open-ended questions:** Ask questions that encourage students to express themselves.
- **Non-verbal cues:** Use body language like nodding and maintaining eye contact.

2, Creating safe spaces
Create safe spaces within the school where students feel secure, respected, and able to express themselves without fear of judgement.
- **Quiet corners:** Designate quiet areas in classrooms or other communal areas.
- **Safety rules:** Co-create rules that promote respect and inclusivity.
- **Wellbeing check-ins:** Check in with students to ensure school continues to feel safe for them.

3, Inclusive language
Using inclusive language involves consciously choosing words that promote equality and respect. It is about fostering an environment where all students feel respected and included.
- **Language guides:** Create and distribute guides with a list of terms that are preferable and

those to avoid. This is powerful when informed by students.
- **Feedback systems:** Establish a system where students and staff can suggest more inclusive language, perhaps a suggestion box or online form.
- **Inclusive language posters:** Place posters around the school as reminders of inclusive language practices including examples of non-inclusive vs inclusive language.

4, Community classroom
Foster a sense of community in the classroom where each student feels connected, supported, and part of a collective group.
- **Classroom charters:** Develop classroom charters with input from all students to establish shared values.
- **Group projects:** Encourage group projects that require collaboration and team-work.
- **Community circle time:** Implement regular time for students to share news and discuss challenges, ideas and opinions as a group.

5, Sensory considerations
Recognise and accommodate the different sensory needs of students.
- **Sensory breaks:** Incorporate short breaks for sensory activities.
- **Visual calm zones:** Set up areas with muted colours and minimal visual stimuli for students who get overwhelmed visually.

6, Fostering independence
Help students to develop the confidence and skills to think and

act autonomously, preparing them for life outside the classroom.
- **Step-by-step guides:** Create guides for tasks to encourage independent participation.
- **Choice in assignments:** Allow students choices in their assignments and mode of completion to promote decision-making.
- **Self-assessment tools:** Teach students to assess their own work, identify areas for growth, and celebrate their successes.

7, Self-expression
Encouraging self-expression helps students explore and communicate their thoughts, feelings, and identities.
- **Graffiti boards:** Set up a graffiti board where students can freely draw or write, expressing themselves in a visual format.
- **Personal blogs or vlogs:** As a project have students maintain a blog or vlog where they can express their thoughts.
- **Photography assignments:** Introduce photography as a means of expression with assignments that involve capturing images that convey certain emotions or tell a story.

8, Conflict resolution skills
Teaching conflict resolution skills is essential in helping students navigate disagreements and misunderstandings constructively. Guide them to understand different perspectives, communicate effectively, and find common ground. This will promote a more harmonious and empathetic school environment.
- **Workshops:** Organise sessions that teach the practical steps of conflict resolution: active

listening, brainstorming solutions together, expressing feelings without blaming, etc.
- **Emotion management:** Teach students techniques to manage their emotions, such as deep breathing or counting to 10 before responding to prevent conflicts from escalating.
- **Empathy-building exercises:** Engage students in exercises that build empathy, such as imagining how others feel or discussing the effects of conflict on those involved.

9, Role models/mentoring
Role models and mentors provide guidance, support, and inspiration to students, helping them to see possibilities for the future.
- **Share personal stories:** Share your own learning experiences and challenges, showing your vulnerability and strategies for moving towards success.
- **Cultural and experience matching:** Identify colleagues who share cultural backgrounds, experiences, or interests with students, and facilitate mentoring connections.

10, Cultivating empathy
Promoting empathy involves activities and discussions that help students understand and share the feelings.
- **Role-playing:** Use role-playing activities to help students experience different perspectives.
- **Reflective writing prompts:** Writing prompts can help students reflect on how others might feel in various situations.

Final thoughts
The power of change often lies in the smallest of gestures and strategies. Each idea presented here can support the creation of a nurturing and inclusive environment for all students, especially those who are most in need of our support. **SecEd**

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Behaviour and ABC charts

What is challenging behaviour and what causes it? And how can the use of ABC charts and wider professional reflection help schools to support the good behaviour of vulnerable learners

As a virtual school head and inclusion manager for a large local authority, I have daily discussions with headteachers, SENCOs and other senior leaders in schools about how they can support students who are struggling with behaviour or emotional wellbeing.

Some of the children we are discussing are in crisis – at risk of permanent exclusion and in many cases involved with social care, early help, youth offending, or other services.

Let me be clear: every day I see evidence of skilled, dedicated staff doing everything within their power to support their students and doing a cracking job.

But, despite this, some schools say that not all staff feel confident about identifying difficulties and knowing how to respond. Some students report that the way some school staff respond to their needs could make things worse. We know that sometimes (or often) children are excluded due to unidentified or unmet needs.

Challenging behaviour

First, what, exactly, do we mean by "challenging" or "difficult" behaviour?

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists: "Challenging behaviour is socially constructed and is a product of an interaction between the individual and their environment."

And according to the Wolverhampton Educational Psychology Service: "Behaviour is

what we see when children and young people experience difficulties with their emotional wellbeing and social development. Behaviour that concerns us is not simply behaviour that is disruptive; it can include withdrawn behaviour, anxious behaviour, harmful behaviour and so on."

The book *Challenging Behaviour* (Hewett, 1998) reassures us: "Challenging behaviour occurs – it is normal."

And if all behaviour is communication, then Dr David Pitonyak (2004) captures this beautifully: "Difficult behaviours result from unmet needs. In a sense, difficult behaviours are messages which can tell us important things about the person and the quality of his or her life. In my experience, people with difficult behaviours are often missing:
- Meaningful relationships.
- A sense of safety and wellbeing.
- Power.
- Things to look forward to.
- A sense of value and self-worth.
- Relevant skills and knowledge.
- Supporters who are themselves supported."

He goes on to explain: "Supporting a person requires us to get to know the person as a complicated human being influenced by a complex personal history.

"Instead of developing a behaviour plan to 'fix' the person, help the person and the person's supporters to develop a support plan that reflects a real and authentic life."

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Understanding students

In a holistic, strengths-based approach, Dr Pitonyak's model encourages us to look for ways to expand their relationships, to increase their health and wellbeing, to develop their sense of self-worth and to build their skills and knowledge, rather than simply wondering "how can I stop this behaviour from happening?" or "how can I make this child engage?".

All good, positive stuff. But how can we better understand the particular difficulties that a student is facing? How do we decode what they are trying to tell us when they tell us to "fuck off", or storm out of the classroom, or simply don't turn up in the first place?

Disengagement can be due to a number of factors – from communication difficulties to sensory overload (or underload), frustration, boredom, waiting, social confusion, previous traumatic experience, difficulties with change or transition, provocation by others, or fear of failure.

Some of those stressors are ever-present – something that's going on in their home life, for example, or a social or cultural factor. This can also include those deep-seated issues such as

attachment or trauma-related difficulties.

Others, however, are situational or environmental – they are to do with the context or environment that the student finds themselves in and what's going on around them at the time. These are often the more immediate trigger. They are also the things that we can more easily control as teachers. Behaviour usually arises from a complex blend of both types of factor, but I want to focus, in particular, on the situational elements.

ABC charts

Behaviour occurs in a particular context, not in isolation. We cannot hope to improve children's wellbeing and engagement without thinking about the environment and conditions around them.

ABC charts are a useful way of approaching this, especially when looking at specific incidents of particularly challenging behaviour. They look at, first, the antecedents (the A) to a particular episode or example, then the behaviour or event itself (the B), and finally the consequences (the C) of that behaviour.

They encourage us to list problem behaviours and to look very closely at what went on before

and after the event. It is important to be clear, specific and non-judgemental. Ask, not just what happened, but also when, where, how, and with whom or what. What should the student have been doing instead of that? What was their physical, emotional or sensory state? Were there any evident causes or triggers? Is this a repeat of previous behaviour? If so, when/how often?

Then, what happened afterward? What helped to de-escalate the situation? How did the student recover? Were there points at which there was an increased danger of the behaviour recurring? If the student is sent home afterward, or to a different room or setting, what then?

The answers may help us on our way to the crucial questions – *why* did this happen and what might prevent it from happening again?

The table below offers a template for an ABC chart. The approach encourages discussion – discuss with colleagues, compare notes, and agree responses collaboratively, based on a shared and growing understanding of that child or young person.

It should also help to identify some important "do's" and "don'ts". ABC charts are a tool to help us understand a student, and from that understanding, it should become much easier to formulate effective strategies and interventions to support them.

Crucially, however, the ABC can also help us to better know ourselves – to scrutinise our own knowledge, assumptions, practice, procedures and teaching environment. This is where we

might use the ABC as a starting point and begin looking more widely at what's going on in school.

Environmental factors

Let's go back to those situational or environmental factors. In terms of the school context, the environment includes the physical surroundings (social environment, e.g. interactions with peers and adults) and instructional environment (teaching structure and delivery).

As stated, as educators, this multi-faceted environment is what we have the most control over.

Wolverhampton Educational Psychology Service (with which I work very closely) has developed a *Behaviour and Wellbeing Environmental Checklist*. This checklist focuses on several features of the school and environment which can significantly affect student behaviour and wellbeing, including:
- Classroom environment.
- Managing teaching and learning.
- Promoting wellbeing in class.
- Routines, expectations and consequences.
- Around school.
- Support for students.
- Whole-school systems and policies.
- Support for staff.
- Communication and joint working.

When the checklist is completed it should highlight those environmental factors which may need to be improved for the student or group in question. The professional completing the audit should then develop an action plan which responds to those key areas.

The more detailed, holistic and honest your assessment of the situation, the more it should help you to take the right steps. We

would call this an Environment Action Plan, and it should be implemented and reviewed after about one month.

The plan should break-down each of the areas above into several individual factors. For example, under classroom environment, Wolverhampton EPS's model looks at whether the classroom looks and feels like a good work environment; furniture and equipment; heat, ventilation and light; seating arrangements; noise levels; space and ease of movement.

Sounds basic, but if a child has experienced early abuse or other trauma, their physical position in relation to other people, for example, and to entrances and exits, can be fundamental. Loud noise can also be extremely difficult to handle for some children with additional needs, including those who have experienced trauma.

These factors can throw some children into "hyper-vigilance", a state when the brain is on high alert and focused purely on survival. On a more universal level, tests have shown that in some classrooms where ventilation is poor, the room can become too high in carbon dioxide which hampers the brain's ability to function and learn effectively.

Under promoting wellbeing, the assessment includes the following statements, among others:
- "I help teach students to understand their own emotions. I help students to communicate their feelings and seek help."
- "Students are taught/supported with self-management skills."
- "Staff can recognise signs of their own emotional need and are aware of how their emotions may affect their behaviours towards their students."

And under routines, expectations and consequences:
- "I have established a clear routine for students entering and exiting the room."
- "I have established effective clear routines for gaining quiet/silence, distributing and collecting materials, changing activities, clearing up."
- "Classroom expectations are discussed with and understood by the students."
- "Classroom expectations are positively framed, referred to and reinforced.
- "I explicitly teach the expectations and routines of positive behaviour."
- "Rewards are small and readily achievable."

If, after assessing all of these factors and implementing plans to address any issues or improvements that may be needed (and some might be very small, but important, adjustments), you continue to have concerns about a student, the next stage involves identifying individual targets and more targeted support.

This might include modified timetables, additional tuition, pastoral support and/or therapeutic intervention, alternative provision or a consultation by an educational psychologist or specialist teacher.

For more vulnerable students who are involved with social care or youth offending, there will be additional opportunities as well as requirements, and any strategies should be planned in a collaborative way between schools, social care/youth offending team, carers or parents where appropriate, and any other key partners.

It all starts, however, with deepening our understanding – of the student, of ourselves as educators, and of the environment in which we teach. **SecEd**

As easy as... A template for an ABC chart, which is designed to encourage discussion and agree responses to behaviour

Antecedents	Behaviour	Consequences
Time & date Room & class Teacher Temperature Noise level & type What happened shortly before? Any previous home/school communication or other relevant information?	Type of behaviour Duration & intensity Repeated? How many times? Multiple behaviours or one main issue?	What did staff/other students do? What happened then? How did you respond? How did the student respond? What stopped the behaviour? How were they for the rest of the day (if still in school)? Were there any restorative actions by the student, staff or others afterwards?

FURTHER INFORMATION

► *Pitonyak: All behavior is meaning-full: Supporting a person with difficult behaviors/supporting the people who care, Imagine, 2004:* **http://tinyurl.com/5pr4xahy**

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Quality first teaching for SEN

Teachers can make a huge difference for SEN children in their classrooms. Here are some practical tips that you can easily integrate into your day-to-day teaching practices

This article shares a range of effective and inclusive teaching strategies that not only support SEN learners but enrich the learning environment for every student.

I have focused on practical tips that you can easily integrate into your day-to-day teaching practices.

Direct instruction and visual supports

Direct instruction paired with visual supports helps clarify concepts, especially for SEN students. Using visuals (diagrams, symbols, charts) can make abstract ideas more tangible and easier to understand.
- Create laminated cards with key instructions and visuals for common classroom activities.
- Use symbols and colour-coding on whiteboards to highlight important points in lessons.
- For new concepts or tasks, perform step-by-step demonstrations. Break-down the process into clear, manageable parts with visual aids for each step.
- Incorporate graphic organisers to help students understand and organise information.
- Design classroom posters to summarise key concepts in a simple but visual way.

Adaptive lessons

Differentiated or adaptive lesson-planning ensures that all students can access learning at their level. This involves varying content, process, and product based on students' needs.
- Design tiered assignments that offer varying levels of challenge.
- Use flexible grouping to cater to different learning styles, abilities, and interests.
- Incorporate a range of sensory experiences into lessons (e.g. tactile activities).
- Plan alternative ways to access information, like audio recordings or interactive apps.
- Provide extension explorations for students keen to go deeper.

Dr Pooky Knightsmith

...is a passionate ambassador for mental health, wellbeing and PSHE. Her work is backed up both by a PhD in child and adolescent mental health and lived experience of PTSD, anorexia, self-harm, anxiety and depression. Visit www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/dr-pooky-knightsmith

Clear explanations and direct teaching

Clear explanations and direct teaching help students grasp concepts more effectively. Think about breaking down information into smaller, understandable parts.
- Use analogies and real-life examples to explain concepts.
- After introducing a new topic, conduct guided practice sessions to work through a few examples as a class.
- Check for understanding with quick, informal assessments.
- Use simple, concise language and avoid jargon.
- Provide written summaries of key points after each lesson.

Chunking lesson content

Break-down lesson content into smaller, more manageable parts. This is particularly helpful for students with attention or processing difficulties.
- Use short, focused mini-lessons instead of longer lectures.
- Provide step-by-step break-downs for assignments.
- Use visual aids to segment information.
- Implement frequent, short breaks during lessons.
- Summarise key points at the end of each chunk.

Assessment for learning

Assessment for learning involves continuous evaluation of students' understanding, allowing for adjustments in teaching. It is crucial to deliver feedback in ways that don't overwhelm students.
- Use low-stakes anonymous polling or digital quizzes.
- Provide one-to-one feedback sessions privately for anxious students.

areas in the class for students who need a calm space.
- Use flexible seating to accommodate different learning or sensory preferences.
- Clear pathways for easy movement around the room.
- Consider sensory-friendly lighting and decor. Use scent-free materials.

Growth mindset

Encourage students to see challenges as opportunities for growth, focusing on effort and learning rather than innate ability.
- Model growth mindset.
- Celebrate effort and progress, not just completion.
- Use reflective exercises where students identify their own learning improvements.
- Encourage a classroom culture of trying new things and learning from mistakes.
- Implement regular goal-setting and review sessions.

Communication methods

Recognise diverse communication needs. This includes alternatives for students who struggle with verbal communication.
- Allow students to use drawing or mind-mapping to express ideas. Enable written responses or presentations as well as verbal ones.
- Introduce communication technology for students who find verbal communication challenging.
- Offer varied presentation formats, like videos, posters, or digital presentations.

Final thoughts

Each small step you take towards incorporating these strategies into your practice can lead to significant positive changes in your students' educational journeys.

Start today by picking one or two ideas – observe the changes, reflect on the outcomes, and continue to adapt. **SecEd**

- Utilise self-assessment tools where students can reflect on their own learning.
- Offer written feedback that students can process in their own time.
- Use peer assessment techniques for collaborative evaluation and support.

Constructive feedback

Positive yet constructive feedback boosts confidence and motivation.
- Highlight specific positive aspects of a student's work before offering areas for improvement.
- Use a feedback sandwich – positive-constructive-positive.
- Set up a class recognition system where students' strengths are celebrated.
- Provide written feedback notes that students can refer back to.
- Use peer praise where students highlight positives in each other's work.

Building resilience

Fostering resilience and teaching self-management skills is crucial.
- Teach goal-setting and planning techniques.
- Implement daily checklists or planners for students to manage their tasks.
- Implement frequent, short breaks during lessons.
- Encourage reflective journaling to build self-awareness and coping strategies.
- Use role-playing scenarios to practise problem-solving and decision-making.

Accessible environment

An accessible classroom caters to diverse sensory and learning needs. This includes physical and sensory considerations.
- Create quiet zones/sensory

Identifying barriers to learning

What does a holistic assessment for learning barriers and SEN look like? There are five distinct aspects that must be properly investigated if we are to fully understand the issues

Informing parents that their child has SEN is one of the most profound messages that a school may have to communicate. School professionals should never lose sight of that or underestimate the impact.

Therefore schools need to ensure that they have come to the correct decision using the most robust and thorough assessment process.

The current SEND Code of Practice tells us that in "identifying a child as needing SEN support the teacher, working with the SENCO, should carry out a clear analysis of the pupil's needs".

Consideration should be made to progress, attainment, teacher assessments, peer and national comparative data, the views of parents and the student, and, if relevant, advice from external support services.

So at the point where a school is deciding whether a student has SEND, it must complete a "holistic" assessment of need, including learner strengths and deficits. This should enable schools to avoid the often-observed scenario where valuable resources and capacity are drained without fully understanding what the problem is.

Having established the need, what range of assessments should schools use to provide the holistic profile? My suggestion would be a range that covers five broad areas.

1, A history of need

We are looking to identify the earliest understanding of any barriers to learning. Avoid only using a "surface" assessment of attainment, progress, and teacher reports. Yes they are useful but the assessment requires a much deeper review involving parent and student consultation.

These can help identify a range of issues that may never be known to you. Familial history questionnaires, if structured correctly, can provide a wealth of information in deciding how to move forward.

2, Cognitive ability

Standardised assessments and classroom observations should be used to gain an understanding of academic skills and ability in areas such as reading, writing, processing speed, working memory, and problem-solving. Standardised tests are not without criticism, particularly their often abstract rather than real-world application, but they do provide an objective measure of ability within a large group.

3, Speech language and communication barriers

This consists of assessments focusing on understanding spoken language, using spoken language, and non-verbal communication skills, as well as observations of how a learner interacts with others, understands social cues, and uses appropriate communication.

By typically focusing on language skills in isolation, if a student appears verbally able we can often overlook how they interact, interpret social cues, and adapt communication non-verbally, thus missing crucial communication needs. This gap becomes critical at key stage transitions, where the complexity of language grows, leaving learners with hidden communication barriers exposed.

4, Sensory

Sensory profiling can often create

Conrad Bourne

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challenges for schools as there could be many underlying or co-existing difficulties. Any student that reports a visual challenge – as often those with a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia do – should be referred to an optician as the first action.

5, Wellbeing

Wellbeing measures can often uncover a range of hidden challenges for the learner that can include many considerations, such as emotional regulation and daily living skills like self-care, dressing, and personal hygiene.

Observations of how a learner interacts with others, follows rules, and manages challenging situations can provide key information to an assessment. By acknowledging and seeking to address all aspects of a learner's wellbeing, the assessment empowers them to understand their challenges and find strategies to cope.

Efficient assessment

Time and capacity remains one of the key workload issues that SENCOs face. Therefore, one of the challenges in the assessment process could be the time to undertake assessments.

However, undertaking a holistic assessment will provide a much closer identification of the primary barrier the learner has. This should lead to better planning in the assess, plan, do review cycle and classroom provision. Interventions should then have greater precision and free up capacity and resources that may have been soaked up on

> *This should enable schools to avoid the often-observed scenario where valuable resources and capacity are drained without fully understanding what the problem is* **99**

"trying things" without knowing the problem. The process may also uncover information that, with the right intervention, could resolve a learning barrier in a relatively short space of time.

All aspects of the cognitive, speech and language and wellbeing assessment process can be completed electronically. There are a broad range of cost-effective assessments that can be completed online and where groups of students can be assessed at any one time. Again, this improves staff capacity and produces instant reporting and learner profiles. A number of these cognition assessments can also be used to support evidence for the award of access arrangements.

In the Mercian Trust SEND teams use the following assessment tools in developing a profile of barriers to learning for a learner.
- Familial history (parent/learner) questionnaire (online or supported interview).
- Cognition: Lucid RECALL and Lucid Exact (access arrangements compliant).
- Reading: New Group Reading Test (NGRT) from GL Assessment and Access Reading Tests (ART) assessment (a number of options available online).
- Communication: SpeechLink Screener (Speech and Language Link).
- Wellbeing: Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale and Warwick-Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale.

Final thoughts

Sharing a learner's SEN is not simply conveying information; it's reshaping a family's understanding of their child's future. We must never underestimate the weight of this conversation.

We must remain unwavering in our commitment to thorough and robust assessment processes because every decision carries the potential to unlock a learner's development. **SecEd**

An inclusive curriculum: Three waves of support

Changes to the structure and delivery of teaching at Uppingham Community College are helping SEND students, including adaptive teaching and three waves of curriculum support

We know that high-quality adaptive teaching is crucial for all students in supporting them to achieve their full potential. Yet it can be argued that such effective teaching is even more crucial for our vulnerable learners with SEND.

For these students in particular the process of continually adjusting, adapting, and assessing within the classroom can yield the greatest benefits.

At Uppingham Community College in order to meet the needs of all our learners we have made significant changes to the way we structure and deliver our teaching, shaping our school community in the process.

An inclusive culture
We have strived to create an inclusive culture which supports high-quality adaptive teaching in every classroom. Over the past few years we have integrated an Enhanced Resource Provision (ERP) to support students with autism and complex needs, a small cohort of predominantly SEND students called Mainstream+, and a significant increase in the number of Education, Health, and Care Plans across our student population.

Our aim has always been to give our SEND students the best learning experience within a mainstream school setting, offering bespoke interventions as required, but with the intention of students attending as much mainstream curriculum as possible.

This has been supported by some modification to the curriculum with the introduction of several new vocational courses and wellbeing support offered through our inclusion hub. We have also trained more staff as SENCOs to manage the growing need, with a whole school SENCO and SENCOs who focus on the ERP or Mainstream+ students.

Subject provision for SEND learners also features as a criteria in our internal quality assurance, with learning walks and department self-evaluations considering the effectiveness of both curriculum planning and adaptive teaching.

Adaptive teaching
Adaptive teaching is essentially adapting your teaching to suit the needs of the learner, utilising a range of teaching methods. You anticipate barriers to learning and act accordingly. Standard 5 of the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2021) provides a helpful explanation of why adaptive teaching matters:

● Students are likely to learn at different rates and to require different levels and types of support from teachers to succeed.
● Seeking to understand students' differences, including their different levels of prior knowledge and potential barriers to learning, is an essential part of teaching.
● Adapting teaching in a responsive way, including by providing targeted support to students who are struggling, is likely to increase student success.

The ECF says teachers should provide opportunities for all learners to experience success by:
● Adapting lessons, while maintaining high expectations for all, so that all students have the opportunity to meet expectations.
● Balancing input of new content so that students master important concepts.
● Making effective use of teaching assistants.

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A useful summary of adaptive teaching strategies can be found via the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). It explores how techniques including anticipating barriers and planning to address them, using assessment effectively, and in-the-moment adaptations can all be utilised to support student progress in the classroom (see Eaton, 2022).

Implementation
At Uppingham we have built on these suggestions to make adaptive teaching work in our school context. Fundamentally, we had to first establish among staff a shared understanding of what adaptive teaching was and how it can be successfully implemented in different subject areas. This has involved considerable training. We have approached this in two ways.

First, we have implemented an Improving Teaching Programme which seeks to improve the pedagogy of all teachers through a focus on developing teaching techniques centred around modelling, checking for understanding, and retrieval practice. I have written about this approach previously in SecEd (Duffy, 2023).

Second, we have included into our CPD programme staff training specifically focused on the needs of SEND learners. All staff have received training from the Autism Education Trust.

Additionally, all teachers have attended training from our school educational psychologists who are working with us to develop a SEND teaching toolkit of strategies.

As part of our focus on adaptive teaching we have also trained staff on what high-quality teaching is. The EEF suggests that there are five specific approaches which have a positive impact for SEND students (Davies & Henderson, 2020):
1. Explicit instruction
2. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies
3. Scaffolding
4. Flexible grouping
5. Using technology

High-quality teaching encourages greater inclusion of students with SEND. At Uppingham Community College, it incorporates the features we recognise as excellent teaching practice, including:

> **We have raised awareness of what constitutes different waves of intervention for SEND students and what each teacher's responsibility is towards these students**

● Clearly designed lesson plans with accessible resources and use of visual cues where appropriate.
● Plenty of opportunities to involve and engage with students.
● Appropriate use of modelling, explaining, and questioning for students to engage with higher levels of critical thinking skills.
● Clear direct instructions and assistance throughout the lesson with specific feedback.
● Providing students with the chance to talk both individually and in groups.
● An expectation that students will accept responsibility for their own learning and work independently.
● Regularly using encouragement and (authentic) praise to engage and motivate students.
● Using assessment to evaluate learning and plan next steps.

Three waves of intervention
We have raised awareness of what constitutes different waves of intervention for SEND students and what each teacher's responsibility is towards these students.

Through training from our SEND team, staff are now better able to support the Wave 1 universal SEND offer which aims to keep students in the mainstream classroom as much as possible but with adaptations made to meet their needs. Staff are aware that any interventions put in place should be carefully selected, targeted, time limited and have a specific set of desired outcomes to support the learner as explained in the SEND Code of Practice.

Wave 2 is classed as targeted, additional interventions for students who are not quite meeting age-related expectations. Extra support can be provided during regular lesson time – it doesn't have to take place outside of whole-class teaching. This is where adapted activities and resources are particularly useful.

Wave 3 is for specialist, personalised interventions. It may require SEND specialists or teaching assistants to provide further support to help learners progress at the expected rate.

Curriculum changes
We have made curriculum changes to help implement the three waves of intervention model. Our Mainstream+ students receive a curriculum which largely reflects that of the rest of their year group and the timetable is flexibly designed so that they can join mainstream classes aligned to their ability.

However, they are in a small nurture form group of just 10 students to support pastoral care and help meet their needs. They also receive Wave 2 intervention direct instruction lessons in English (decoding and comprehension) and maths (functional). This is taught by a very experienced teaching team and it has seen significant impact and progress for the students.

For our ERP students we ensure they follow a mainstream curriculum with specific Wave 3 interventions only as required, e.g. small study groups in our ERP classroom with our specialist teacher, or meeting with one of our educational psychologists.

For our SEND students who are in the main school cohort we have introduced Wave 2 interventions in English and maths with smaller groups and the use of specialist teachers, for example for phonics.

When needed, we also offer Wave 3 support through bespoke curriculum packages for specific students aligned with their areas of strength and interest to support them in their post-16 plans.

Any specific student needs documented in EHCPs are translated into Individual Education Plans for every student on our SEND register. These plans are a summary of strategies for teachers to use in their classroom practice and helps to bridge the gap between everyday practice and the long and often complex EHCPs.

Using research from the *Making best use of teaching assistants* guidance report (Sharples et al, 2015) we have also moved to a model where all teaching assistants are based in subject areas, which has helped to integrate them more effectively. With increased subject awareness they are better able to support in the classroom.

All of these adaptations to our school culture, our curriculum and our pedagogy have ensured that meeting the needs of all our learners, and specifically our SEND students, is effectively achieved.

Final thoughts
An inclusive school culture takes time to establish and involves working with all stakeholders to raise awareness.

Train staff well in the required techniques and then expect to see evidence of adaptive teaching informed by students' IEPs in any learning walks or quality assurance. Consider where curriculum adaptations or Wave 2/3 interventions may be beneficial and plan for these.

Ultimately, be driven by high expectations for all learners. **SecEd**

FURTHER INFORMATION
► Davies & Henderson: Special educational needs in mainstream schools, EEF, 2020: http://tinyurl.com/4u8bkbte
► DfE: Early Career Framework, 2021: http://tinyurl.com/3ve8kw2a
► Duffy: Effective CPD: Improving pedagogical practice, SecEd, 2023: http://tinyurl.com/2sx4b5j4
► Eaton: Moving from 'differentiation' to 'adaptive teaching', EEF, 2022: http://tinyurl.com/mrdcf3mr
► Sharples, Webster & Blatchford: Making best us of Teaching Assistants, EEF, 2015: http://tinyurl.com/2syxaw65

Meet the Neuro Ambassadors

The Neuro Ambassadors programme at Southend High School for Boys is breaking down barriers, busting myths, and opening the workplace for neurodivergent students…

As educators, we aim to equip students to live happy, healthy lives, and contribute to society as well-rounded human beings.

However, just 3 in 10 autistic people are in work (Gomez & Sheikh, 2023). This suggests that we are not achieving our ambitions for all our students – and this needs to change.

If employers do not know how to make reasonable adjustments, this needs to be a focus within the curriculum offered to students. After all, all employers were students once.

In my experience, most people want to be as inclusive as possible but sometimes do not know what they do not know – and this can lead to the creation of unintentional societal barriers. To address this, I have devised a programme which focuses on students learning about neurodiversity, learning how to support their peers, and volunteering their time in environments that widen their experience of working with people who are neurodivergent.

Neurodivergent refers to individuals who have conditions including autism, ADHD, Tourette's, dyspraxia, dyslexia, and others.

By addressing this at school level, all students when they leave school will be equipped with an understanding, awareness, and acceptance of difference.

Often ignorance can lead to unkindness. With the model of all students learning about their communication differences in a safe, controlled way, students can ask questions and learn key life-skills. Although this is currently a pilot, funded by Southend City Council, it is my aspiration that all schools might have this programme as part of their curriculum.

The Neuro Ambassadors

Like the Duke of Edinburgh scheme (DoE) there are three awards – bronze, silver, and gold. After the pilot, year 7 will complete the Bronze, year 8 the silver, and year 9 the gold. For each award, there are three categories of tasks to complete: mentorship, learning, and work-related skills.

The learning tasks: These have been created with the intention of being completed during form time, PSHE lessons, or as an extra-curricular activity. We use online quizzes and explanatory videos and students can choose the medium in which they wish to demonstrate their understanding.

The mentorship tasks: These focus on the student learning how to coach another human being. This could be for any skill. Examples have included developing communication skills by encouraging their mentee to participate in card games, peer mentoring on subjects where the mentee could benefit from additional support, or indeed some of our neurodivergent students have just been themselves and taught their peers about neurodivergence from their perspective.

Work-related skills: These could be from work experience or, as we have done, a trip to a workplace where the students complete a

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"hands-on" set of activities, helping them develop their employability skills.

Part of the curriculum

With the programme being part of the curriculum, even if a student chooses not to complete the full award they still walk away with a basic understanding of neurodiversity and how they can support their peers.

Each of the tasks are designed to "pick up and go" to help protect teacher workload. Students who choose to complete the full award do so as a mostly self-guided extra-curricular activity and simply require a member of staff to oversee the completion of the mentorship and work-related activities.

Student impact

Our Neuro Ambassadors come and play board and card games with students who use our Autism Resource Base (ARB) provision and/or volunteer at local neurodivergent focused charities.

All students benefit. Our ambassadors are learning about neurodivergence and the importance of neurodiversity first-hand.

Some of our neurodivergent ambassadors have found themselves as role models for their peers. One in particular can feel very anxious when they want to verbalise their responses. But after participating, they now regularly play games and converse with their peers, sometimes teaching them the rules of new games they play.

Another student lacked confidence when they began on the programme but now attends clubs, even helping their peers to join in when they feel less confident.

Our students enrolled in the ARB are benefiting from socialising with the wider school community in an

The Neuro Ambassadors: Some of the team take time out from their work for a group photo. They are (back l-r) Ansh, William, Daniel, Lucy Wallace, Josh; (front l-r) Holly Rivers, Harry, Melissa Leggett, Caiden. The programme's logo, shown below, was created by Neuro Ambassador Archie Bailey

environment where they feel comfortable, as well as acting as mentors to our Neuro Ambassadors on neurodivergence and/or other areas of interest. We have found all students are mentoring and learning from each other.

Delivery

The learning tasks are being delivered to year 7 and 8 students as part of their form time curriculum. Within five years, I want to see all students who join our school being given an understanding of neurodiversity and the need to celebrate it, and to be equipped to show empathy and compassion to all people they work with in school.

Enabling all students to engage with the awards has been very important. It is essential for students to be able to choose how they demonstrate their understanding of a subject.

Practical, flexible approaches are needed. For example, when students are creating educational

> ❝ *With the programme being part of the curriculum, even if a student chooses not to complete the full award they still walk away with a basic understanding of neurodiversity* ❞

pieces on neurodivergent conditions, they can be presented as a video tutorial, quiz, game, essay, artwork, or music composition. By modelling to students that it is okay to show your understanding in different ways, we hope that these values will be carried by our students into the workplace. This programme focuses on celebrating a person's own personal best and accepting that everyone has something to contribute to society.

Lessons learned

The biggest obstacle to implementing the programme if your school does not have a work experience programme is finding workplace-related experience for the students.

As Neuro Ambassadors is in its early stages of deployment there is limited external knowledge as to the aims of the project. When I have approached employers, those

most willing to offer support already participate in supporting school careers, the government's Disability Confident employer scheme, and/or have family connections with neurodivergence.

For the Bronze award, the Department for Work and Pensions delivered a bespoke workshop on preparing for interview and managing anxiety.

For Bronze and Silver awards students have completed virtual work challenges from DigData – a company that connects students and schools with UK data industry professionals – to demonstrate a variety of rewarding data careers.

For Gold award we have organised a trip for each of the ambassadors to visit fit-out specialists Overbury to experience a series of hands-on activities showing them various jobs in construction.

I have found when approaching any organisation for the first time, leading with the research has been a powerful way to show how this programme is trying to "beat the statistics", while simultaneously helping our partners to meet their social responsibility aims.

Elsewhere, another important aspect is ensuring that from all perspectives all students feel they are contributing towards the learning, mentorship, and work-related tasks in their own, equally valuable way.

If we are to create an ethos of celebrating difference, it is essential that there is not one favoured neurotype in the delivery of the programme. Likewise, it must not be pitched as neurotypical students helping neurodivergent students or vice-versa. The crucial message is that we are helping each other to understand all of our differences.

When it comes to teacher workload, for this programme to be sustainable, I wanted to make sure it required minimal teacher input and could be run mostly as an extra-curricular club.

Along with having a booklet printed for the students to complete, it can be easier to manage using online homework software to enable students and staff to see the progress being made with minimal administration for checking completed tasks. By using technology to manage this, it also prevents issues around lost booklets.

Moreover, it is our intention to have a student leadership structure to help with the running of activities in future deployment, whereby students who have earned their Gold award can act as mentors to those completing their Bronze.

Therefore, students are gaining experience in leadership and mentoring on a first-hand basis, which can then support personal statements, CVs and DofE.

Next steps

I will be looking to deploy this to schools across the country and this is ambition is being supported by two UK autism charities. Should you be interested in finding out more about how your school can get involved, do get in touch. **SecEd**

FURTHER INFORMATION

▶ DigData: **https://digdata.online/**
▶ Gomez & Sheikh: Opening opportunities: Improving employment prospects for autistic people, Autistica, 2023: **http://tinyurl.com/36a3m3hf**
▶ Overbury: **www.overbury.com**