

Inspecting attendance: guidance

Age group: All

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Introduction

Learners' attendance is judged in comparison to **national figures** under '**Outcomes: how well are pupils doing, taking account of any variation?**'

The grade descriptors make it clear that if the pupils' **actual attendance** is consistently well below national averages, or too many pupils are persistently absent, then attendance will be graded as low.

Inspectors must use national averages, not free school meal bands, to judge attendance – see tables in next section.

The judgement on attendance is taken into account when judging 'the extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their economic wellbeing'. The school's work to promote good attendance and reduce absence is judged in care, guidance and support as part of the evaluation of '**How effective is the provision?**' It is essential that inspectors make the distinction between the **outcome** – actual attendance – and the **provision** made to promote good attendance when making their judgements and when reporting.

The school's **efforts and strategies** and their effectiveness should be taken into account when judging care, guidance and support, and commented on in the text of the report when appropriate. RAISEonline gives a contextual element to the attendance data by graphing the school's attendance and persistent absence figures against free school meals information. However, while there is a clear statistical link between levels of social deprivation (as measured by free school meal eligibility), this should not be taken as an excuse for poor attendance and high absence rates. At every free school meal level there is a range of school performance on absence. Strong comparative performance within a band may reflect favourably on the strategies used by the school to promote regular attendance. This may well influence inspectors' judgement about the quality of care, guidance and support. However, this is quite distinct from the judgement about actual attendance which is made against national averages.

It is not acceptable to judge poor attendance as 'average' on the basis that the school is working hard to improve it.

There is a clear link between attendance and achievement, since if pupils are not attending school they will be unable to access the opportunities available to them. Inspectors should use their evaluation of attendance to assist their analysis of any differences between the achievement of different groups of learners, such as those of different gender or ethnicity. Inspectors should evaluate how much the school knows about the attendance patterns of groups of learners and the effectiveness of systems to alert them to changes in pupils' attendance, as a sudden or a gradual alteration **can indicate a safeguarding issue.**

Judging attendance under 'Outcomes: how well are pupils doing, taking account of any variation?'

Inspectors should use the tables provided below as a general guideline supported by RAISEonline and the school's own data.

Primary schools (including middle deemed primary)	Overall absence 2008-09	Attendance	Attendance grade indicator
Lower quartile absence	4.29	Equal to and above 95.7%	High
Median	5.07	94.9%–95.6%	Above average
Upper quartile	6.04	94%–94.8%	Average
		Below 94%	Low

Secondary schools (including middle deemed secondary, academies, and so on)	Overall absence 2008–09	Attendance	Attendance grade indicator
Lower quartile	6.14	Equal to and above 93.9%	High
Median	7.09	92.9%–93.8%	Above average
Upper quartile	8.19	91.8%–92.8%	Average
		Below 91.8%	Low

Bear in mind, however, the importance of looking at the figure for persistent absence, since the overall absence figure can disguise the poor attendance of a small but significant number of pupils. RAISEonline data will also give an indication of whether attendance is improving or declining over time. Inspectors should ask the school to provide the latest attendance and absence figures at the start of the inspection. Inspectors should also ask the school for its breakdown of attendance by year group and by **groups of pupils**, such as pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, girls and boys, **as this must be taken into account when making the judgement**. The charts in RAISEonline show absence levels in comparison with other schools with similar free school meals levels. While this may help inspectors to form a view about the effectiveness of the school's work to promote regular attendance, it is the national figures (shown in the above tables and in RAISEonline) which show the overall absence and persistent absence that **should guide inspectors' judgements about attendance**.

When judging attendance inspectors should consider **all the evidence available**, including:

- figures for overall and persistent absence, **in comparison with national averages**, shown in RAISEonline (there are no RAISEonline data for children not yet of statutory school age)
- the most up-to-date attendance and absence data held by the school
- the attendance of different groups of pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those from minority ethnic groups – inspectors will find it useful to use the school’s own analysis of this data as a starting point. If there is no analysis this is a cause for concern and will need to be considered as part of other judgements such as care, guidance and support and aspects of leadership and management
- the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent, which is identified nationally as absence of more than 20%
- patterns of absence – is there more absence at particular times of year, days of the week, from a particular class or year group?
- proportions of pupils with particular levels of attendance, for example below 85% or above 95%, and whether these proportions are changing.

Account should be taken of **whether the percentage of pupils present in each lesson observed is broadly consistent with the school’s attendance and absence figures**. Should discrepancies arise it may be necessary to investigate the school’s procedures for registering pupils and recording absence. Is truancy from lessons occurring after pupils have initially registered?

In a small school it is particularly important to make sure that the average is not masking significant differences in individuals’ attendance. If there is a **very small** number of pupils who are persistent non or low attenders, consider the attendance figure without these pupils’ attendance. What does the figure now look like? If it is above average without these pupils then it is reasonable to consider an overall attendance grade of average. However, in making a judgement on **care, guidance and support** it will be essential to ascertain whether these pupils are being given the appropriate amount of support and challenge to improve their attendance, and whether this is being effective.

Judging attendance when published data indicate that it is below average

The previous section of this guidance suggests that inspectors may consider a judgement that attendance is low if attendance rates lie within the lowest quartile of all schools nationally. However, this section also makes clear that inspectors should consider **all the evidence available** about attendance, including, for example, the school’s own data and trends and patterns in attendance.

Inspectors should also consider the size of the difference between the school’s attendance rate and the national lower quartile. A slight difference may be consistent with a judgement that attendance is average, if the school’s own data are suggesting

this. However, a substantial and sustained difference would point more strongly towards a judgement that attendance is low (grade 4). *The evaluation schedule for schools¹* uses the phrase 'well below average' in the descriptor for low attendance – this is unlikely to apply to attendance rates which are only marginally below the national lower quartile, or where the rate has dropped slightly below for one year. The grade descriptor for 'low' refers to the **last three years'** data.

As with the other judgements that they make, inspectors should use professional judgement to form a view about attendance. It is certainly not the case that attendance will be judged to be low (grade 4) simply because the school's current published attendance rate lies within the lower quartile.

External factors affecting attendance

Inspectors should consider carefully, for example, the impact of extreme weather conditions on attendance rates in schools which remain open when some other local schools decided to close. If a short-term decline in attendance is not related to any underlying trend and if the school can provide convincing evidence that it was linked to the poor weather conditions, then this should not affect the judgement about attendance. Indeed, the school's decision to stay open in difficult circumstances may reflect favourably on its leadership and management.

These general principles should be applied to other external factors, over which a school has little control, but which may adversely affect pupils' attendance. Another of these is set out in the next section.

Attendance of children of service personnel

It is Ministry of Defence practice for service personnel returning from active deployment to get a two-week period of rest and recreation. For service personnel with young families this usually means them wanting to take their children out of school for all or part of this. This routinely happens in Ministry of Defence schools abroad and is a similar issue for personnel returning to England following active service. While the Pupil Registration Regulations constrain a school's ability to allow term-time holidays, Department for Education (DfE) guidance on the regulations makes specific reference to service personnel as one of the special cases that would warrant the school allowing up to 10 days' holiday in term time, subject to minimal disruption to pupils' education.

In a school which includes children from service families inspectors should take account of the impact of these arrangements on overall attendance rates when making a judgement on attendance. If the school can convincingly demonstrate that 'dips' in the attendance of these pupils are linked to the particular circumstance of service personnel returning from active service, then this should not affect the

¹ Evaluation schedule of judgements for schools inspected under section five of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009, Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090098.

judgement about attendance. How well the school mitigates the degree of disruption to pupils' education should be considered as part of the judgement about care, guidance and support.

Judging the effectiveness of the school's actions to reduce absence and promote attendance as part of 'How effective is the provision?'

As part of making an overall judgement on the quality of the **care, guidance and support** offered to learners it is important to consider the effectiveness of the steps taken by the school to encourage regular attendance for **all groups of pupils**, including the school's progress towards any attendance targets set by the DfE or local authority. This includes a consideration of:

- whether attendance has improved as a result of actions taken by the school, or whether previously high attendance has been maintained
- whether reductions in overall absence and persistent absence have been sustained.

Effectiveness should be judged in terms of the reduction of both overall and persistent absence and **not in terms of conversion from unauthorised absence to authorised absence.**

Inspectors should also evaluate:

- the effectiveness of provision to enable any pupils to catch up with work missed, for example through absence, through attendance at additional programmes, or through exclusion
- the school's arrangements to monitor the attendance of any pupils who attend provision off-site, such as extended work experience or college.

Inspectors should take into account:

- the school's monitoring and evaluation of any patterns of absence among particular groups of pupils and the effectiveness of action taken to address this. The school should know if there is higher absence among any groups of pupils, or if there are distinctive patterns of absence for individuals. For example, if some pupils are frequently absent on a Monday or a Friday or if pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are disproportionately absent, then these issues should have been identified and addressed
- whether the school's strategies to tackle poor attendance are appropriate. Different causes of non-attendance need different responses and senior leaders should be able to explain what they are doing and why
- the support given to any pupils absent long-term for medical reasons, such as any in hospital, and arrangements made to keep pupils in touch with

school work. How are these maintained during extended spells in hospital or at home? What liaison arrangements are in place with other supporting professionals, for example at the hospital school or home tuition?

- the effectiveness of partnership work to reduce absence, for example with the Education Welfare Service and with parents
- the extent to which the school has clear action plans for the re-admittance/engagement of non-attending pupils? Does it include plans for reintegrating them in all areas of the curriculum? Alternatively, can it show how another agency is pursuing their re-admittance to school?

If it is clear that the school has high levels of absence and/or high persistent absence and its actions have failed to reduce those rates and, as a result, it has failed to meet learners' needs, then a grade 4 may be warranted for 'care, guidance and support'. Inspectors should also consider whether poor attendance is a result of other failures on the school's part, such as a curriculum which does not meet all learners' needs or an ethos of low expectations.

Judging attendance in special schools and pupil referral units

The attendance guidance in the evaluation schedule makes it clear that judgements on attendance are made by using national averages data. This also applies to special schools. **National data for mainstream primary and secondary schools should be used as a general guideline** – where special schools and pupil referral units are working well, and the curriculum and teaching are engaging pupils, it is possible for them to achieve high attendance rates.

If pupils are not attending then they will not be achieving their potential and will continue to be disadvantaged. It is important not to give positive but inaccurate messages about outcomes for these pupils, however hard staff may be working.

RAISEonline reports for special schools provide the annual percentage of the school's enrolments that are **persistent absentees** and the annual percentage of sessions missed due to **overall absence**. In addition to the school's data, the national average for persistent absence and absence for maintained and non-maintained special schools is also reported.

Inspectors must remember and take into account the fact that the data for special schools cover all types of special school and do not distinguish between schools providing for pupils with particular needs such as those with severe learning difficulties or those with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. Moreover, there are schools that provide for pupils with a wide array of needs. Nevertheless, the RAISEonline information about special schools may be a useful tool **for schools** to help them set interim targets if they are working from a very high level of absence towards the attendance rates found in mainstream schools.

Taking account of these caveats, as in small mainstream schools, it is particularly important to make sure that the average rate is not masking significant differences in individuals' attendance. If there is a **very small** number of pupils who are persistent non or low attenders, consider the attendance figure without these pupils' attendance. What does the figure now look like? If it is above average without these pupils then it may be reasonable to consider an overall attendance grade of average. However, in making a judgement on **care, guidance and support** it will be essential to ascertain whether these pupils are being given the appropriate amount of support and challenge to improve their attendance, and whether this is effective.

If some pupils have **medical needs** that influence attendance, inspectors need to investigate whether the levels of absence are justifiable and, if not, check that they are challenged by the school. If pupils are absent for considerable amounts of time inspectors should find out about arrangements for work to be continued at home or any links made with hospital school provision. As part of their safeguarding duties inspectors need to be assured that the school:

- is in regular contact with the family and medical professionals as appropriate and
- is rigorous in checking the pupil's actual whereabouts.

Schools have a duty to make reasonable adjustments that enable pupils to return to school as soon as they are fit enough.

Note: In the past, School Improvement Partners have used special school attendance data to set statutory attendance targets with schools.

The relationship between low attendance and 'the extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills which will contribute to their future economic well-being'

The prime judgement about 'the extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills which will contribute to their future economic well-being' takes account of pupils' attendance. **However, it does not follow that the prime judgement must be 'inadequate' if attendance is low.** The evaluation schedule indicates that this is likely to be the case if 'pupils' attendance and punctuality generally, or for a significant minority, are poor and show no sign of improvement' and explains that the prime judgement may be 'satisfactory' even when attendance is low. Again, it is important that inspectors use professional judgement and are not drawn into a mechanistic approach which leads to the school being judged inadequate solely because attendance is low.