ASPEP
THE ASSOCIATION OF SCOTTISH PRINCIPAL EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

The Contribution of Educational Psychologists in Supporting School Attendance in Scottish Schools- A response on behalf of the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP)

Introduction

The Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP) welcomes the revised *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools* (Scottish Government, March 2026). The revised guidance provides an important opportunity to strengthen Scotland's approach to school attendance through early intervention, inclusive practice, positive relationships and coordinated support for children, young people and their families.

ASPEP considers that educational psychologists have a distinctive and valuable contribution to make to the implementation of this guidance. Their expertise in child development, learning, wellbeing, mental health, additional support needs, systems change and evidence-informed practice enables them to work across individual, family, school, community and local authority levels.

Educational psychologists can help education services move beyond understanding attendance primarily as an administrative measure or an individual responsibility, towards understanding it as an important indicator of children and young people's experiences of education, their sense of belonging, their wellbeing and their access to appropriate learning opportunities. This does not diminish the responsibilities of schools, education authorities, parents and other services. Rather, educational psychologists can strengthen the capacity of these partners to understand and address the complex, interacting factors that influence attendance.

ASPEP proposes that educational psychology should be recognised as a strategic and operational partner in delivering the revised national guidance, with a particular contribution across four interconnected areas.

1. Implementation of recent national attendance guidance

The contribution of educational psychologists

Educational psychologists can support education authorities and schools to translate the revised national guidance into coherent, locally responsive policies and practices. The guidance emphasises a whole-school approach, positive relationships, inclusion, early identification, effective use of data and staged intervention. Educational psychologists are well placed to support these developments through consultation, professional learning, research, evaluation and organisational development.

Their contribution should include:

- **Strategic planning and policy development:** Advising education authorities on the development and review of attendance policies, ensuring these reflect the principles of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), children's rights, equity, inclusion and additional support for learning.
- **Building professional understanding:** Supporting school leaders, teachers and support staff to understand the diverse reasons for absence and to distinguish between the presentation of non-attendance and the underlying factors contributing to it.
- **Developing inclusive school cultures:** Helping schools examine whether relationships, curriculum provision, learning environments, approaches to behaviour, bullying prevention and the availability of appropriate support promote pupils' safety, belonging and engagement.
- **Strengthening early intervention:** Supporting schools to develop graduated approaches that identify emerging patterns of absence and respond before difficulties become entrenched.
- **Developing staff confidence and capacity:** Providing professional learning in areas such as anxiety, emotional regulation, trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity, attachment, relational approaches and psychologically informed problem-solving.

Educational psychologists can also support schools to reflect on the potential unintended consequences of attendance initiatives. For example, approaches that rely heavily on sanctions, rewards or numerical targets may fail to address the reasons a child is struggling to attend and can increase feelings of shame, exclusion or disconnection. A psychologically informed approach recognises that attendance is influenced by the interaction between the child or young person, their family circumstances, the school environment and the wider social context. This requires schools to consider not only how to encourage attendance, but also what changes may be necessary to make attendance achievable, safe and meaningful.

Principal and senior educational psychologists can contribute to strategic attendance planning, supporting the alignment of educational psychology services with wider improvement priorities. They can help authorities identify systemic barriers, determine where specialist input is most needed and develop a consistent approach across schools without losing sight of local context. ASPEP recommends that educational psychology services are represented in local authority attendance improvement structures and that their contribution is reflected explicitly in attendance policies, improvement plans and arrangements for professional learning.

2. Identification and support of pupils with persistent absence

Understanding the reasons behind absence

The revised guidance recognises that long-term, persistent or complex absence requires a coordinated response, including comprehensive assessment with the team around the child. It identifies a range of potential contributing factors, including anxiety and mental health concerns, difficulties with learning, bullying, relationships, family adversity, poverty and experiences within the wider community.

Educational psychologists can add considerable value by helping schools develop a fuller understanding of these factors and their interaction.

In particular, educational psychologists can support schools to:

- Analyse attendance patterns alongside information about wellbeing, attainment, participation, relationships and additional support needs.
- Explore the experiences and perspectives of children and young people, including their feelings about school, relationships with adults and peers, and perceived barriers to attending.
- Understand the potential relationship between anxiety, emotional distress, neurodevelopmental differences, unmet learning needs and difficulties attending school.
- Identify environmental and organisational factors that may be contributing to absence, such as inaccessible learning, sensory demands, inflexible timetables, perceived threats to safety or a lack of belonging.
- Develop hypotheses about the factors maintaining absence and identify appropriate, proportionate interventions.
- Review progress and adapt support in response to evidence about what is helping.

Educational psychologists can use consultation and collaborative problem-solving approaches to help school staff move from asking, “How do we get this pupil back to school?” to asking, “What is making attendance difficult, what needs to change, and how can we work together to make participation possible?”

This distinction is important. Persistent absence should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of motivation, poor parenting or deliberate disengagement. Equally, recognising the complexity of absence should not delay appropriate action to establish the child’s safety, maintain contact and provide educational support.

Developing individualised and psychologically informed support

Educational psychologists can contribute to assessment and planning for pupils whose attendance difficulties persist despite initial interventions, particularly where there are complex or interacting needs.

This may include supporting the development of an individual attendance and engagement plan that:

- Identifies the pupil’s strengths, interests, protective factors and aspirations.
- Establishes the pupil’s own understanding of the difficulties and their preferred forms of support.
- Specifies changes to the learning environment, relationships, curriculum or support arrangements.
- Identifies a trusted adult and clear arrangements for communication with the family.
- Sets realistic, agreed steps towards increased participation, with regular review.

- Includes appropriate support for transitions, periods of absence and reintegration into learning.
- Identifies responsibilities across school staff and partner services.

For some pupils, flexible timetables, phased returns, alternative learning arrangements, access to quieter spaces or adjustments to particular aspects of the school day may be necessary. Educational psychologists can help schools consider these options carefully, ensuring that any temporary arrangements are purposeful, regularly reviewed and directed towards meaningful participation and appropriate educational opportunities.

It is important that flexibility does not become a substitute for addressing the barriers that prevent full participation. Nor should a return to full-time attendance be pursued without sufficient consideration of the child's needs, circumstances and readiness.

A preventative, rather than solely reactive, contribution

Educational psychologists can also support the identification of groups of pupils who may be at increased risk of persistent absence. These may include children and young people experiencing poverty, care experience, additional support needs, mental health difficulties, bullying, disrupted transitions or difficulties accessing an appropriate curriculum. Through work with schools, educational psychologists can help identify patterns across year groups, transitions and stages of education. This can support preventative approaches, including transition planning, targeted nurture and wellbeing provision, improvements to school connectedness and early support for pupils beginning to disengage. ASPEP recommends that educational psychology involvement is available through staged intervention processes, with timely access to consultation and more intensive collaborative assessment where absence is persistent, complex or associated with significant concerns about wellbeing.

3. The role of multi-agency working and family engagement

Strengthening the team around the child

Persistent absence frequently involves factors that extend beyond the remit of any single professional or service. Effective responses therefore depend on coordinated assessment, shared understanding and clear accountability across education, health, social work and other relevant services.

Educational psychologists can make a distinctive contribution by helping partners develop a shared formulation of the difficulties, drawing together different perspectives to understand how individual, relational, educational and contextual factors interact.

Their contribution may include:

- Facilitating collaborative meetings and structured problem-solving with the team around the child.
- Supporting clear, shared plans that identify agreed outcomes, actions, responsibilities and review arrangements.

- Helping partners understand the relationship between emotional wellbeing, learning, family circumstances and school experiences.
- Supporting the coordination of educational interventions with appropriate mental health, social work, health, youth work and third-sector support.
- Advising on transitions between services, educational stages and learning arrangements.
- Helping resolve differences in professional perspectives and maintain a shared focus on the child's needs and rights.

Educational psychologists can also help ensure that multi-agency working results in coordinated action rather than repeated assessments, disconnected plans or families having to navigate multiple services independently. This requires clarity about respective responsibilities, appropriate information sharing, timely decision-making and access to services capable of responding to the identified needs.

Meaningful engagement with children, young people and families

The revised guidance places considerable emphasis on listening to children and young people and working constructively with parents and carers. Educational psychologists can support schools to make this engagement meaningful, particularly where relationships have become strained following prolonged absence or repeated unsuccessful attempts to improve attendance. A psychologically informed approach recognises that families may be experiencing considerable stress, anxiety, financial hardship, health difficulties or other adversity. Parents may also feel blamed or judged when their child struggles to attend school. Children and young people may feel misunderstood, unsafe, overwhelmed or disconnected from learning. Educational psychologists can help schools develop approaches that are compassionate, curious and collaborative, without losing sight of the importance of regular educational participation.

This can include:

- Creating opportunities for children and young people to express their views in ways that reflect their age, communication preferences and additional support needs.
- Supporting professionals to listen to parents' experiences and understand the practical and emotional barriers facing the family.
- Helping schools rebuild trust where relationships have deteriorated.
- Supporting the identification of family strengths, existing support networks and potential sources of assistance.
- Advising on communication approaches that reduce blame and promote shared responsibility for finding solutions.
- Ensuring that the child's views remain central to assessment, planning and review.

Educational psychologists can also help services recognise the impact of poverty, disability, neurodivergence, discrimination and unequal access to resources on attendance. This is important to ensure that interventions are equitable and do not inadvertently penalise children or families for circumstances beyond their control.

Supporting a shared preventative approach

At a strategic level, educational psychologists can contribute to stronger relationships between schools, educational psychology services, health and social care partnerships, community services and third-sector organisations. They can help identify gaps in local provision, advise on appropriate referral and consultation pathways, and support the development of joint professional learning. ASPEP recommends that local authorities establish clear pathways for educational psychology involvement in complex attendance cases, alongside agreed arrangements for multi-agency assessment, family engagement, information sharing and review.

4. Sharing and evaluation of effective practice across local authorities and schools

Using evidence to improve practice

The revised guidance emphasises the importance of accurate attendance data, regular analysis and evaluation of approaches to improving attendance. Educational psychologists have relevant expertise in research, evaluation, applied psychology and improvement methodologies, which can support this work.

Their contribution should extend beyond monitoring whether attendance rates increase. It should include evaluating whether interventions address the underlying barriers to participation and improve pupils' experiences and outcomes.

Educational psychologists can support schools and authorities to:

- Establish clear baseline information and identify the pupils or groups targeted by interventions.
- Examine patterns of attendance alongside measures of wellbeing, inclusion, participation and educational progress.
- Evaluate the implementation, reach and impact of interventions.
- Gather qualitative feedback from pupils, families and practitioners.
- Identify which approaches are effective for which pupils and under what circumstances.
- Adapt or discontinue approaches that do not achieve their intended outcomes.
- Use findings to inform school improvement planning, authority-level strategy and future resource allocation.

A key contribution is the ability to combine quantitative data with qualitative evidence. Attendance figures can identify where concerns exist, but they cannot, on their own, explain why a pupil is absent or whether a particular intervention has improved their experience of education. For example, a phased return to school may initially result in a modest increase in attendance while also improving a pupil's sense of safety, relationships with staff and readiness to participate. These changes may be important indicators of progress, although they should be considered alongside longer-term attendance and learning outcomes.

Evaluation should also examine the unintended consequences of interventions, including whether particular groups of pupils experience greater barriers or whether approaches inadvertently increase stigma or exclusion.

Developing a culture of shared learning

Educational psychologists can facilitate the sharing of effective practice within and between local authorities, drawing on their links with schools, education services, professional networks and research evidence.

This could include:

- Establishing local authority or regional attendance learning networks involving educational psychologists, school leaders and other relevant professionals.
- Developing anonymised case studies that illustrate successful approaches to complex attendance difficulties.
- Sharing examples of effective consultation, family engagement, psychologically informed assessment and reintegration planning.
- Supporting collaborative action research and improvement projects across schools.
- Identifying common themes in persistent absence and translating findings into practical resources and professional learning.
- Contributing to national discussions about emerging challenges, service gaps and promising approaches.

ASPEP is well placed to support the exchange of learning between principal educational psychologists and to help identify opportunities for collaborative work across Scotland. This could support a more coherent national understanding of the contribution of educational psychology to attendance improvement while respecting differences in local contexts, resources and service models. There is also an opportunity to strengthen the links between educational psychology, Education Scotland, local authority improvement teams and national attendance initiatives, so that learning from individual cases and local improvement projects informs wider system development.

Measuring impact and sustaining effective practice

To ensure that this work is sustainable, educational psychology involvement should be evaluated in terms of its contribution to improved practice and outcomes. Potential indicators include:

- Earlier identification of emerging attendance difficulties.
- Increased staff confidence in understanding and responding to barriers to attendance.
- Improved quality and timeliness of individual support plans.
- Stronger coordination between schools, families and partner agencies.
- Improved pupil and family experiences of support.
- Increased participation in learning and, where appropriate, improved attendance over time.
- Reduced recurrence of persistent absence.

- Greater consistency in the implementation and evaluation of effective approaches across schools.

These measures should be proportionate, meaningful and interpreted in context. Educational psychologists should not be held solely responsible for attendance outcomes, which depend on a range of interacting factors, including school capacity, family circumstances and access to wider services.

Conclusion

ASPEP believes that educational psychologists can make a significant contribution to the successful implementation of the revised *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1* guidance.

Their added value lies in helping schools and education authorities understand attendance difficulties within a broader framework of learning, wellbeing, inclusion, relationships and children's rights. They can support earlier identification, strengthen professional confidence, facilitate coordinated multi-agency responses, promote meaningful engagement with families and contribute to the evaluation and dissemination of effective practice.

Importantly, educational psychologists can help ensure that efforts to improve attendance are not confined to responding to absence once it has become persistent. Their preventative and systems-level work can support the development of school environments in which children and young people feel safe, valued, included and able to participate in learning.

Improving attendance is a shared responsibility. Educational psychologists cannot address the full range of barriers to attendance independently, nor can improved attendance be achieved without appropriate resources, effective partnerships and a sustained commitment to inclusion. However, their distinctive contribution can help services move from monitoring absence towards understanding and addressing its causes.

ASPEP therefore recommends that educational psychology is explicitly recognised as a key professional partner in Scotland's national and local attendance improvement work, supporting a coordinated, evidence-informed and child-centred approach that enables all children and young people to access and benefit from education.

Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP)
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