Improving school attendance in Scotland: evidence briefing for the Education and Gaelic Committee

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) | October 2026

About the EEF, their work in Scotland and the evidence presented

The EEF is an independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. We **generate**, **synthesise** and **mobilise** evidence on what works to close the poverty related attainment gap**.**

We are beginning to undertake work in Scotland through our pilot project, Education Evidence Scotland, funded by the Robertson Trust until November 2028. Our aim is to increase the use of research by Scottish educators to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty.

Our evidence on attendance comes mainly from a 2022 rapid evidence assessment of 72 studies from the international evidence base (EEF, 2022), our resources on supporting school attendance for schools in England (EEF, 2026) and recent evaluations funded jointly with the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) in England and Wales (EEF and YEF, 2026). We have also supplemented this work with relevant Scottish policy and Education Scotland documentation.

Scottish context

In Scotland persistent absence is defined as: missing 10% or more of all possible school sessions (half-day openings) across the academic year (Scottish Government 2025a, 2026)

Official Scottish Government education statistics for the 2024/25 academic year reveal a modest recovery in primary and secondary school attendance compared to the immediate post-pandemic period, yet attendance remains below pre-pandemic benchmarks.

Attendance Indicator	**Pre-Pandemic Benchmark (2018/19)**	**2023/24 Academic Year**	**2024/25 Academic Year**
Overall Attendance Rate	93.0%	90.3%	91.0%
Persistent Absence Rate	21.8%	31.4%	28.5%

Scottish Government 2025a

While the overall attendance rate improved by 0.7 percentage points between 2023/24 (90.3%) and 2024/25 (91.0%), more than a quarter of all pupils in Scotland (28.5%) remain persistently absent, missing at least 10% of total half-day school sessions (equivalent to missing four full weeks of schooling per year).

Disadvantage and absence

Pupils living in Scotland's most deprived communities experience lower attendance and higher rates of persistent absence than their peers in the most affluent areas:

- **Overall Attendance Rate Gap**: Pupils in SIMD Quintile 1 (most deprived 20%) record an overall attendance rate of 87.6%, compared to 94.1% for pupils in SIMD Quintile 5 (least deprived 20%), generating a 6.5 percentage point gap. (Education Scotland 2026)
- **Persistent Absence Rate Gap:** Pupils in SIMD Quintile 1 exhibit a persistent absence rate that is 26.5 percentage points higher than pupils in SIMD Quintile 5. (Education Scotland, 2026)

Link between absence and attainment

School absence, whether in the form of missed school sessions or fixed and permanent exclusions, is associated with lower pupil attainment. Longitudinal evidence from the Scottish Study (Dräger, Klein & Sosu, 2022/2025) demonstrates that all forms of absence - including authorised sickness -have a negative association with academic attainment and Senior Phase qualification tariff scores.

On average, pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds tend to achieve lower attainment outcomes from their more affluent peers. In Scotland, there is a persistent poverty related attainment gap, starting in the early years and getting wider over time (Poverty Alliance, 2021). This table shows the latest available figures for the poverty-related attainment gap.

	Percentage gap between most and least deprived (using Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) data)	
Stage and subject	**2023/2024**	**2024/2025**
Primary school literacy	20.2	19.4
Primary school numeracy	17.4	16.6
Secondary school (end of S3) literacy	12.7	10.8
Secondary school (end of S3) numeracy	12.0	11.6

Scottish Government 2024; 2025b

There is evidence that absence can be a key driver of disadvantage attainment gaps (EPI, 2025), both due to a higher rate of absence amongst disadvantaged pupils and due to a higher penalty (i.e. the impact of that absence is greater) for a given rate of absence on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils**.** Further, evidence indicates that absence has a progressively larger role in contributing to the disadvantage attainment gap as pupils move through school (EEF, 2026).

Drivers of absence

School absences may be symptomatic of, driven by or otherwise linked to, other factors which may be consequential for attainment, as well as being important in and of themselves. These examples are **not exhaustive** and the evidence referenced does not necessarily make *causal* links between these factors and attendance. Many of these drivers are likely to be overlapping and the evidence is taken from predominantly English sources.

- **Hardship:** Some qualitative evidence links absence amongst disadvantaged pupils to the hardship they experience. CPAG (2025) found that, on average, disadvantaged pupils missed school due to not having something they needed to attend (e.g., uniform, money for transport) more often than their more affluent peers.
- **Mental health and wellbeing:** There is evidence that mental health and wellbeing (for example, life satisfaction) is a predictor of levels of absence (NFER, 2026). Other studies have found that mental health-related absence may be more frequent amongst disadvantaged pupils (CPAG, 2025).
- **Engagement [1]:** There is evidence that pupils' engagement at school is also linked to absence, particularly in English secondary schools (ImpactEd Group, 2025). Secondary pupils in the top 25% of engagement scores were 10 percentage points less likely to be persistently absent than those in the bottom 25%.

What works to support attendance

Our synthesis of the global evidence suggested the evidence was relatively weak but there were some areas of promise (EEF, 2022). We used this to create a resource for schools on **Supporting school attendance** (EEF, 2026). The resource is organised around six recommendations:

1. build a holistic understanding of pupils and families, and diagnose specific needs
2. build a culture of community and belonging for pupils
3. communicate effectively with families
4. improve universal provision for all pupils
5. deliver targeted interventions to supplement universal provision
6. monitor the impact of approaches

1.Build a holistic understanding of pupils and families, and diagnose specific needs

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to improving attendance. Knowing and understanding pupils, their families, the influences, and their specific challenges can help diagnose some of the underlying causes of absence and more clearly define the problem. Better identification is a helpful first step but does not improve attendance on its own: schools need a clear,

[1] Pupil engagement can be proxied by multiple, different measures (for example, this report uses enjoyment, perception of peer and peer-teacher relationships, perception of value of school)

evidence-informed response to identified needs reflecting the individual and contextual factors affecting pupil attendance (EEF, 2026).

2.Build a culture of community and belonging for pupils

Making sure pupils feel seen, understood, and safe is a crucial starting point for supporting attendance, especially for more vulnerable students who may have fewer protective factors than others. There is some evidence that targeted parental engagement, in which staff communicate with parents to understand the reasons for absence and plan support together, has a small positive effect. However, there were fewer studies to draw this conclusion from and so it warrants caution (EEF, 2023).

3.Communicate effectively with families

Well-designed communications with families can be effective for improving attendance and supports positive relationships through two-way communication. Our review (EEF, 2022) found that parental communication approaches, such as personalised letters or texts to the families of persistently absent pupils, had a very small positive effect. This finding is relatively secure, as most of the studies involved had large samples and a low risk of bias. The EEF recommends that schools communicate proactively with families, in ways that are personalised and positive (EEF and YEF, 2026).

4.Improve universal provision for all pupils

When pupils are in school, their experience should be inclusive, positive and supportive of their long-term academic attainment and personal development. It may be that an aspect of universal provision could be improved for all pupils, which might support the attendance of those with more barriers to learning (EEF, 2026). Areas to consider include explicit teaching of learning behaviours, academic and behaviour routines, social and emotional skills and metacognitive strategies (EEF, 2026).

5.Deliver targeted interventions to supplement universal provision

Targeted intervention may be needed for persistent or particularly challenging causes of pupil absence. Our 2022 review found some evidence of promise for responsive interventions, in which a member of staff or team uses several approaches tailored to the needs of individual pupils. This can include monitoring attendance, parental communications and motivation systems. The average effect was small and positive, and the quality of the studies means it should be treated with caution (EEF, 2022; EEF, 2023).

Some targeted approaches might include additional staffing. An evaluation of employing attendance and family liaison officers in English secondary schools found no meaningful average effect on persistent absence. Schools described these roles as most effective when they provided tailored, one-to-one support within a coordinated whole-school approach (EEF and YEF, 2026).

6.Monitor the impact of approaches

Monitoring the effectiveness of an approach will help understand whether it is being delivered with high quality and success, or whether (and how) it might need to be changed to improve processes and outcomes. Data collection processes need to fit with school routines and be sustainable for staff to use. Planning evaluation alongside rollout, potentially with comparable data across authorities, gives a better chance of learning what works. The EEF's guidance asks schools to monitor the impact of their approaches and adapt in response (EEF, 2026).

How the current position in Scotland aligns with the evidence:

The current non-statutory "Improving Attendance in Scottish Schools" guidance maps closely to the EEF recommendations. However, alignment does not by itself show the guidance will be effective for two main reasons:

- The evidence on what works to improve attendance is relatively thin.
- Implementation matters. We have not- and are not in a position to – evaluate the implementation of Scottish guidance. Our work in Scotland is so nascent that we are not in a position to comment on its implementation more anecdotally. Wider implementation research evidence suggests that that how an approach is delivered often matters as much as which approach is chosen (EEF, 2024).

The design of the guidance itself is worth further reflection, including the balance of prescription and specificity given the reasons for absence are complex and there is no one-size-fits-all model. Potentially national guidance is best placed to set out principles and expectations, leaving schools room to respond to their own context (EEF and YEF, 2026).

Further considerations

Multi-agency working. The Scottish guidance treats partnerships with health, social work and other services as essential (Scottish Government, 2026). The research evidence on which multi-agency models work is limited. The most effective targeted parental engagement approaches were multi-component, offering access to services such as counselling alongside school-family discussion, and one study involved social workers identifying and addressing barriers (EEF, 2023). **Sharing practice on attendance**. A potential risk is that examples of practice are shared without good evidence warrant i.e. the practices themselves do not have evidence of effectiveness and/or do not relate to wider evidence. Further a recent EEF study of internal provision (support for pupils in school but outside regular classroom space and/or mentoring, tutoring or health and wellbeing support) in England**,** found that schools' practice varied widely and overlapped. This suggests that in England at least a shared language for describing approaches has not yet been established (EEF and YEF, 2026). For practice sharing to be successful it requires a shared language (so there is consistent understanding of the practices) and it is important to show the process of implementation of the approach including exploration of the feasibility and fit for those practice in that school context to support

effective implementation (EEF, 2024). An example of this can be seen through this case study showing evidence-informed approaches to improving attendance using EEF and wider guidance (Education Evidence Scotland, 2026).

Generating evidence on scalable interventions that can support attendance. The evidence EEF reviewed contains some clear areas of promise, particularly around multi-component interventions that combine universal elements (such as effective parental communication) with targeted support for pupils with persistent absence. There is, however, a limited causal evidence base for these interventions in Scotland and limited scalable support for schools in Scottish education.

Primary research in England has shown that there are many programmes, training offers and approaches that do not translate to real-world impacts on attendance when measured against business as usual. For this reason, any approaches to improve attendance should be accompanied by rigorous evaluation that can identify and share areas of promise, iterate and improve approaches, and support schools to select appropriate and well-evidenced approaches to support their children.

Appendix A: Evidence Generation in England

Since 2021, the EEF has built evidence on attendance and exclusion in England through evidence synthesis, programme trials and school-level evaluations.

This has included the Attendance Interventions Rapid Evidence Assessment, the joint EEF–YEF *A Safe, Positive Place to Learn* funding round, and practical resources for schools. Across this work, findings point to the importance of understanding pupils' barriers, combining universal provision with tailored support, engaging families, and monitoring implementation and outcomes.

However, the evidence from England is mixed: several approaches were feasible and acceptable but did not produce clear improvements in attendance or exclusions, often because of small samples, variation in delivery or weak contrast with existing practice (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022; Education Endowment Foundation and Youth Endowment Fund, 2026).

For a fuller summary see: educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/research-agenda-themes-priority-areas/research-agenda-theme-attendance-and-exclusions

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