Official Report
Aithisg Oifigeil

DRAFT

# Education and Gaelic Committee

# Comataidh an Fhoghlaim agus na Gàidhlig

**Tuesday 3 November 2026**

**Session 7**

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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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**EDUCATION AND GAELIC COMMITTEE**
**7th Meeting 2026, Session 7**

**CONVENER**

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

*Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD)
*Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
*Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green)
*Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)

*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Dr Silvia Behrens (University of Glasgow)
Stuart Mathers (Education Endowment Foundation)
Barry Syme (Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists)
Helen Waggott (Scottish Guidance Association)

**LOCATION**

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

# Scottish Parliament

## Education and Gaelic Committee

*Tuesday 3 November 2026*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]*

## Support for Pupils with Persistent Absence

**The Convener (Karen Adam):** Good morning and welcome to the seventh meeting in 2026 of the Education and Gaelic Committee. As this will be Angela Ross's final meeting as a member of the committee, I thank her for her contribution and wish her well in her new role.

This morning, we have our first session on a short inquiry into support for pupils with persistent absence. I welcome Barry Syme, Glasgow educational psychology service, who is representing the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists; Stuart Mathers, head of evidence mobilisation, Education Endowment Foundation; Helen Waggott, president, Scottish Guidance Association; and Dr Silvia Behrens, research associate in urban studies and social policy, University of Glasgow. Thank you all for your written submissions to the committee. I will start the questions, then open them up to other members.

Persistent absence is not evenly distributed. Pupils with additional support needs are around 40 per cent more likely to be persistently absent, and almost half of secondary pupils now have an identified additional support need. Do we understand well enough which children—in particular, neurodivergent children—are persistently absent and why, and are schools equipped to respond to those different needs rather than treating persistent absence, in itself, as the problem?

**Barry Syme (Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists):** In Glasgow, we identify that about 62 per cent of our persistent non-attenders are probably neurodivergent, and there are high numbers of young people with significant anxiety. That is probably the main reason for the increase in non-attendance. Post-Covid, the challenges for young people of stress and anxiety have significantly exacerbated the issue. We need to look at the issue through a lens of how we support them with that anxiety and how we support resilience in overcoming the challenges. Work with families shows that they are really struggling. Over probably the past 10 years, we have adapted to move away from prosecuting or blaming families to trying to understand the challenges that they face.

**Helen Waggott (Scottish Guidance Association):** I agree with what has just been said. A lack of resilience, and anxiety over attendance, are an issue not only for the pupils but very much for the parents. It is about working with the parents as well to overcome their anxieties about their young people, and empowering parents to support their children and work confidently with schools.

**Dr Silvia Behrens (University of Glasgow):** You asked about who is more likely to be persistently absent. Our research has found a strong link between poverty and persistent absence. As Barry Syme has said, there is an exacerbation, especially in combination with mental health.

Another point to be made is that, at least from our research perspective, it is unclear where neurodiversity falls as an additional support need. I realise that it is increasingly being picked up by schools and psychologists, but how schools are reporting it is unclear.

**The Convener:** Do we have a good enough grasp of the national data on persistent absence among neurodivergent pupils, such as those who are autistic or have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder? If we do not, do you think that we should be collecting the data?

**Dr Behrens:** In my research, we work with Scottish Government data such as linked administrative data, which includes the personal records of schoolchildren. We have 23 additional support needs codes and autism is one of them, but there is no further specification on neurodiversity. I cannot speak about school-level data.

**The Convener:** What data do you think we should be collecting so that we are able to fully understand the issue?

**Dr Behrens:** I believe that there needs to be more granular data on neurodiversity. There is a category of other additional support needs that is growing across Scotland's pupil population. From a research perspective, it is often quite unclear who falls into those categories.

**The Convener:** Barry Syme, your submission noted the relationship between anxiety, emotional distress, neurodevelopmental differences, unmet learning needs, and difficulties attending school. Do you think that school staff have sufficient training to recognise when persistent absence might be linked to neurodivergence through anxiety or sensory needs, rather than simply disengagement?

**Barry Syme:** I think that schools are getting much better at that and there has been a significant change in teachers' views on persistent non-attendance. In Glasgow, we have started work on emotionally based school avoidance. Some of the work was done in Suffolk and we have developed guidance for all schools in Glasgow and those in the West Partnership on emotionally based school avoidance or non-attendance—EBSNA. It is a different way of looking at the problem of non-attendance, which allows us to help staff, and particularly school guidance staff, to support young people, as opposed to taking a hard-line approach. If a young person is terrified of going to school, their family may have to change their lifestyle.

We collected some data from a Glasgow reach project that showed that more than 50 per cent of families had to change their employment status when a child had persistent non-attendance, because they were concerned about what would happen if the child was in the household with no one around to support them. Persistent non-attendance has a much wider impact on society than simple non-engagement with school.

**The Convener:** Do you think that school staff, including teachers and guidance teachers, have enough training to identify those issues?

**Barry Syme:** It is improving and there are significant resources available. The National Autism Implementation Team's resources are excellent and there is an excellent autism toolkit. Schools are now having a separate discussion, and I think that we are getting much better at supporting or, rather, understanding the problem. However, the interventions should be slightly different. We need to take a multi-agency approach, particularly with third sector partners. We have good evidence to show that working with a family and taking a holistic approach has much better outcomes.

**Helen Waggott:** I agree that a vast number of training facilities or toolkits on neurodiversity are available, particularly for guidance staff and for schools in general. However, there is an issue with the inconsistency in the ability of guidance staff to access those resources, which is a concern for the Scottish Guidance Association. The tools are there and we are following the guidelines that have been published, but there is a lack of consistency with implementation. We take a pupil-by-pupil approach to support non-attendance and we need there to be a team around the child; the whole community needs to be around the child. Unfortunately, that varies between schools within authorities and across the country, which is a major issue for the SGA.

**The Convener:** An organisation that provides specific support for autistic children and young people aged 10 to 15 who are experiencing emotionally based school non-attendance has told us that it currently has a six-month waiting list. Does that accord with the demand that you are seeing in schools? Do you think that that shows an unmet need for more specialist support service for neurodivergent children?

**Helen Waggott:** Absolutely. We are dealing with a large number of young people who do not have a neurodiverse diagnosis because the waiting lists are so long; in addition, in some areas, the child and adolescent mental health services waiting lists have been closed to new referrals. We are having to work from our knowledge of conditions to support young people in school who do not even have a diagnosis yet.

I work with young people who have been on CAMHS waiting lists since primary school or who have a diagnosis and are on waiting lists for medication reviews. They are still not being supported by mental health services, so schools are having to step in to support families, but we are educators and not clinically trained—we can support, but we are not there to diagnose young people. Parents are asking us time and again—weekly if not more—for that information and for their children to be put forward for diagnosis.

**The Convener:** My next question is on the school environment. What if we flip it and do not see the child as a problem but see the problem as the environment that they are entering? If the barrier is the school environment—with things such as noise, sensory overload, transitions, bullying and inflexible timetables—should success always be measured by getting the child back through that door or should we be measuring whether a changed environment has made attendance difficult in the first place? I open that question up to all of you.

**Helen Waggott:** As I have said already, we take each pupil through an individual process, step by step. We work with young people who are accessing education but not in the school environment, which very much depends on the resources that are available in each of the schools—perhaps local libraries or community centres can be used instead.

Some local authorities have additional support needs schools and services available off-site from their main campuses, but not all, and not all areas—very few, in fact—have the staffing levels that are required to enable young people to have a range of different services. We would all, of course, want to provide that service for the young people, but the resources to enable us to do that are just not there.

**The Convener:** Would anyone like to come in on the school environment question?

**Barry Syme:** I agree that we have to change. I do not want this to become about neurodiversity, but many young people are in significant anxiety because of the environment, and we force them into that environment. I do not know how many people have been in a large secondary school recently, but I visit secondary schools: particularly at lunch time, a large central concourse with 1,000 pupils milling around is a difficult environment to be in—if you have sensory issues, that is the last thing you want.

We always have to think differently about outcomes when we are considering an intervention. In many cases, an intervention to get young people back into school will fail—if you are trying to run a project, your outcomes are really poor. You have to think about the longer-term outcome of getting the young person back into society. Getting some of the people we work with out of their bedroom is a major achievement. A young person can pick up their education at any point in their career, but the challenge is when that young person is living in their bedroom and not going into the community. It is not just about getting them back into school; it is about a positive outcome, such as getting them down to the sports centre or the local library. A lot of these young people are learning online; they are struggling not academically but socially—they cannot go outside their bedroom. Given the numbers, that is the biggest challenge that we have.

You mentioned the waiting list. The challenge for many projects is that they are immediately flooded because they are picking up from zero. We had one project that immediately had 300 people on the waiting list, when we could work with only about 200 people a year, so there must be a much longer-term plan.

09:15

**Stuart Mathers (Education Endowment Foundation):** As we said in our submission, our work in Scotland is much newer, so I can comment only on the global and wider evidence base. On that issue, it is useful to consider the breadth of the child population that we are thinking about and what the appropriate measure is. We can think about more challenging cases, but there is quite a big set of pupils involved. This is about how schools can create an environment that is more inclusive of more of those pupils, so that we have a school system—and a system in general—that can provide the right support for children.

There are some areas of promise in the evidence, one of which is about an environment that creates positive relationships. Some of those things are achieved through good consistent practice across all classrooms and all educators—practice that requires thoughtful professionalism but not exceptional skill sets or particularly niche knowledge. Getting those things right takes time, support and effort, which is different from having particular detailed knowledge. Some of those approaches are worth considering, because we are talking about a broad spectrum of children.

**The Convener:** Not having a school bell seems to be quite a controversial topic. I visited a school that does not have a bell, although I did not realise that that was the case until after the visit. When I was there, I was thinking that the school was very calm compared with other school environments and academies. The young people took personal responsibility for their timekeeping, and there was a much easier flow between classes. It was only afterwards that I asked why the school was like that and found out that it did not have a bell. I then realised that a bell had not sounded the whole time I had been there. I then noticed the rushing around and loud noises in other academies. That seems to be a simple measure that does not cost any money, and there is not a lot of time involved for training—it is just a case of adapting a bit. What do you think about those kinds of steps to create a more welcoming atmosphere for anxious and neurodivergent children?

**Helen Waggott:** I absolutely agree. The school that I work in has a bell, and I very much agree that it creates a noisy and chaotic atmosphere at certain points in the day. In our own classrooms, teachers are looking at ways to balance high-quality learning and teaching with active learning practices, while also trying to ensure inclusive education for all young people. As you said, convener, some simple measures can be put in place, and I think that teachers are doing their best to do that. When it comes to the wider school environment, within their own budgets, individual schools are looking at various aspects, including even the colour of the walls in the corridors and the type of flooring in corridors and classrooms in order to support young people.

**Stuart Mathers:** That is a good example of surface-level matters—such as having or not having a bell or having green walls versus blue walls—being quite seductive, and it is an area where case studies and examples become quite dangerous. Those aspects are the things that you can see, but what is going on behind those measures is a strategic approach to planning effective transitions in classrooms, which different schools will be able to achieve in different ways. What you actually want is for schools to think hard about how to create a calm, supportive environment with explicit teaching of what we would describe as learning behaviours for

children, so that they can do things such as manage their own time, understand how to leave and enter classrooms and establish being ready to learn. For some schools, that might mean adapting a bell; for others it might be about the physical environment and changes to layout. The more important thing is that the school is taking deliberate steps to think about how it achieves that and supports its staff to do that. It is important to consider the issue in the round.

**The Convener:** I will not take away from the fact that, in the school I mentioned, it was not just about removing the bell. Staff in the school did a lot of work to help create a calm environment.

**Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** I have only one question. I want to go back to the points that you all talked about in relation to consistency, so that every school and local authority knows what it is dealing with and knows that it is dealing with the same challenges. I wondered about consistency in the recording of data and in the threshold for intervention.

Barry, you talked about a particular initiative in Glasgow, how that was rolled out and the impact that it had. What are the barriers to local authorities sharing good practice when they find something that works? Obviously, one thing will not work for every child. However, if something is working, I am sure that other people and authorities would like to look at it. If we want to make inroads and have the same definitions and consistency, it is about inter-local authority learning and sharing. Does that exist? If not, how can we do that?

**Barry Syme:** We certainly meet regularly in the West Partnership, which relates to Glasgow and the surrounding local authorities. There is an attendance working group that shares good practice. We also link up with health colleagues in relation to mental health to look at what exactly is working.

One of the challenges is when you set a stretch aim or a percentage increase; for us, that is a problem. For example, if you are a school that is at 87.5 per cent and you need to go up by 2 per cent to 89 per cent, and then you do not achieve that, it is disheartening for schools. That is what we hear back from headteachers who are trying to implement interventions in their schools. We have to be much more focused on targeting specific populations. We have to use the data to identify where the problems lie, such as in particular year groups, and then focus on that and look at the success there.

It is almost as if you are fighting against the current at times. It is not static, so you cannot suddenly say, “This year we’re at 87 per cent—next year we want to be at 88 per cent,” because there are further challenges. We saw that two weeks ago in relation to the bomb scares that impacted on a number of local authorities. It was one day, certainly in Glasgow, but it took us three days to start to see an improvement, because families were so concerned about what was happening. Little things like that can have a huge impact on your data. That is why, when we talk with schools, we say that they need to focus on and target specific aspects of their data, look at their successes in relation to those, and then share that.

**Dr Behrens:** Our research indicates that less than 4 per cent of the variation in any sort of absence patterns lies between schools and local authorities. Basically, in practice terms, that means that the circumstances of the pupils are very much key. Therefore, although schools can do a lot to improve their inclusive environment, we must still consider structural factors such as family, pupil health, child health, poverty and care experience.

From a research point of view, the measure of persistent absence is very useful and helpful, but it is also very limited, because we have simply this 10 per cent threshold. However, we see from research that children are heterogeneous and diverse in how they respond. There are groups of children that do very well, even if their attendance is not excellent, but those are children who live in higher-income households and have less disadvantageous circumstances.

Although we should of course focus on the school environment, it is therefore important that we also have a more holistic view of the child and the family, rather than focusing only on that.

**Helen Waggott:** I will come in on consistency and barriers to that.

A lot of our members come back to us and we have regular discussions. In the SGA, our committee is made up of members from various local authorities, and we often have discussions about things as simple as differing paperwork used by the team around the child. For example, child’s plans that are produced by education are different from the child’s plans that are produced by social work, and child’s plans that are produced in one local authority are different from those in the neighbouring local authority.

Dr Behrens mentioned how we log and keep track of neurodiversities or mental health conditions. In the SEEMiS recording system, there are multiple ways of recording mental health concerns, and those are being recorded differently in areas that do not use the SEEMiS system. In trying to track attendance and to be consistent, those are basics for us as guidance teachers. The documentation asks for consistency in schools and says that guidance teachers know the pupils

best and that we are the face-to-face contact with pupils and parents. However, the situation is increasingly difficult when what I do in my school is different from what is done in the school 5 miles down the road, which is different from what is done in a school in another authority.

We consistently see pupils moving between schools. Sadly, because of school avoidance, parents often think, "I'll try a different school." When people are close to borders with other local authorities, pupils are moving within authorities but also across boundaries. That creates issues with consistency because, as I say, there are differences even in something as basic as paperwork.

**Patricia Gibson:** So would it be helpful to have a national system?

**Helen Waggott:** Absolutely.

**Patricia Gibson:** That would be one thing that would mean less focus on bureaucracy and more focus on the child.

**Helen Waggott:** Yes. It would allow every person to work from the same basic structure. As I say, the child's plans are massively different in education and in social work. Education child's plans are incredibly weighty documents, and it can take several hours to produce just one of them when, actually, we want to be supporting the pupils. We are absolutely looking for consistent paperwork and consistent training across the country for guidance staff to be able to use that with our partners.

**Stuart Mathers:** I want to go back to the original question, which was about the barriers to sharing examples of practice between local authorities. In general, sharing practice is hard. It is often seen as straightforward and being about people thinking, "Oh, that has worked—we should share it." However, our experience, and the wider evidence, is that it is important to carry out good evaluation to know whether something has worked, because the people who have a vested interest in something always feel quite positive about it. With most of the evaluations that we have commissioned, people are very positive, even if something had no impact on their pupils. That rigour is important.

You also need to ensure that what was involved in the practice is clear. Usually, that is about the underlying processes, so it is about how the context was understood, how the implementation support was designed around that, and then how that was enacted. That is the bit that is helpful for another local authority or school to learn from. It is easy to think, "I just want to copy what they did." However, you cannot quite do that, because you will have a different pupil population and staffing situation. Therefore, it is more about the processes and things that are going on beneath that.

It is easy for me to say that, but it is hard to systematise that approach. A set of skills and system structures is required so that local authorities have support to do that evaluation well, and a system is needed to capture and translate things in a way that is straightforward for other people to learn from.

**Dr Behrens:** I have a brief comment on structures. There are the regional improvement collaboratives, which are the most structural form. I cannot evaluate how well they work, but there are also associations such as the SGA. I am aware that Education Scotland is running a test of change workshop series, which I believe is taking place next week.

Ms Waggott raised a point about the child's plans. We have forthcoming research on variation in child's plans, individual educational programmes and statutory co-ordinated support plans. There seems to be quite a lot of variation between local authorities and schools, even when we account for the differences. Obviously, the pupil population differs from one place to another. Additional support needs should be considered, along the lines of consistency and national strategy.

09:30

**Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD):** It came across in the evidence that those who are missing 20 per cent of their education are from the most deprived backgrounds or disadvantaged areas. Whose job is it to get persistent non-attenders to school?

**Helen Waggott:** That is the big question, is it not? We find in schools, and this is coming from—

**Duncan Dunlop:** I am sorry to interrupt, but you can say whose job you think that it should be.

**Helen Waggott:** It is the job of the entire community. We need to come together.

**Duncan Dunlop:** That does not work, does it? When it is everyone's responsibility, nobody takes responsibility. Whose job should it be to get them to school?

**Helen Waggott:** I cannot answer that question, because we find that it is left entirely to the schools to get the young people into school, but that is not possible. We cannot go out to parents' houses and get children to come into school. We need schools, parents and other local services to collaborate. There is not one body that is responsible for that. There is no way that we can get around the issue without working as a team.

Unfortunately, education is the only service that is not allowed to step away from the child. If there is non-engagement, social work and other third sector services can step back, say, "The young person is not engaging with our service," and close their cases. Education is the only service that is left. We do not have all the answers. We certainly do not have the time or the resources to provide the answers.

**Barry Syme:** I have to agree with Helen Waggott. It would be simple to specify one person or another, but education is a universal service, so the issue ends up at that door. When you talk to headteachers, it is clear that they are so committed to getting the young person into their school, and they understand the role of the family and the community.

The broader issue is that it has very much become compartmentalised as an education problem. You can blame the parents, but, as I said before, you need to understand the parents' perspective. The longer-term issue is that, if we do not get it right in education, we just create a problem for adult services. A young person who drops off the education radar at the end of first or second year will not do anything until they are 16 and can leave school. The mental health issues that build up for them will hit adult mental health services down the line.

That issue is significant, yet we do not have those discussions. We have education and we have adult services, but we need to work a lot harder in communities to address the problem. We can do it and know what works: it comes down to engaging with families, providing support and working with the young person in a non-statutory way.

**Duncan Dunlop:** Can you give us an example of where it does work?

**Barry Syme:** In some of the work that we have seen across Scotland, third sector partners work with the young person almost daily. They go into the household regularly, try to get them out of their bedroom and do not take no for an answer. They work in a person-centred way with the young person and ask, "What do you want out of this? Are you going to go back to school?" The young person says, "No, I can't go back to school," so they say, "What are we going to try to achieve to get you back into the community?"

It might be that, if you can get them to attend the community centre for a time and they start to re-engage with society, you can then pass them on to somebody else, but that takes a lot of hard work from partners. Third sector organisations are some of the best partners because they have a totally different agenda. They work with the families in a very non-threatening way, whereas when social work services come in, particularly following a referral to the children's reporter, there is a perceived threat. When you work with families, they sometimes say that they are really worried about social work coming in and taking their child away—that does not happen, but it is the perception—which is why using third sector partners is very effective.

**Duncan Dunlop:** Is it not also the case that the approach must be relationship centred as well as person centred? The young person does not see the labels that we might wear professionally; they see the person that they trust, whether it is Barry, Helen or Silvia. They see that individual and go, "I like them and therefore respond to them," because there is continuity. Are there struggles when somebody different keeps turning up?

**Barry Syme:** It is basically the one good adult concept. Schools are, in many cases, that one good adult, but when your attendance at school is below 60 per cent, something else has to be done. That is where those organisations can be really helpful.

**Duncan Dunlop:** Is there any school in one of the more disadvantaged areas that you could point to and say, "They've got it right"? Is there a school that has managed to get the resources, whether it be from social work or elsewhere, and to manipulate them in whichever way to get this right?

**Barry Syme:** I could not name one particular school, but I could probably identify many schools across Scotland. I can certainly think of many schools in Glasgow, particularly those using the children and young people's improvement collaborative—the CYPIC programme—which Education Scotland promotes and which is a superb way of working with schools. Perhaps 15 or 16 schools in Glasgow have gone through that programme, which gives school staff dedicated time to come out, work with Education Scotland colleagues on data and analyse the problems in the school and what can actually be done about them.

There is lots of good work out there, but again it all comes down to sustainability of funding, which is the biggest challenge that we face. I come back to my point that this is a broader issue; it is not just an education or children's services issue, and we have to take a much broader view in the longer term.

**Duncan Dunlop:** Dr Behrens, I noted the comment in your submission about the overrepresentation of care-experienced people with regard to persistent absence, but that seems to run counter to the fact that most of the resources and attention are being focused on care-experienced people in terms of what we are

spending on them as a population—at least notionally, anyway. Has there been no change in this situation since the Promise has been in place?

**Dr Behrens:** We did not find an increased probability of pupils who are care experienced being more persistently absent. What we meant was that, basically, they have a roughly similar probability—say, a one-in-four or one-in-three chance—of being persistently absent, but they have very specific absence patterns, and children who are care experienced are more likely to be absent for unauthorised reasons.

From our data—I work with large data sets—we cannot infer any reasons for that. We might hypothesise that it might be due to unstable care arrangements—perhaps they have moved care families several times—but I have to say that we have seen no strong indication of things improving over time. As far as the Promise is concerned, I do not see any very hopeful positive change, but I am not seeing much significant negative change, either. I would say that, overall, this particular group of pupils should certainly be on the radar of any policy changes.

**Duncan Dunlop:** Mr Syme, has there been a decrease in the number of educational psychologists? That is what the speech and language therapists whom I met last week were very much saying, and they also alluded to the fact that psychologists were taking on much bigger case loads than they used to.

**Barry Syme:** The numbers are pretty static at the minute. We had quite a drop between 2010 and 2015 when the funding for the course was removed, but since its reinstatement in 2017, there has been a consistent supply of educational psychologists in Scotland. The numbers are comparable to what they were around 2009. Of course, we could always do with more psychologists, but at the minute supply is meeting demand.

**Duncan Dunlop:** Moving on to guidance staff, what is the equivalent role in primary school?

**Helen Waggott:** I honestly could not answer that question, because I do not work with any primary staff, but I guess that it would be a principal teacher.

**Duncan Dunlop:** What is the secondary school equivalent of pupil support assistants, whom we see more of in primary schools?

**Helen Waggott:** Pupil support assistants?

**Duncan Dunlop:** Yes.

**Helen Waggott:** There are secondary school assistants, too.

**Duncan Dunlop:** So there is an equivalent.

**Helen Waggott:** Yes.

**Duncan Dunlop:** But you do not know the equivalent for guidance staff in the primary school environment. I guess—

**Helen Waggott:** I am sorry to interrupt, but guidance staff are principal teachers.

**Duncan Dunlop:** I understand that.

**Helen Waggott:** And classroom assistants are—

**Duncan Dunlop:** Not teachers.

**Helen Waggott:** Not teachers, no.

**Duncan Dunlop:** I understand the roles—what I am trying to look at is the additional people in the school environment. One issue that has come up is what I think is called internal truancy, which I assume refers to people wandering the corridors and not attending class. Those children might be at school, but we are not enabling them to exist there, and I am trying to work out whose role it is in the school to ensure that they do attend class.

**Helen Waggott:** Internal truancy is a significant issue in secondary schools. We even have parents dropping pupils at the front door, bringing them into the school building and handing them over to school staff—we have to put people in those roles—and then pupils leaving classrooms very quickly and frequently. Internal truancy disturbs learning and teaching in schools.

On the staff in secondary schools who are working with these young people, we have the guidance staff, as you mention. The support assistants—this varies vastly across schools, let alone across local authorities—are largely used to support pupils with additional support needs. They are either attached to a specific class, a pupil or a small group of pupils with additional support needs, and sometimes they are very complex support needs, such as toileting or feeding young people in the school. In general, they are not used for internal truant search.

We have the commitment for school counsellors in schools. You asked about educational psychologists, and there has been some movement on that. Having a school counsellor is very much a bonus, but waiting lists for them and for our school health nurse services are very high. For instance, if a pupil came for a referral to a school health nurse, they could be waiting for four or five months. School counsellors are a slightly different service, but having them in the school is an absolutely superb bonus. In schools where those are available, they are working very well with young people.

You mentioned support assistants, but some schools are looking at using principal teachers

and, quite regularly, leadership teams to patrol corridors in schools and count pupils in and out of toilets, because they would rather be hiding in there than accessing the classrooms. That goes right back to the start when we mentioned having school environments that are appropriate for all young people. They are not, because pupils are choosing to hide in the toilets.

**Duncan Dunlop:** My final question links to an issue that we have not mentioned and which did not come up much in the evidence. Do you see any correlation between smartphones or screen time increase and anxiety at home, at school or in the social network?

**Helen Waggott:** As you know, various interventions are happening across the country with regard to the use of mobile phone devices in schools, but the situation does vary. As for what we, and our members, feel about mobile phones, I am sure that everyone will be aware of this, too, but when I was at school, any bullying or antisocial behaviour with regard to relationships happened at school. Then you got on the bus and went home, and you could close the door to it. Now, that sort of behaviour continues through the day and night.

I regularly speak to parents about their children's access to mobile phones and devices, and their question is this: how do I remove them? Our advice is to take the phone away from them at a certain time of night and allow them to have a good night's sleep. It is all about going back to basics—do not allow them to have devices in their bedrooms. There are parents who allow their children to be on their phones or playing computer games until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, because they do not feel that they have the power to take those devices away from them.

Mobile phones and apps such as Snapchat are vital to young people. Removing them might be a massive issue for schools and parents, but for young people, this is their life. Unfortunately, every single day—and I mean every single day—we get phone calls from parents; we have the police involved in situations in which threats have been made; we have groups targeting young people; and we have young people not feeling safe to come into school, because of threats, gossip or the sharing of images online. I agree that it is a big problem.

09:45

**Duncan Dunlop:** Stuart, do you have thoughts on this?

**Stuart Mathers:** Will you remind me of the question? I think that Helen's answer went quite a long way—

**Helen Waggott:** Sorry.

**Stuart Mathers:** No, no—it is fine.

**Duncan Dunlop:** It was about the impact of screen time and how the proliferation of smartphones over the past decade has impacted on children's anxiety, and not just in schools.

**Stuart Mathers:** There is a growing evidence base with regard to screen time, mobile phone use and the potential link to increased anxiety, mental health conditions and impacts on learning. I do not have much more to say than that. The issue is of increasing interest to people around the world, to be honest. I do not know whether you saw it, but a lot of the commentary on the programme for international student assessment results was about the impact of mobile phones and the interaction with artificial intelligence. As an organisation, we are keen to learn more about that, but the evidence base is developing.

**The Convener:** Patricia Gibson has a brief supplementary question. We will then move on to questions from Katherine Sangster.

**Patricia Gibson:** In previous answers, you have said quite a lot about the reasons for children not going to school, which are complex. It can be about additional support needs not being met or about anxiety, mental health, caring responsibilities, bullying or the smartphones that Duncan Dunlop asked about. What is your assessment of how child protection issues overlap with non-attendance at school? How is that measured? What is the threshold for a bell going off in your head that a serious child protection issue might exist? How would you know that?

**Helen Waggott:** I can speak only anecdotally to that. School attendance levels alone do not trigger a referral to social work or the involvement of social work, as they did previously; there has to be an additional child protection concern for a referral to social work to be made, and it is even more difficult for the referral to be taken as far as the children's reporter. Especially if there is a mental health element or any CAMHS involvement, it is very difficult to engage the children's reporter.

**Patricia Gibson:** If I understand you correctly, it is difficult for child protection challenges to be picked up and dealt with, and a child not being at school will not, on its own, create a need to pick up those challenges.

**Helen Waggott:** Sorry—I misunderstood you. Are you referring to a situation in which a child is not attending school and there could be ongoing child protection cases within the household?

**Patricia Gibson:** Yes.

**Helen Waggott:** Nobody has eyes on those children. If there is concern about child protection cases and the child is coming into school, we might

pick up on that in a one-to-one relationship. If the child is not coming into school, we will not see them to be able to pick up on child protection concerns.

**Patricia Gibson:** So it is not just an education and social work issue—it is actually a safety issue.

**Helen Waggott:** I think so. In some cases, it could be a safety issue. Our concern is about the crossover in child protection where neglective parents are unable or unwilling to engage with services to get their children into school. It is difficult, because we want to form those relationships and work as a team around the child. We want to work in partnership with the parents, but sometimes there is an absolute step-back from those parents and families who will not engage at all. That raises concerns as to whether there is, perhaps, a child protection concern.

**Patricia Gibson:** That might be not just about the child missing school, but about abuse of some kind, or wider neglect.

**Helen Waggott:** Potentially, in some cases.

**Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab):** I have a couple of follow-up questions, the first of which is for Ms Waggott.

In your first answer, you highlighted not just the reasons for pupils not going to school but the reasons for parents not being able to get them to school. Can you expand a bit more on that? Is there any data on that? After all, there is a big difference between a parent who is struggling to get their child to school, because they have work and it is all a bit overwhelming, and a parent who did not attend school themselves.

**Helen Waggott:** I thoroughly agree. As we have said, the reasons for not seeing children in school are complex. A lot of parents are exhausted and have run out of options. We have been talking in particular about post-Covid times, and the fact is that there are young people now in secondary school who were being home educated during lockdown. In some cases, parents have not been able to take young people out of those lockdown situations and get them back into school, and we are looking at that in relation to mental health and anxiety issues. We do have parents who try their absolute hardest and engage fully with the school in assisting their children to get back there, but there are also parents who are trying just to get their children out of bed in the morning and who say to us, “What can we do? We can’t physically lay our hands on our children and drag them into school.”

Earlier, Barry Syme mentioned that some parents are having to significantly change their working patterns; indeed, some have had to leave their jobs entirely, because they have to be at home to look after children who are not coming into school. In some cases, schools are teaching 30 pupils in a classroom while providing work for other young people to do at home. However, if the parents are out of the home and at their job, they will not be able to ensure that the work is getting done and that the pupils are engaging.

We have some young people who are absolutely superb. For example, I have a young person in my case load who did not set foot in school from secondary 2 to 6 but managed to come out with As in all of their highers from learning at home with the work that we had provided. However, that sort of thing needs engagement from the parents, as well as absolute dedication from the young people, and such cases are few and far between.

Parents are at a loss as to what more they can do, and we very much need to look at how we support them. There are soft starts and breakfast clubs for pupils, but I have heard of schools that are providing the same welcoming environment to parents who had similar issues when they were at school, perhaps because they had behavioural issues or because they did not engage well in school.

Parents might also be receiving constant messages from the school, because, in a lot of schools, attendance is notified to parents on a period-by-period basis; indeed, some have asked us to remove them from our Groupcall text messages to home, because they are fed up with their phones beeping all day long. They are exhausted, and some are at a loss. We need to look more at how we support those parents, particularly those who are themselves suffering from a lack of resilience and from anxiety, because that anxiety and that lack of resilience are being built into the young people, too.

**Katherine Sangster:** You have just touched on the pinging of text messages, and we talked about ASN at the start of the session. I will open this up to the rest of the witnesses: do you think that there has been a breakdown of trust and that parents are not sending their children to school because they no longer trust that the environment is right for their child?

**Barry Syme:** I totally agree with that. Fundamentally, this is about the relationship between the school and the parent. One of the questions that I always ask is why, when their children are at primary school, parents are so willing to go down to the school, yet when the children go to secondary school, they might show up only at parents night. What is the difference? The children have moved just down the road, but it might as well be a totally different world.

In the schools where I see good progress, it comes down to leadership from the headteacher

and the rest of the leadership team. Even in simple things such as the first communication with the parents about a non-attendance, there might be something lighter than a formal letter. Some local authorities with which we have been working have changed the formal letters that go out to something much softer that does not say, "Right—why is your child not at school?" and blames parents.

According to information that we got back from attendance campaigns that we ran in Glasgow, some parents were not happy, because they felt that they were again being blamed instead of someone saying, "Okay, we need to work as partners on this one." That brings us back to the policy. It might be strong on viewing parents as partners as its starting point, but when a school is under pressure—say, from having looked at its percentage attendance or the Scottish Government attendance figures—it will want to keep pushing at those figures, and the simple way to do that is to push it all back on to the parents. That sort of approach does not work. In the feedback that we have had from parents in some of our attendance campaigns, they have said, "Why are you putting pressure back on us? We are doing the very best we can."

**Stuart Mathers:** I would emphasise that there is an area of promise in the evidence on positive parental communication, which promotes parental efficacy. It starts from the position that parents can do something to help. That does not help in every case, because some parents will need additional support, but it is all about a school knowing those parents and starting to form those relationships. I would just re-emphasise that point.

Another point of nuance is that it can be quite hard to understand the causality between different dimensions. In September, a paper was published that looked at the prevalence of family mental health conditions and the link with attendance. The starting assumption was that there was a link between families who were struggling with mental health and children who had lower attendance, but the researchers found that it worked the other way—in other words, children's non-attendance was exacerbating mental health conditions, or making them more likely to occur.

Where things get complicated are the different relationships between the risk factors and the reality. You need to know your pupil population and your families in order to work out what is going on in your circumstance—that is, your school—and what, therefore, your provision needs to be and how the services provide it. It is quite easy to miss that.

**Dr Behrens:** We have very strong evidence from the growing up in Scotland cohort data that there is, basically, an indivisibility between parental mental health and child mental health. Even though it does not necessarily happen with a focus on attendance, we do know what happens with a lot of externalising and internalising of problems. I do not want to say that they are transferred, but there is a strong relationship between children and parents.

I will just circle back to poverty, simply because it is the single most prominent factor related to absence and to other outcomes such as attainment and exclusions. Obviously, poverty is not a direct cause—no one thinks, "Well, I don't have much in my bank account, so I won't turn up to school"—but we have heard insightful accounts of parents having to worry about their fuel bills and how they will get to school. That creates a mental load. In extreme cases, there might be child neglect but often—and this brings me back to the no-blame approach—that might not be intentional. It might simply be that there is not enough resource to keep the family going, and that branches out into other things such as non-attendance.

**Katherine Sangster:** Do I have time for a couple more quick questions, convener?

**The Convener:** Yes.

**Katherine Sangster:** On non-attendance, and helping families get in their cars and get their kids to school, I know that this is anecdotal evidence, but when I visited a breakfast club in my region, the people there told me a good story about a child who had been creeping into that child neglect category, with social work involved, but getting them into the breakfast club made a huge difference. Is there any evidence, or have impact studies been done, on how breakfast clubs can improve attendance?

**Helen Waggott:** I cannot provide any statistics, but I do have experience of breakfast clubs, and I know that having a dedicated nurturing space in schools makes a big impact. Indeed, it could be the first step across the threshold for a lot of young people. Perhaps just coming into school, having breakfast, spending some time with a trusted adult and then leaving again might be the very first step for a lot of young people. We believe that having such a dedicated nurturing space in school is very important, but it is not available at all schools and we think that it would be of benefit.

10:00

**Stuart Mathers:** We have done a couple of evaluations of breakfast clubs and other provision around the edges. Off the top of my head, I cannot remember what they say, but I would be able to follow up on that, if that would be useful.

**The Convener:** I have a supplementary question. We have spoken a lot about parents, in the plural, but we know that there is a high proportion of absent parents who have left a single parent to shoulder the burden and responsibility of caring for the children on their own. If a child has ASN or if the adult has to take time off work, that is mostly pushing the woman—the mother—into poverty, so that disproportionately affects women. Do we have data on that? If we do, is it linked to absences? What are we doing to support those single parents?

**Dr Behrens:** We know from the experience of the growing up in Scotland cohort—that data is obviously different from linked administrative data—that children from single-parent households perform worse overall in the strengths and difficulties questionnaire. That does not immediately mean that they have absence or non-attendance issues, but it is associated with that. From our research side, I do not believe that we have the data available from the Scottish Government, so we do not have anything directly on family structure. We may be able to gather that using the Scottish census data, but we currently do not have information from the Scottish census of 2022—the most recent one.

**The Convener:** Are single-parent families supported? Do they have additional support? Are schools and systems cognisant of that additional barrier for families?

**Barry Syme:** I would say that schools are aware of that. I am not aware of any specific projects. Judging from anecdotal evidence from my work, I would have to agree that the number of single parents of children with additional support needs or with attendance issues is probably disproportionate—although I do not have any hard data on that, unfortunately.

**Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green):** Much of the evidence that has been submitted and that we have heard today highlights unmet need, rather than deliberate disengagement. Parents frequently describe lengthy struggles in getting the support that they need, getting assessments and getting appropriate provision for ASN. In that context, should we be considering persistent absence not as an attendance problem but as evidence of the wider implementation gap between Scotland's aim for inclusive education and the reality that is being faced on the ground by families, schools and children? That is for everybody, but you can go first if you like, Silvia.

**Dr Behrens:** I believe that it is a signal, and that there is unmet need. It is somewhat concerning that we are now reaching a level of almost 50 per cent of secondary school pupils with ASN. I say that not in the sense that those pupils do not deserve support—obviously, they deserve the right support—but to note that our services are stretched very thinly. Schools are doing a lot to deliver, but some of that cannot be provided by schools alone.

One thing that comes out of our research is that the structural aspects, as well as the individual aspects, are really important. I cannot overstate the fact that poverty is the single most associated factor, which exacerbates poor mental health. Mental health issues also occur in higher-income families, but the exacerbation via poverty is strong.

To circle back to your question, I believe that looking at persistent absence is definitely helpful from the perspective of both research and policy. However, we need more granular data on authorised absence, unauthorised absence and what works on the ground, and we need to work together with schools and local authorities.

The data perspective has changed since 2024. The Scottish Government used to publish attendance data only every other year, which made it incredibly difficult to have longitudinal research on it in order to have a more stringent approach to it. That was changed retroactively from 2022-23, and we now have annual data, but having better data that would enable research, schools and local authorities to work together would be beneficial.

**Laura Moodie:** Does anyone else want to pick up that question?

**Barry Syme:** I entirely agree with you that non-attendance is a symptom of other issues. We require a consistent approach. In Glasgow, in response to the revised guidance, threshold markers—for example, 95 per cent, 90 per cent or 85 per cent attendance—have been put in that inform schools of certain things that have to be done and to address the question of the point at which we should start to follow staged intervention processes. For example, at 95 per cent attendance, you might well say, "Right, I need to make contact with the parent to check in"; reaching a 90 per cent marker might well mean that you needed to start to focus on the case; and going below 90 or 85 per cent would mean setting up a team around the child meeting.

Bringing in that consistency across local authorities would certainly be helpful, because it would allow us to look at the underlying causes of non-attendance. We know that, once a pupil's attendance drops below 90 per cent and goes towards 85 per cent, something is going wrong; if it goes below 80 per cent, the trajectory is down all the way. By intervening early and using the staged intervention processes, we could have a better impact on attendance.

**Stuart Mathers:** This makes me think about what is going on overall in schools. Your question was about unmet need, and this is essentially a question of school improvement. As that group of students gets bigger, the core offer of schools needs to support more of those students in order to have a system that works and can meet the need. How do we support schools, educators and settings to have the evidence around teaching practice and pedagogies that support leadership decisions to effectively drive change and support them to carry on improving? Are we having honest conversations about how well that is happening, and is that consistent across every school? That is not true of all English schools—most of our work historically has been in England. There is a huge implementation gap across different schools in their ability to do that, which is kind of true of all the other education systems in which we work.

The issue requires an honest conversation about how you put in the supports for schools to do a good job. It is not that any single educator or any single leader does not want to do a good job—they usually do—but it is about whether they have the right supports to enable them to do that well. That is the hard question at the core of what you have said. Although some of that is about additional services, some of it is about schools providing high-quality, positive education, a good environment and supportive routines, and doing that bit well.

**Helen Waggott:** I agree. There are many competing expectations in the classroom—to provide high-quality learning and teaching, to push for attainment, to deal with large class sizes and so on. We are looking at situations whereby, in some cases, half the class has an additional support need and it is about the class teacher managing to provide for each of those individuals in the classroom.

In the senior phase in school and, as I said, with the expectation of high-quality learning and teaching, we have class teachers in some cases trying to support young people who are studying at national 3 level in the same classroom and at the same time as teachers are supporting pupils who are studying at higher level, while also supporting the needs of the pupils—let us say half of the class—who have an additional support need. There is no doubt that teachers absolutely want to provide the service, but the competing expectations are just too many.

As I have said, while dealing with that, teachers are also having to deal with pupils who are learning at home and are not able to come into school. Classroom teachers are not only providing for the 30 pupils in front of them but providing resources to be sent home digitally or physically to young people.

We want to do our best for each individual and provide for their additional support needs, but those needs can be so vast in that one room for each period. It is incredibly difficult, and I think that teachers and school staff need more training on additional support needs. The knowledge is there—the issue is the time that is available to share good practice.

**Laura Moodie:** I see that Stuart Mathers wants to come back in.

**Stuart Mathers:** I know that it all sounds as if we are facing nothing but challenges, but there is cause for hope, too. Some of the core principles of effective teaching, when done well, are helpful to all children, so we need to get them right. I am thinking of, say, explicit teaching, scaffolding, modelling and so on. Getting those things right is an act of inclusion, because they support most children to achieve better as well as supporting the inclusion of the children who are there. There is, of course, the reality of the full breadth of what schools do, but ensuring that we have good core teaching would be a really positive and hopeful move.

**Laura Moodie:** I will pick up on some of the data that we have. I am becoming increasingly aware of what researchers have taken to calling “ghost parents”—in other words, parents who have been reluctantly forced into home educating, because their child is so persistently absent and is not getting the support that they need. No data seems to be getting collected on home education in general and particularly on those who are home educating not through choice but because they feel that they have no other option. A few of the witnesses have talked about the impact of that on household incomes and poverty and how it essentially becomes a worsening cycle. What approaches can we take to find and start gathering that data, given that it seems such a big missing piece of the jigsaw?

**Helen Waggott:** We should perhaps clarify that there are two types of home learning. First, there is the home learning where schools provide the resources and work with the parents and the young people in question. That might, in some cases, mean visiting the children at home, taking them work in, say, hospital or meeting them off-site. Then there are parents who have come to the end of the road, say, “We can’t work with the school any more,” and then cut all ties with education and home educate entirely through other sources. I have seen an increase in both of those situations, but I am afraid that I could not give you figures for Scotland.

**Dr Behrens:** As you said, there is little data on home education. I have read that the incidence of home education has gone up, but it is still at a very

low level—say, a couple of thousand children across Scotland.

From our data set at the moment, we cannot really gauge how the situation is changing because, if someone drops out of school or moves to another part of the UK, we cannot really account for that. However, I know from research that has been done in Wales, and from a research study that we are trying to draw up on missingness and data, that there are ways of finding in other public services—for example, in the health service—children who are no longer appearing in the education data. As I said, we are talking about a small percentage, but I think that it might be worth looking into these groups, whether it be for data purposes or qualitative research.

**Laura Moodie:** That is great—thank you.

I know that George Adam is going to ask a number of questions on poverty, but knowing how hard it is to get teenagers out of bed—I have them at home—I cannot imagine how much harder it would be if the house was not heated and there was nothing in the cupboards. It is difficult to get data on this, but we know that poverty is a factor, and I wonder whether there are strands in that respect that it might be worth pulling out.

I live in quite a rural area and I feel that some of the proposed solutions to child poverty are often urban based. I am conscious that there does not seem to be much data on attendance difficulties that shows those rural factors. If there are only two school bus runs a day and you miss them, that is a whole day written off when it comes to getting your child into school. If you need to get yourself to a workplace that is a long distance away, you cannot be in the house to get your child out the door. I wonder whether there is a way to pull those factors from the existing data or to be cognisant of them when we look for solutions.

10:15

**Dr Behrens:** It is quite a complicated picture. There are several factors, including employment and supply. From a policy perspective, I am aware that the Fraser of Allander Institute has produced policy modelling on how to get children out of poverty that does not differentiate between urban children and rural children. The bottom line is that the single most effective factor that it found in its modelling was an increase to the Scottish child payment.

**Laura Moodie:** Does anyone else want to come in on rurality?

**Stuart Mathers:** It is really hard not to default to saying that this is about schools understanding their parents and knowing the challenges in the community that they serve. That does not help answer the question about responsibility, because it gets quite difficult for schools if they are trying to solve things that are beyond their capability to solve.

**Helen Waggott:** I know from working with young people and families that we as guidance staff, along with other classroom teachers and school staff, regularly provide money and resources from our own pockets to pay for meals, snacks and clothing, to provide personal care and to help young people take part in activities. In our office, we have a stash of stuff that we buy each weekend so that we can feed some of the children who come to our school. They come in hungry and thirsty, and we are the people who have to provide for them.

**Laura Moodie:** Thank you.

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** Silvia, every time you mentioned poverty, I was getting worried, because I thought that all my questions would be answered before I got a chance to ask them. All the written evidence that you have given shows that there is an attendance gap between poorer and better-off communities. We have discussed a few issues, but let us think positively. What could we do to remove some of the barriers and make things easier? What could the Government and local government do? I do not always succeed, but I am always trying to find ways to fix things. The Government already does a number of things on the poverty side, and it has a couple of policies in this area, but what else could we look at?

**Dr Behrens:** As has been mentioned, the support that is provided needs to be more consistent. A person-centred approach is still needed. There is support at a school level, but there also needs to be support at a pupil level. For example, having immediate or timely access to mental health support is relevant and important. If the school is overwhelmed, the national health service needs to step in, so perhaps some priority lanes would help young people get the right support, although I know that that is tricky.

I will not state it again, but at a family level, it is incredibly important to tackle poverty. Again, I come at that from my research background. We need to have the data and the evidence generated and analysed to see what works, or even where we can make incremental progress, because the issue will not be fixed overnight. Where we find, for example, that breakfast clubs work, can we gather strong evidence and then take a consistent approach across Scotland that is led by schools and disseminated more widely? Those are my first ideas.

**Stuart Mathers:** It is probably not my place to comment on the wider societal changes that might address aspects of child poverty. A couple of the

submissions referred to the way in which poverty seems to exacerbate other factors. Children have a few protective factors, and poverty seems to influence those, so we need to think about how to provide the best supports and scaffolds for children, and school can and should play a role in that. Some of the matters that we have rehearsed about the environment, the effectiveness of teaching and the feeling of belonging are important things that schools can do positively. They do not necessarily address the root cause, but they provide the scaffolds and support that help combat issues that represent a lack of protective factors, which poverty interacts with.

**Barry Syme:** I would like to see the attendance issue looked at more as a family support issue. Some of the really positive outcomes that we have seen in our work have come about through supporting the family. If we keep looking at this as just an education problem and seeing attendance as education's problem, we are not going to have great outcomes. We need to really focus on the broader family, which will mean having to redirect budgets, probably from health and social care, more towards education. That would be an interesting thing to do. It would involve using third sector partners, but we also have to look at longer-term sustainability of projects, because it takes quite a skill set to develop workers to engage with those families. If an organisation is being funded for only 12 months, is it going to get the best workers? If you can employ people for two, three or four years and they can develop a real skill set and engage with families, you will see much better outcomes.

**Helen Waggott:** I agree. A more family-based approach is very much what we need. I also cannot say anything about finances or budgets. In previous years, we have had dedicated family support services based in some schools to work with young people and families, getting to know them properly and supporting their specific needs, but there has been a huge reduction in that support. Short-term approaches do not work. If we want to provide a team around a child and a consistent reliable service for families to support them, we need consistency of workers. Some schools are now looking at having engagement officers. That title does not sound as supportive as the approach that has been taken in previous years, but a dedicated worker for that in each school, along with school counsellors, will make a difference.

**George Adam:** Public service reform is happening at the moment, and, no matter how you look at it, there is an opportunity to look at a better service being delivered at the end of the reform process. That might mean a strategic view of education being taken in a region. Whatever it ends up being, public service reform is an opportunity to look at these services. Barry Syme and Helen Waggott both raised the point that it is a community issue rather than it being about just the school itself, but a lot of the time, the issue is left to the school to deal with.

I have an anecdote about my local football team, St Mirren, which has done a lot of community-based work. One of the chairmen asked me, "When are you going to second a social worker to St Mirren?" I thought that was madness, until I actually thought about it and realised that that takes the social worker away from the message, "I'm from the council. I'm here to see your child," to a situation where they have a St Mirren polo shirt on and they are saying, "I'm here to talk to you about how I support your family." That goes back to what Barry said about third sector organisations being supportive in these things.

Football will not be the be-all and end-all for everyone, but for some families, that has been the right access route. I think that Spartans in Edinburgh has also done a lot of good work, including courses for young people to access school by turning up there for a different programme. We need to continue those programmes, so is it a case of looking at things differently and asking whether we can use those approaches? Throughout your evidence today, you have all talked about partner organisations and stakeholders working with you. Can we design things in a way that engages with young people and their families, whether through football or anything else?

**Helen Waggott:** Absolutely. In my community, I know that Montrose Football Club has a huge community education programme along the lines of what you have mentioned. Third sector partners are available, but children are not going to set foot in a school if their parents are not able to get them there. I suggest that we find somewhere that is available and accessible, where people are not dressed in suits.

**George Adam:** It needs to be a place that they want to go.

**Helen Waggott:** Yes, it should be somewhere that they want to access. Montrose Football Club provides food, as well as health and wellbeing support. It now also provides education support, with literacy and numeracy workshops. As we said, if pupils are not going to school, where else can we turn to that will provide support for them? You are absolutely right that those kinds of things are a great example of where pupils can access support.

**Stuart Mathers:** There is something that is very difficult to balance in that. For a system to think carefully about the routes to support attendance is positive; there are many examples of that,

including parent and family support. However, it is important to recognise the limits of what schools can and should be expected to do.

Schools should have great teachers, and they are the best people to support children to learn, and we should be cautious and thoughtful about children's learning being outsourced to other people who may not be as expert or as skilled as teachers. There is wider evidence of well-intentioned interventions where additional support people have taken kids away from teachers in classrooms, which has meant that the children have not learned as much because they have not been taught by teachers, who are experts. There is some nuance—

**George Adam:** In many cases, those programmes offer softer restarts.

**Stuart Mathers:** It is about the destination and the journey. We need to think systematically about how we are supporting the experts to teach and how pupils are learning; engagement is an important part of that. You made the case for looking at the matter as part of public service reform, which I agree with. I am just saying that we have to be careful of the counterincentives or perverse incentives that might come from those kinds of initiatives. In a number of countries, well-intentioned approaches have meant that less expert people are doing the teaching.

**Barry Syme:** I understand what Stuart Mathers is saying, but the persistent non-attenders who we are talking about would have reached a stage where education is almost secondary to their wellbeing. It is key for me that we sort out their wellbeing and mental health and get them engaged with society again before we pick up their learning. I know that that sounds a bit harsh but, realistically, if you had worked with some of the children and young people who we are dealing with, you would understand that some of them spend their entire day online and do not engage. They might come out for one appointment or to see someone, but that is not an existence. We need to tackle that cohort of persistent non-attenders.

**George Adam:** With regard to the practical difficulties that poverty poses, are young people not going to school because of issues of transport, clothing, food or housing? How much of the problem is health related? You have already mentioned anxiety. How much do those factors prevent a young person from going to school or affect their experience at school? Are those factors worse in parts of the country that experience poverty than in the slightly better-off areas?

**Helen Waggott:** It is very complex, as individual pupils have different reasons for not attending school. I do not think that I could pinpoint an answer, I am afraid.

**George Adam:** Does anyone want to hazard a guess?

**Barry Syme:** In Glasgow, the data shows that 58 per cent of young people live in Scottish index of multiple deprivation areas 1 and 2, which is consistently our target population for non-attendance. When headteachers look at their data, they will specifically target children who are living in those areas. We do not have the exact figures, but if you ask any headteacher in Glasgow, they will say that poverty is the biggest challenge in relation to attendance and attainment.

10:30

**George Adam:** If we use Glasgow as an example, you have got East Renfrewshire on your border, where the attendance rate is 93 per cent. In Glasgow, it is 89.2 per cent. Is that difference due simply to poverty? Is it because of SIMD figures? We all know that SIMD figures are, in effect, determined by streets. People out there think that it is about vast areas of poverty. However, when you look at it, you see that it is basically streets that are the difficulty. Is that the cause of the big difference between Glasgow and East Ren? Is it just poverty, or are there other factors?

**Barry Syme:** It is incredibly complex. However, if you asked any of the headteachers in Glasgow, who know their families so well, they would say that the challenge, and the biggest barrier, is poverty.

**George Adam:** I am not disagreeing with you. I am just trying to get your impression. I come from a similar demographic.

**Barry Syme:** I would like to think that it is as simple as that. However, when I work with headteachers around attendance strategy and they talk about their families—who they know so well—there are issues about clothing. It is also about the broader social capital and being able to access other supports, which, as the committee will know, a lot of families cannot do.

**Dr Behrens:** The SIMD is a helpful, but restricted, measure. In our research, we use a free school meal measure: whether people are free school meal registered, which excludes those who are entitled only to universally provided free school meals. Again, the picture is absolutely the same. That is our measure of poverty, and our research echoes exactly what we have heard when different measures of poverty are used.

Of course, there is a lot of variation in the reasons for absence, which I am sure we see in day-to-day life. For example, it might be about fuel or transport, or about not being able to afford clothing, which can also turn into bullying. It is very

complex and it is difficult to pinpoint the causes. However, the overall strength of the association with poverty is so strong, and that is what we see on the ground.

**George Adam:** We will always hear stories of people who come from backgrounds such as mine, or from the sort of area that I come from. People will say, "Oh, they've been a success in life—they've gone on to university." I can think of a colleague of mine who ended up going to St Andrews, of all places. We always hear those stories. Where are the role models for that kind of scenario? Do role models, such as the teacher who is supportive, still make a big difference?

I do not even remember what I did wrong, but I still remember this one time, in primary school, that the headteacher took me in and said, "George Adam, I'm very disappointed in you." I can still feel the hurt at this point, because I respected that headteacher.

There is still a role for the positive role model, is there not? How do teachers and headteachers do that while dealing with all the other pressures that they have on a day-to-day basis?

**Helen Waggott:** For school staff, role modelling, or modelling behaviours, is absolutely key. We talk about consistency within the classroom in relation to learning and teaching, but it is also about consistency in terms of providing that role model for young people within our schools. A huge amount of what we have talked about today, in relation to what happens in school, is the responsibility of the guidance teacher.

**George Adam:** I was just going to say that I remember my guidance teacher from second year. She maybe did not guide me into the career that she had thought of for me, but she made sure that I did not make a complete mess of the last two years of school.

**Helen Waggott:** It is not easy. [*Laughter.*]

We also ensure that the guidance teacher is not necessarily the one person who is the role model for a particular young person. The school is full of people who could be a role model, whether that be the school janitor, a class teacher, the headteacher or a principal teacher. We find that role modelling is incredibly important.

As a mother of teenagers, I note that, sadly, teenagers do not often see the right role models, and it is about celebrating celebrity status. It goes back to the question—I cannot remember who asked it—about mobile phones and access to devices. Young people spend hours upon hours on mobile devices watching—as far as they are concerned—the new role models and modelling their behaviours and language, which we know are not always appropriate. Role modelling is incredibly important, but there are huge challenges regarding who young people choose as their role models.

**Stuart Mathers:** I will echo that point. It is possible for all school staff to be expected to do role modelling, but it needs to be explicit that that is an expectation that is on them. It is about the learning behaviours and approaches that they model, which can also be taught—you can explicitly teach pupils about those things and expectations. Those aspects can work together but it requires consistency and a strategic approach by the leadership for that to work well. It does not happen just by accident; there needs to be intentionality.

**George Adam:** I remember meeting—it was ironic—the headteacher of my wife's old school. I was a councillor at the time and we did a charity football match. I felt as if I was back in school, because he was sat there encouraging me as we played a game of football as older people. It was interesting.

Those are all my questions.

**The Convener:** Before we move to Angela Ross for a substantive question, there are a couple of points that I want to clarify. I know that other members wish to ask supplementary questions, but we need to be cognisant of time, and Angela has not come in yet.

I just want to clarify a point about data. Stuart Mathers, you mentioned that children with ASN have a lower performance when taken out of the classroom than those who are in the classroom. I just want to ensure that we get the data right. Is it not the case that that child would perform even worse in the classroom than if they were taken out of it? How do we ensure that the data and the things that we are talking about are correct? We do not want to assume that children who are being taken out of the classroom because of their needs is an indicator of their performance, when that performance could be going from zero to something rather than to nothing.

**Stuart Mathers:** Thank you for the opportunity to clarify the point. The wider evidence on additional adult support—we would usually describe them as teachers' assistants in England—is that the support needs to be provided in an intentional way. There is a set of principles that seems to suggest that additional adult support is likely to be effective, but it needs to complement rather than replace general teaching. The connection between the intervention and the core teaching is an important part of that, and that connection requires there to be a system around it.

Several interventions have shown us that replacing a general teacher of maths with someone else who teaches maths can be detrimental, because that set of children does less well than a similar set of children in the school. It is an area that needs careful thought, but there is strong evidence to suggest that certain types of intervention can work quite well.

The point that I was trying to make is that, if you want to design a system that ensures that all children have the opportunity to achieve, regardless of their background, it is important that they have access to good teaching and to be clear about where and who the expert teachers are that are able to provide it. There are several bear traps and things that can be fallen into that require intentional and careful thought, and there is reasonably good evidence on where those traps are.

**The Convener:** I want to clarify another point. When we talk about lack of attendance and absence from schools, do we mean from the building, or are we talking about absence and lack of attendance from education as a whole? We have already talked about children who are educated at home.

**Helen Waggott:** Do you mean attendance as a whole between the two groups?

**The Convener:** When we talk about children or young people being absent from school, do we mean that they are absent from the school building or from education as a whole? We have heard of examples of children being taught at home in co-ordination with the school.

**Helen Waggott:** Indeed. If a young person continues to be taught through school processes but outwith the school building, we still monitor attendance through, for example, flexible timetables. If pupils are entirely withdrawn from education in order to be home educated, that is an entirely different scenario.

**The Convener:** So, we need to make sure that we get that right—if we are talking, that is, about a lack of attendance at a school building or absence from education itself. Should that be reframed?

**Helen Waggott:** We have mentioned the different coding of children and young people at different levels, whether they be in full-time education or have revised and personalised education plans. It is important that we have clear coding across the country, so that we can look at the statistics clearly. We need to ensure that everyone uses that approach.

**The Convener:** I appreciate that.

**Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform):** I just want to understand the evidence a little more clearly. Rates of attendance were quite stable until the pandemic; we know that lateness figures went up in the post-pandemic phase, and I have also seen evidence that in secondary schools—from S1 to S3—there was a spike in absenteeism. Is that your understanding, too? Is there any link or connection at all with the fact that those 11, 12 and 13-year-olds were the ones who were maybe at a formative age—say, five, six or seven years old—during Covid? Is that year group moving with the spike, or is something else happening at secondary level?

I will put that question to Barry Syme first, as it deals with psychology issues.

**Barry Syme:** Over the past 10 years, perhaps—indeed, it was the case even before Covid—there has been an increase in the level of anxiety in young people, and the age has been coming down. Traditionally, 15 and 16-year-olds would present with anxiety, and I recall young people not attending because of that. That age has been dropping, according to school counselling figures.

Those figures came through in 2020, I think, when we were starting to track the number of young people who accessed counselling. The age in this respect has been dropping consistently, year on year, and we are now seeing children in primary 5—that is, nine-year-olds—seeking support for anxiety. The incidence of that sort of thing has been increasing over time to the point at which, in Glasgow, we are offering school counselling and therapies from primary 1 onwards.

I think that it has to do with societal change, by which I mean the pressure on young people and the demands that we put on them to achieve and go into further or higher education. Those expectations are now much greater. The financial challenges have impacted significantly on families, too, and young people have picked up on that and understand that their parents are under pressure. Many other factors have contributed to the increase in anxiety. For me, it is one of the biggest things when it comes to non-attendance.

**Angela Ross:** Is that the rest of the panel's understanding of the evidence? Is it the case that, when we track back, we find that this is following not just one year group but is widespread?

**Helen Waggott:** Yes. We are seeing anxiety levels increasing across all age groups, particularly the lower age groups. Perhaps the biggest reason that pupils and parents give for non-attendance is that the pupil is too anxious.

We are seeing a greater incidence of social anxiety—it is not just school based. As I have said, young people are spending a huge amount of their lives in their bedrooms and are just not leaving them. There is even anxiety about socialising with

their own families. The traditional view of teenagers is that they lock themselves in their bedrooms and do not want to associate with their families, but we now have an actual problem of young people not leaving their rooms, not socialising with their families or physically with their friends and not being able to walk down the street and go into a shop, let alone come into a school where there are potentially hundreds of young people, noises, and expectations on them. That anxiety is massive for young people.

Although quite a lot of young people, while being locked away in their bedrooms and not socialising, will talk about the fact that they still have friends, it all happens through their hands—that is, through a keyboard and online. A lot of young people talk about their friendships and connections in the community, but those communities could be in America. That loss of a bond, perhaps, and of feeling included in various environments increases the anxiety. The fact that they are so not used to having human friends, because their friends are on a screen instead, means that there is a lack of somebody—a friend, even—to whom they can turn. That is a big cause of anxiety, too. Going back to primary schools, which have been mentioned, I would just point out that school counsellors who are based in secondary schools are used in primary schools, too.

10:45

**Dr Behrens:** On the Covid question, we might see a more pronounced cohort effect further down the line on the children who lived more actively through the pandemic, but I would say that it started even before that. You spoke about the transition from primary to secondary school; when we looked at the cohort that finished school before the pandemic started, we found a huge drop in attendance from primary to secondary school, particularly among pupils with additional support needs. Therefore, the transitional phase is important, regardless of the wider circumstances.

**Barry Syme:** On that point, there is probably a global view that some kind of impact from the pandemic will rub through. However, in general, people think that a challenge exists in relation to attendance at that age group, especially where there is a transition between institutions. The transition from primary to secondary school seems to be a particular challenge, because you have a new set of relationships, often bigger organisations and all those other things that we have talked about. There is quite a bit going on there.

**Angela Ross:** I want to go back to Barry Syme on the issue of interventions and the way forward. In your submission, you made a request for educational psychologists to be quite prevalent in and to partner with the educational system. In relation to theory and psychology, I know that we have things such as operant conditioning, which is a way of managing some of the anxieties, but how do we avoid, say, avoidance behaviour with those practices? How do we ensure that educational psychologists all approach the issue with the same perspective and theory?

**Barry Syme:** In Scotland, we take what we call a social ecological approach, which looks at putting the child at the centre. In fact, it probably reflects the getting it right for every child approach—it is about putting the child at the centre and looking at what supports are available around that.

It is also important that we do not pathologise the young person's condition. We have talked about the waiting list for CAMHS or neurodevelopmental services, but such a label does not change anything. It might explain a few things, but it does not actually help as an intervention.

Where psychologists come in is that they can support the system by working with the various partners; indeed, we have talked about a community-based approach. The psychologist can bring a different perspective to the issue. The school will often see the problem as one of getting the young person into the school, whereas we will see other factors if we look at the broader issue and take the my world triangle approach.

As we have heard, that can happen when you talk to a young person. You might ask, "Who are your friends?", and they will say, "Oh, I've got plenty of friends." When you ask again, they will say, "Oh, they're online." I always ask a young person, particularly an adolescent, to tell me about their perfect evening. Is it sitting in their bedroom with their phone, or is it going out with their friends? I can tell an awful lot from their response; if they come back to me and say, "Oh, I really like my perfect night, and it's sitting in my bedroom with my phone," I find that a wee bit worrying, because normally you would expect an adolescent to talk about being out and experiencing things. That is where the psychologist comes in, because they can look at the broader picture of the child within the system and ask what options exist.

As I said earlier in relation to some of the work that we have done on interventions, if your outcome is to get young people back into school, chances are that your project and your intervention will fail, because it is much more complicated than that. We have to look at other things, such as whether we can get them into something else—a sports or youth club, for example. That can be the starting point. We must look at the matter

differently, instead of just saying, “Get them back into school.”

**Angela Ross:** Is the intention to build up coping mechanisms?

**Barry Syme:** Entirely. It is about resilience. We do not use the word much now, but life is difficult and we all experience stress—indeed, I experienced it coming here today. However, we have to challenge that and find ways of dealing with it, because if we do not, we just wrap the child up and they stay in their bedroom. Indeed, that is one of the things that we have seen when we have worked with families.

At what point do you say that the family is no longer there? Some work was done in Japan around the hikikomori condition, where young people live in their bedrooms and are supported by their families for 20 or 30 years. Who supports that young person when the family becomes elderly or somebody dies? What I have been trying to say this morning is that we have to address a much longer-term problem here, which is whether we are preparing young people to get into and take their place in society.

**Angela Ross:** This might be a bit of a wider question, but how does that anxiety manifest itself, if you like, and is there a connection—maybe a gateway—between lateness or occasional absence and persistent absence? Have any of the witnesses seen that? Would it be more preventative to tackle lateness early on?

**Helen Waggott:** There is definitely a link between anxiety and latecoming. A lot of young people report that if they are even moments late, they will not step over the threshold, either into school or, in particular, into a classroom. As someone who can quite confidently walk into a classroom or, indeed, any room, I try to unpick the fact that some young people cannot knock on a door, open it and go into the room for fear of being judged—I hear that word constantly—and worrying about what other people are thinking or saying about them. You and I know that other people could not care less, but it is a huge factor in a pupil’s level of anxiety.

We often try to put it to parents and young people that they can get things back on track in period 2 if they have missed period 1. Instead, what a lot of young people who miss period 1, and their families, might do is say that they can spend the rest of the day in bed and go again tomorrow. As far as we are concerned, however, getting into school at any point in the day is better than not getting in at all.

**Stuart Mathers:** We have talked quite a bit about barriers, but this is also about the pull factor that will get a young person into school. Is it a feeling of belonging or of success? Do they have positive relationships? Those are really important things that schools can help with. Some of those softer things are what we call pull factors: if you want to be in school for those other reasons, and if you have a skill set that includes resilience and the other things that have been talked about, you are more likely to overcome that fear or want to do those things. So, there are two sides to the issue.

**Angela Ross:** Helen, you have made some great points about the angle that should be taken here, whatever the school’s lateness policy—it is more or less, “Well, you’ve missed a bit of time, but let’s continue the day positively.” Is there an issue about how lateness is handled in schools? Has that aspect been considered?

**Helen Waggott:** Possibly. When it comes to attendance, different schools tackle communication with parents differently. In a lot of cases, lateness is reported to parents in the same way as non-attendance is, so it potentially creates a barrier, depending on the communication between home and school—and, therefore, between parents and pupils. If it is communicated to them as “You missed this period” or “You were late to that class” as soon as the young person arrives home from school, that is problematic.

**Stuart Mathers:** I come back to the earlier point about whether schools understand the families; take a targeted approach to communication where needed; are positive; support parental efficacy; and send those kinds of messages. That is as true of lateness as it is of absence. As for persistent absence, it is all about where on that spectrum you need to be to address that family circumstance, which, in essence, requires schools to know their kids.

**Angela Ross:** As you have mentioned, once that persistent absenteeism is in place, you cannot go knock on the door and bring the child to school—that is very difficult. Therefore, it might be about using that point of last connection effectively. Thank you for your responses.

**The Convener:** Apologies to members who wished to come in with a supplementary, but we are well over time.

I thank the witnesses for taking part in our evidence session, and I bring this part of our meeting to a close. We will now move into private session.

10:54

*Meeting continued in private until 12:02.*

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