Scottish Parliament Education and Gaelic Committee Inquiry into support for pupils with persistent absence – Connect's Written Submission

Connect thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment on support for pupils with persistent absence.

Connect was a member of the Scottish Government working group reviewing the school attendance guidance. During this period, we conducted an online survey to help inform the working group of views of parents and carers.

School Attendance: Hearing from Families about Supporting Children ran from 9 June to 8 July 2025, with 350 responses from 30 local authorities across Scotland.

Over half (60%) of parents reported their child attends school nearly all the time, and two thirds (67%) said they were satisfied with their child's attendance. However, a quarter (25%) of parents reported that their child had experienced long term absence from school.

The survey found that nearly half of the parents whose children experienced long term absence (47%) received no support during the absence and over half (52%) received no support on their child's return from long term absence.

These parents cited poor communication and support from school, lack of resources required to support absence and unsympathetic approaches from school staff as issues experienced during periods of absence for their child.

For those facing long term absences, issues impacting attendance were thought to be part of a wider systemic issue, and parents felt school staff required training and greater resources to support pupils before, during, and after absence.

Other Key Findings

Parents say positive relationships with staff (69%) and provision of desired subjects (67%) are key to encouraging attendance, as are friendships (65%) and feeling supported (61%) and safe (60%) in school.

43% said schools most commonly offer communication with parents to support with attendance, 38% said a named member of staff was allocated to children to talk to about their worries. Parents report better communication and trusted relationships with staff would be beneficial for their child's attendance.

Thoughts on attendance communication is mixed – communication is generally thought to be clear and understandable, while perception of tone varied, although the majority thought it was positive or neutral (39% very or quite supportive and understanding, 22% neutral).

Parents are broadly confident about how they would raise attendance concerns to their child's school (86%).

For those raising concerns, the actions taken were mixed – 60% felt listened to, but there were also many reports of no action being taken or that the actions taken were insufficient.

Sample of Parent Comments

‘My child had long periods of absences in nursery due to a family member being diagnosed with a terminal illness before passing away. The nursery is connected to the school and the staff were very supportive and understanding not to mention they helped her readjust to being back at nursery.’

‘I have felt that I have had to work hard to be credible and believed. I am still not certain I have succeeded. School does want to help and has limited understanding of autistic burnout which requires acceptance and patience along with minimal demands (from family and school). I think school has at times been slow to respond- accommodations too little too late- though I appreciate it can be difficult with high masking young people.’

‘We had a very supportive guidance teacher who did everything she could to help my child with attendance issues during Nat 5’s. Individual support from class teachers was variable and this could have been improved.’

‘My child was off school because of a concussion. She was off school for over 2 months. We did not get any support from the school or help. My child was not able to use any electronics to do school work at home. … My child found it very difficult when she eventually returned to school. Her teachers were not very supportive, or did not understand about her situation. I feel the school system failed with support for my child and with me as her parent. No resources were given to her or me when she was absent for so long.’

‘It is horrendous. School sending a group call absence text morning and afternoon only served to add stress and anxiety. We felt like we were failing every day. Our child was expected to return to school into the same conditions that caused her to burn out. No changes could be made to support her.’

‘It's awful. You feel like a failure. People don't understand unless they've been through it too. It affects everything, jobs, relationships, finances, everyone's mental health.’

‘Attendance policies do not account for effect lack of additional support has on mental health. Lack of course choices also affecting attendance as so few subjects in S5 and S6 combined with lack of support resulted in part time’

‘Attendance is important but I think that performance should be taken into account too. Quality over quantity. Young people should not made to feel like criminals for taking a few hours for dentist/doctors appointments or even a few days for illness.’

‘I feel one individual teacher is trying hard to help my child, but there were many missed opportunities before she became involved. My child is now attending school sporadically, despite the lack of support from anyone other than the one guidance teacher who has helped us. My child has missed large chunks of education yet I feel I have asked for help frequently for 3 years but only recently (in last 6 months) been offered any support.’

‘I believe that the communication from the school surrounding attendance is fairly negative and can be interpreted poorly as if parents aren’t making the effort for their children when quite often the children feel more supported and calmer at home. This isn’t always parental negligence but rather protecting the wellbeing of our children.’

‘Also it is a lonely and frightening experience for our young people and their families. It is a widespread issue but you don’t know this at the start of the journey until you find others eg through social media. Why the secrecy? It adds to the shame.’

‘Council’s decision to remove the secondary school bus has created yet another barrier to attendance for many families. This disproportionately affects those without alternative transport options and adds stress to both children and parents. Communication with parents around these changes, and more broadly has been some of the worst I’ve experienced. Families are often left in the dark, unsupported, and excluded from decisions that directly affect their children.’

‘There needs to be a far more robust action plan for children in the early stages of school refusal. The Ed Psych team says a plan exists (the 5 GIRFEC questions). Speaking to friends working in pupil support roles, this is NOT adequate. Surely it’s better to nip the problem in the bud by providing some scaffolding support straight away.’

‘ASN provisions in main stream are not adequate, they are failing these children and parents are punished for lack of attendance when schools more the goal posts on a daily weekly basis.’

Connect’s Calls for Change

Based on these survey findings, Connect made the following calls for change:

A compassionate, family-focused and support-based approach to absence policies: school staff should take an empathetic, non-judgemental approach to absence, prioritising individual experience to create a support plan from this.

Clear channels of communication between parents and carers and school staff, with designated points of contact for parents and children to raise any concerns and provide preventative support before absences occur. Building relationships and taking preventative action will help children and young people to attend school and will provide parents with reassurance of ongoing support should long-term absence occur.

Ongoing support during and after long-term absences from school. Children and their families need to be supported during their absence by school staff with external support, such as mental health professionals, if needed. Support and guidance during and after returning to school is imperative, to catch up on learning and to aid social integration during the transition back to school.

Parents and young people must be listened to when creating plans for returning to school after long-term absence, so their family experiences feed into an individualised plan of action and support, not a one size fits all implementation of school policy.

School staff must be trained on compassionate approaches to managing attendance concerns. Greater resourcing is essential to ensure staff can spend adequate time building supportive relationships with children in schools.

Other issues must be tackled including: the provision of school transport; an inclusive curriculum with subject choices that reflect the diversity of children and young people; comprehensive whole-school approaches to challenging bullying behaviour; and improved mental health support for young people. These factors can all contribute to school attendance - a holistic approach will ensure better outcomes for children and their families.

About Connect

Connect is a long-standing independent parents' organisation and the only Scottish charity which is dedicated to supporting parental engagement in education. We provide membership services to almost 2500 Parent Councils and PTAs, as well as offering advice and information to individual parents/carers about any aspect of the education of their child or the wider education system. Our evidence-based approaches reflect the recognised significant role of families in the learning of their children and young people, and in their expertise and knowledge of their own child.

Connect
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