

Back into school: New insights into school absence

Evidence from three multi-academy trusts

July 2022

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Foreword by Dame Rachel de Souza

As Children's Commissioner for England, it is my job to listen to children. To make sure that everyone understands what they need to thrive, to be happy and healthy. I want every child to feel heard and listened to. That their views, experiences, and outcomes are prioritised and that we deliver meaningful change for children. That is why, when I took up post last March, the first thing I did was to launch The Big Ask survey. It is the largest-ever survey of children in England with over 550,000 responses, giving children the opportunity to tell me what matters to them the most.

The Big Ask was launched as we were emerging from the pandemic, and I heard loud and clear from children just how much they had missed school. They told me how they missed learning face-to-face with their teachers, they missed spending time with their friends, and they missed the extra-curricular opportunities provided by their schools that brought joy and excitement to their lives. The pandemic fundamentally recast the relationship and role of schools in children's lives. These testimonies from The Big Ask confirm what I observed in my career as a teacher and headteacher and as Children's Commissioner, that school is the right place for children to be. And yet, since even before the pandemic, there is a group of children who struggle to attend school regularly and who have fallen through the gaps in our education system.

I have made attendance an absolute priority as a result. The unique and extensive research, evidence, and policy work that my office has conducted has found that there is no one answer or driver as to why some children do not attend school regularly, or in some cases, at all. Indeed, there is not even the data to show how many children are missing from education altogether. What we do know is that in autumn 2021 there were 1.7 million children persistently absent from school, meaning that they missed at least seven days of school in the term, and 98,000 children severely absent, meaning that they missed at least 35 days of school in the term. Vulnerable children were more likely to be absent nationally: 33.6% of pupils receiving Free School Meals (FSM) were persistently absent in autumn 2021, compared to 20% of pupils not in receipt of FSM.

My 'Attendance Audit' is shining a light on the current issues and what the solutions are to fixing attendance. This report is the fourth in a series of publications from my office as part of this. In this report I wanted to test a hypothesis that attending in the first week of a new school year was important if a child was to have good attendance throughout

the rest of the term. To prove this, I needed to go beyond termly statistics and look in-depth at the daily patterns of children's attendance, to understand the impact of the first days of term and at what point an absence from school should trigger support. This is unique and has not been done before. My previous research tried to understand why children miss school, this report provides the evidence for when schools need to intervene, before a child becomes persistently or severely absent.

This analysis found two striking things: firstly, children who missed the second, third and fourth day of a new term were predicted an overall absence of around 43%, or 30 days across the term, significantly more than their peers who attended those first few days. Secondly, whilst Fridays are the most common day for children to be absent, it is actually those children who miss mid-weekdays, Tuesday-Thursday, who are more likely to be habitually absent from school.

We know that the reasons for absence are complex – it is a system issue as well as an individual one. For some, the pandemic has led to disengagement, for others it is waiting for a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) assessment, and for some it is the lack of appropriate provision. Some children cite mental health as the reason for poor attendance, theirs, or that of their parents, for others it is caring responsibilities. Whilst parents are responsible for ensuring their child goes to school every day, and is ready to learn, we need a system that supports that for every child.

My target of 100% attendance in September is about everyone that works with children, and has a responsibility towards them, coalescing around an ambitious target. It is not about blaming parents if the system cannot, at present, support their child attending school. It is an ambition for the system. To achieve it, we need system wide alongside child-level solutions.

This evidence provides a roadmap for schools and local authorities to target limited attendance resource, to providing interventions immediately to those children who miss one of the first few days of term. We don't need to wait until a child has already missed seven or more days of the term to intervene and ask whether that pupil requires additional support. I want to see schools and local authorities working together to support these children and their families, so they don't slip through the gaps in education. This analysis shows that this can be done. Now let's get on and do it.

Executive Summary

The Children's Commissioner heard from The Big Ask, the largest-ever survey of children in England, just how important education is to children. For this reason, the Commissioner has made education an absolute priority. If children are to get the full benefits of school, including the aspects that they value the most, such as face to face learning with teachers, any additional support they need, time with their friends and access to their favourite extra-curricular activities, then children need to attend school regularly. However, evidence has shown that millions of children are not attending school regularly, and some not at all.

So, this year, the Children's Commissioner launched her Attendance Audit, which set out an overarching goal that every child should be in school every day, supported and ready to learn¹. Every child has the right to a fantastic education. To achieve this, we need to be able to identify the early warning signs for persistent and severe absence, so that schools and local authorities can intervene immediately, before a child has missed weeks or even months of education.

From this Attendance Audit, we learned that pupils appeared to be more likely to miss days at the start and end of the week. It also appeared that the first week of term was critical for getting pupils into school and settled into the school routine.

To gain new insights into patterns of school absence, and explore the themes raised during the Audit, the Children's Commissioner's office has conducted new analysis of daily attendance records from three Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). The MATs were geographically dispersed, including primary, secondary, and all-through schools, with a total sample size of around 32,000 children.

The analysis presented in this paper looks at both unauthorised and authorised absence across the term. Authorised absence means that the school has either given approval either in advance or following an absence from the school, and authorisations can be given in several circumstances. Unauthorised absence means that the school has not approved for the pupil to be absent. As the pandemic contributed towards authorised

¹ Children's Commissioner, *Voices of England's Missing Children*, 2022. Available at: [Voices of England's Missing Children | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/missing-children/) Accessed on 04/07/2022.

absence in autumn 2021, we focus our analysis of attendance patterns on unauthorised absence.

Analysis of the data shows that:

- The majority of children, (60%), had no unauthorised absence in the autumn 2021 term.
- Children who were out of school on a period of unauthorised absence (the remaining 40%) have distinct patterns of absence:
 - 13% only missed a single day or half a day for unauthorised absence.
 - 9% had a pattern of multiple one-off unauthorised absences.
 - 3% had one period of unauthorised absence spanning over several days.
 - 14% had a more worrying pattern of both a multi-day period of unauthorised absence and several one-off days. This group had an average of nine different periods of absence.
- Attending the first week of school is a strong indicator that a child will go on to attend school regularly throughout the term:
 - Children who had an unauthorised absence on any day in the first week of term, experienced an overall unauthorised absence rate of 25% compared to an overall unauthorised absence rate of two percent for pupils who didn't miss any sessions in the first week.
 - Missing the second, third or fourth day of the new term is associated with an overall absence of around 43%, or 30 days of school, compared to missing days near the end of term, which were associated with an overall absence of 20-30%.
- Children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and children receiving pupil premium were more likely to have higher levels of absence than their peers:
 - Having an EHCP is associated with four additional days of absence relative to not having any SEND support.
 - Receiving pupil premium is associated with three additional days of absence relative to not receiving pupil premium.
- However, while children in care had similar levels of absence to their peers, when we control for other factors, children in care were actually slightly less likely to be off school than other children. Being in care is associated with two fewer days of absence than not being in care.
- Unauthorised absence is most likely to occur on Mondays and Fridays, with 23% of children in our sample missing at least one Friday in the term for unauthorised reasons. The most popular Fridays for non-attendance were October 22nd, the

Friday before the October half term and December 17th, the last day of the autumn term.

- However, an unauthorised absence on any given Monday or Friday throughout the term is associated with a lower risk of becoming persistently unauthorised absent than an unauthorised absence on any given Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday.
- Authorised absences began to increase after the second week of the new term and were similarly more likely to occur on Fridays. The rate of authorised absence was 6% on Fridays, compared to 5% on other weekdays.
- There's a wide variation in the use of specific absence codes.
 - For example, in one school there were virtually no sessions missed due to absence without authorisation whereas in another school 8% of sessions were unauthorised absences of this type.
 - Whilst the average rate of absence for children arriving late to school was 2%, in one school there was no absence recorded as late yet in another it was 12%.

Back Into School

This analysis indicates that in addition to the policy solutions previously set out by the Commissioner in the findings from the Attendance Audit, there are actions which, if taken by the education sector ahead of the September term could make a real difference:

Preparing for a new term

Children need to feel excited and supported to attend school in the first week in September. To achieve this, the Children's Commissioner will be supporting children and schools through the Back Into School campaign². Additionally, all local authorities need to have a plan for supporting their vulnerable pupils, working with other professionals in their lives to get them the support they need to attend.

Schools need to use the last few weeks of term to ensure that their pupils feel ready for the new school year and have plans in place to support children over the summer to engage or re-engage in education this autumn. To support schools with this, the Children's Commissioner has produced an assembly template which can be used by

² Webpage, Children's Commissioner, *Back Into School*, 2022. Available at: [Back into School | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/back-into-school/) Accessed on 11/07/2022.

primary schools to support their pupils with the transition to year 7 ahead of the new school year. The assembly is available [here](#)³.

Ready with a school place from September 4th

The Attendance Audit found that the first few days of term can be particularly turbulent for children with additional needs who have not been allocated to their preferred school place.

The Children's Commissioner is responding to Department for Education's (DfE) consultation on the SEND green paper on behalf of children with SEND.⁴ Whilst reform to the SEND system should see this phenomenon reducing, we cannot ignore the needs of children now. Local authorities should work with families, listening to concerns about the suitability of places and proactively identify suitable places, if only on an interim basis, to avoid children missing long periods of education.

Making use of the data available

Schools need to be making full use of their data from the first day of term. This report provides a roadmap for how schools and DfE can utilise daily attendance data to identify the children and young people who will most benefit from an early intervention.

Where resources are limited, attendance officers and pastoral teams can target the children who miss one of the first days of term and children who are starting to show a pattern of missing days in the middle of the week, which are the most indicative of a move towards low attendance.

Children should receive an intervention as soon as possible, with the school starting a dialogue with the child and their family as to the underlying reasons for absences and implementing bespoke solutions to support that child back into attending full-time.

Attendance codes

DfE are consulting on simplifying the attendance register into a single list of reasons a pupil is 'attending' or 'absent', to make the national attendance codes clearer for parents,

³ Webpage, Children's Commissioner, *Back Into School: Resources for schools*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/back-into-school/resources-for-schools/> Accessed on 13/07/2022.

⁴ Webpage, DfE, *SEND review: right support, right place, right time*, 2022, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/send-review-right-support-right-place-right-time> . Accessed 13/07/2022.

schools and local authorities.

The Children's Commissioner welcomes this consultation, which will hopefully remove some of the variation in application of the codes. In addition to simplification of the codes, clearer guidance is needed on the interpretation and implementation of the reasons for absence set out in legislation.

Reducing absence on Fridays

Fridays were the most common day for school absence. Schools must work with their children and their families to highlight the importance of attending school every day and that whilst one day may not feel like much, it can make it harder to keep up in classes, as each lesson builds on the previous one.

Schools could also consider making Fridays more appealing by holding popular clubs or extra-curricular activities at Friday lunch times or after school.

Research design and methodology

Prior to the 2021-22 academic year, DfE has only collected attendance totals for pupils on a termly basis, through a school census conducted in the autumn, spring, and summer terms. This data shows whether a pupil was persistently or severely absent, meaning that they missed at least 10% or at least 50% or more of possible sessions⁵, respectively, across the term, but it does not show which days or weeks children were the most likely to be absent.

This report looks at both unauthorised and authorised absence across the term. DfE guidance to schools specifies that authorised absence means that the school has either given approval in advance for a pupil of compulsory school age to be away or has accepted an explanation offered afterwards as justification for absence. Currently, authorised absence codes cover a range of situations children are affected by, including: a leave of absence authorised by the school, a child excluded but no alternative provision made, a holiday authorised by the school, illness, medical or dental appointments, religious observance, study leave and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller absence⁶.

Sample description

The MATs which provided data comprised of 54 schools in geographically disperse areas across England. Schools within our selection criteria were primary, secondary, or mixed age schools. Analysis was carried out on 53 of the Academies provided (as we excluded one Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), which included 32,176 pupils⁷.

⁵ Note: DfE guidance specifies that every school day must have two sessions, divided by a break in the middle of the day. The length of each session, break and the school day is determined by the schools governing body.

⁶ DfE, *School attendance: guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities*, 2022 [PDF]. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1076127/School_attendance_guidance_May-2022_.pdf Accessed on 05/07/2022.

⁷ Note: All data cleaning and analysis was conducted using R. All personally identifiable data was removed so that analysis was conducted on anonymised data. The same data cleaning process was automatically applied to all academies in the trusts.

Our sample, split by secondary schools and primary schools, had higher absence than the national averages in autumn 2021, potentially due to a higher share of pupils on free school meals (36% in our sample, compared to 22.5% nationally, Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of absence rates between schools in our sample and national rates⁸.

	Overall absence	Unauthorized absence	Persistent absence	Severe absence
Sample – all schools	8.6%	3.2%	28.5%	2.9%
National – all schools	6.9%	1.6%	23.5%	1.4%
Sample – Primary	5.4%	1.3%	18.1%	1.0%
National – Primary	5.7%	1.2%	19.5%	0.6%
Sample – Secondary	9.4%	3.6%	30.8%	3.2%
National – Secondary	8.2%	2.1%	27.7%	2.1%

Data collected

The attendance registers held by the MATs included the following data:

- Whether the child was marked present or absent for the session
- The code used to represent the type of attendance or absence. A full breakdown of the distribution of attendance and absence codes is provided in Table 1 in the Annex.
- Child characteristics including:
 - English as an additional language (EAL)
 - Whether the child has an Education Health and Care Plan
 - Looked after child (LAC) status
 - Year group
 - Gender
 - Whether the child receives pupil premium
 - Child’s home postcode

⁸ Note: we present the attendance separately for primary and secondary schools because our sample has a higher share of secondary schools than nationally, and secondary schools have lower attendance on average.

In addition to these characteristics, we matched the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)⁹ score, based on the child's postcode and matched the data to the school census to include a variable on ethnicity in our analysis.

Isolating predictors of absence

Children can have multiple characteristics, for example some children may be receiving pupil premium and speak English as an additional language. We use a statistical technique called regression analysis, to isolate the relationship between a particular characteristic and the overall absence rate and unauthorised absence rate, holding all other characteristics constant.

Our analysis can identify characteristics that are associated with being absent from school, such as care status, but it is not possible to say whether their care status caused school absence. This is because there could be another characteristic not captured in this data which is associated with being in care, such as frequent house moves, which could be driving the absence from school. The results of this analysis are presented in the [predictors of analysis](#) chapter.

⁹ Note: The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) measures the proportion of children aged 0-15 who live in income deprived households by Lower Super Output Area.

Descriptive Findings

Reasons for absence

The majority of absence from schools during the autumn 2021 term was authorised (63%). Periods of unauthorised absence only making up 37% of total absence. The largest driver of absence was illness, with four percent of possible sessions missed due to authorised illness. 14% of children in our sample were persistently absent due to illness, which matches the national statistics for persistent absence due to illness¹⁰. Following the removal of the use of the 'X' code for COVID-19 self-isolation it is not possible to determine what proportion of absence was due to COVID-19, but it is likely a cause of some of this absence. Schools experienced varying levels of absence caused by illness. In one school, only 1% of children were absent due to illness in the term, compared to almost 9% in another.

The second largest driver of absence was children absent without authorisation – known as 'code O'. Absent without authorisation can include, for example, when a child is truant from school, or when a parent informs the school that the child is ill, and the school does not authorise the absence for illness. On average across all schools in the sample, 3% of sessions were missed without authorisation. However, some schools were experiencing significantly more unauthorised absence of this type than others. In one school there were virtually no sessions missed due to this whereas in another school 8% of sessions were unauthorised absences without authorisation.

The absence codes also show a stark difference in the percentage of absent sessions due to arriving late to school. Whilst the average rate of absence for children arriving late to school was 2%, in one school there was no absence recorded as late yet in another it was 12%.

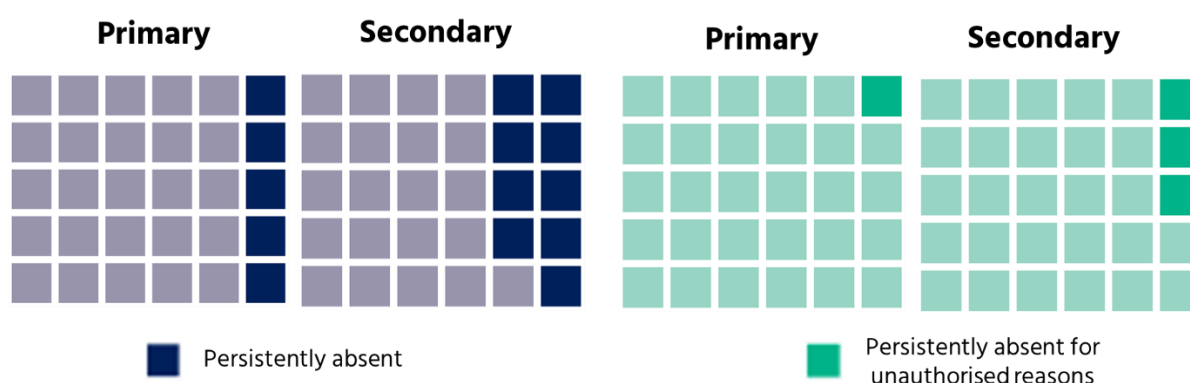
¹⁰ Note: The guidance for self-isolation for positive COVID-19 cases during the autumn 2021 term specified that individuals with a positive lateral flow test needed to self-isolate for 10 full days or seven days following two negative lateral flow test results taken on consecutive days. Children did not need to self-isolate if a family member tested positive for COVID-19 at this time. UKHSA, *[Withdrawn] Stay at home: guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infection*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection#NotRequired> Accessed on 05/07/2022.

These variations indicate some confusion and variation of practice in the application of different absence codes across schools.

Common patterns of absence

In primary schools, 18% of pupils were persistently absent and in secondary schools 31% of pupils were persistently absent. This means that in an average primary classroom of 30 pupils five pupils were persistently absent and in an average secondary school classroom nine pupils were persistently absent (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Illustrative classes by absence levels in autumn 2021¹¹



As COVID-19 contributed towards levels of persistent absence in autumn 2021, we focussed our analysis of attendance patterns on unauthorised absence. Pupils in the sample fall into several categories of unauthorised attendance with distinct patterns:

- The majority of children, (60%), had no unauthorised absence in the autumn 2021 term
- Children who were out of school on a period of unauthorised absence (the remaining 40%) have distinct patterns of absence:
 - 13% only missed a single day or half a day for unauthorised absence.
 - 9% had a pattern of multiple one-off unauthorised absences. This group had three different periods of absence on average.
 - 3% had one period of unauthorised absence spanning over multiple days. Among this group, their absence was an average of two days.
 - 14% had a pattern of both a multi-day period of unauthorised absence and several one-off days. This group had an average of nine different periods of absence.

¹¹ Assuming for illustrative purposes classes of 30

Patterns of absence by child characteristics

We also explored the absence rates of pupils by the characteristics available in the data which indicate vulnerability. As Table 2 shows, children with an EHCP had the highest rate of overall absence (16%) and the highest rate of unauthorised absence (7%). Table 3 shows that Looked After Children (LAC) were the least likely to have unauthorised absence, with 71% of LAC having no unauthorised absence, compared to 52% of children with an EHCP and 48% of children receiving pupil premium.

Table 2. Absence levels and patterns of absence, by child characteristics.

Group	Overall absence	Unauthorised absence	Share persistently absent	Share severely absent	Average number of different absences
All pupils	9.2%	3.6%	28.5%	2.9%	2
PP	12.0%	5.5%	36.1%	4.7%	3
EHCP	16.0%	6.6%	39.1%	10.3%	4
LAC	8.9%	3.4%	22.0%	4.0%	1

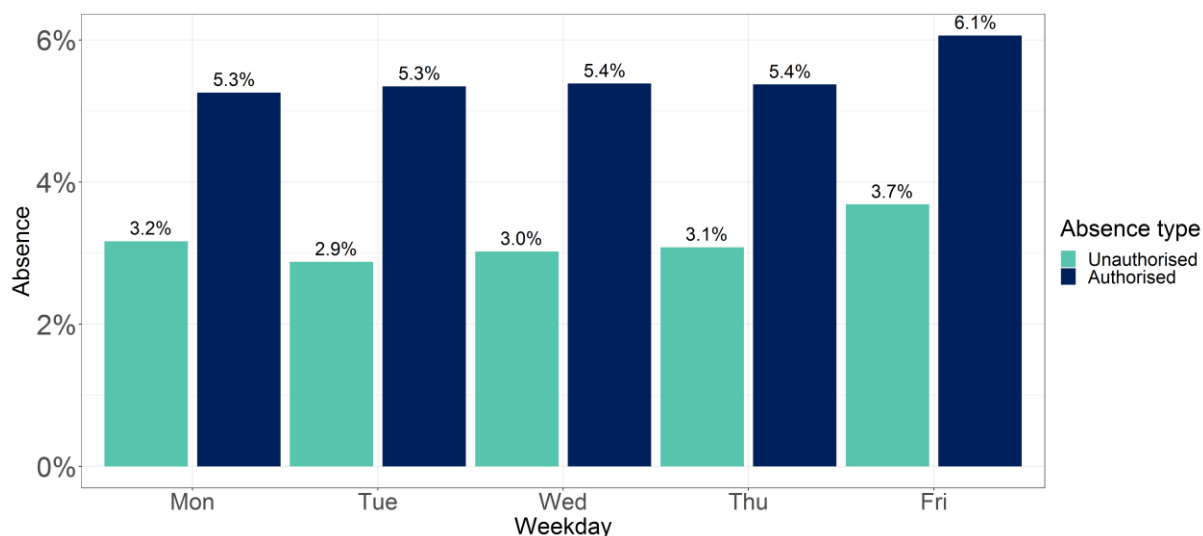
Table 3. Share of pupils by absence pattern, by child characteristics.

Group	No UA	One half day or one day	Multiple one-off days	One long period of UA	A long period of UA and multiple one-off days
All pupils	60.1%	13.4%	9.4%	2.9%	14.2%
PP	47.9%	14.6%	13.3%	2.8%	21.4%
EHCP	52.3%	15.9%	12.9%	2.1%	16.8%
LAC	70.6%	11.5%	6.8%	1.9%	9.3%

Daily patterns of absence

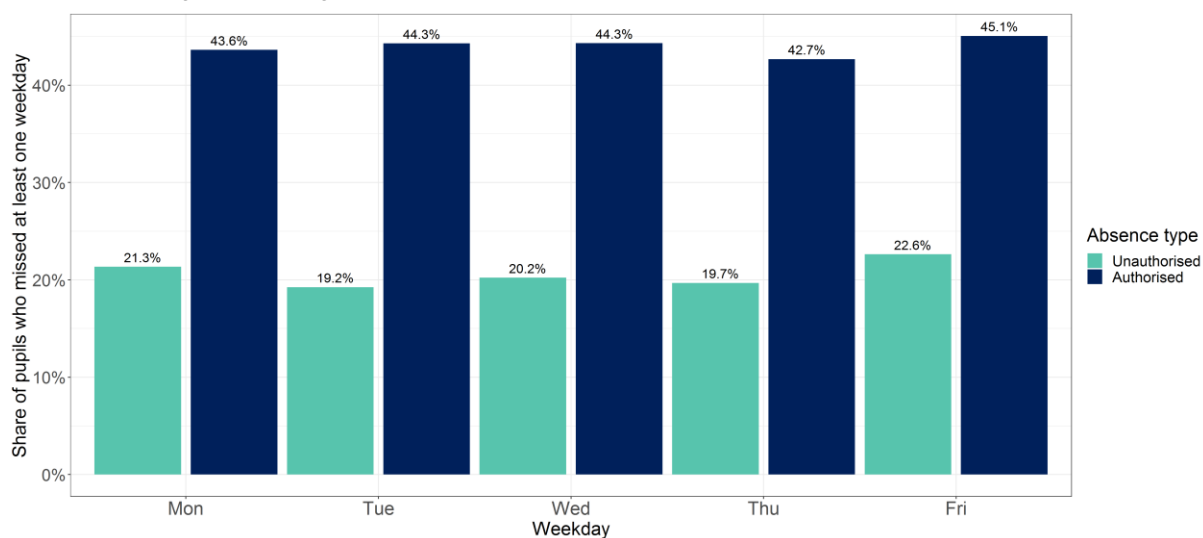
Absence, both authorised and unauthorised, was most likely to occur on Fridays, as shown in Figure 2. The average rate of unauthorised absence on a Friday was four percent compared to three percent on a Tuesday. Authorised absence follows the same pattern, with an average rate of authorised absence of 6% on Fridays, compared to 5% on a Tuesday.

Figure 2. The average rate of absence per weekday, by authorisation status, for the autumn 2021 term.



We also examine the share of pupils that miss at least one day. Figure 3 shows that 45% of pupils had at least one authorised absence on a Friday and 23% have at least one unauthorised absence on a Friday.

Figure 3. The percentage of pupils who missed at least one weekday in the autumn 2021 term, by weekday missed and authorisation status.



While Monday and Friday absences are more common than mid-week absences, an unauthorised absence on a Monday or Friday is associated with a lower overall unauthorised absence rate and lower risk of becoming persistently unauthorised absent than an unauthorised absence on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday (see Table 3 in the Annex).

The calendar in Figure 4 shows the average rate of unauthorised absence on each day of the term. This shows how absence generally increases throughout each week, with Fridays being the most poorly attended. The first day of term for some schools, Friday 3rd September, saw a higher rate of unauthorised absence than the following full week of the new term. The week that falls before a school holiday also see much higher absence. This is particularly the last Friday before the October half-term (22nd October) and the week before the Christmas break. On the 22nd October, 91% of the absence was coded as absent from school without authorisation and 7% was holiday not authorised by the school.

Figure 4. Unauthorised absence rates over the autumn 2021 term.

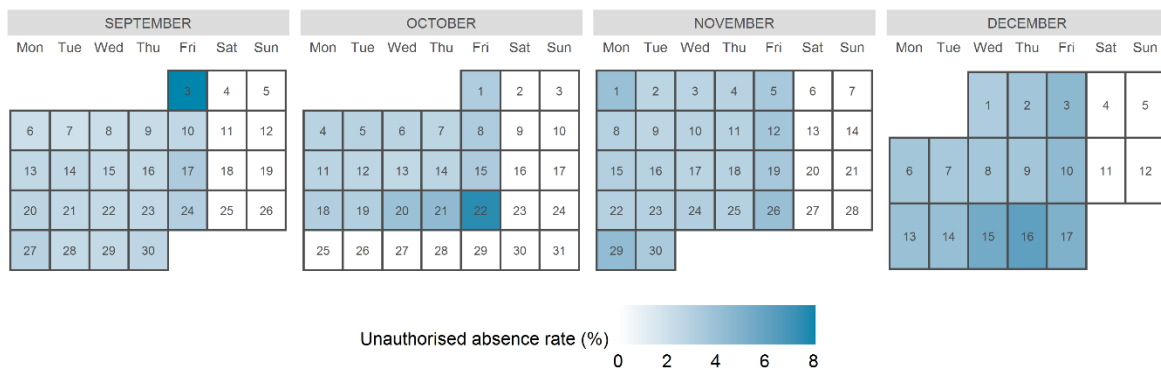
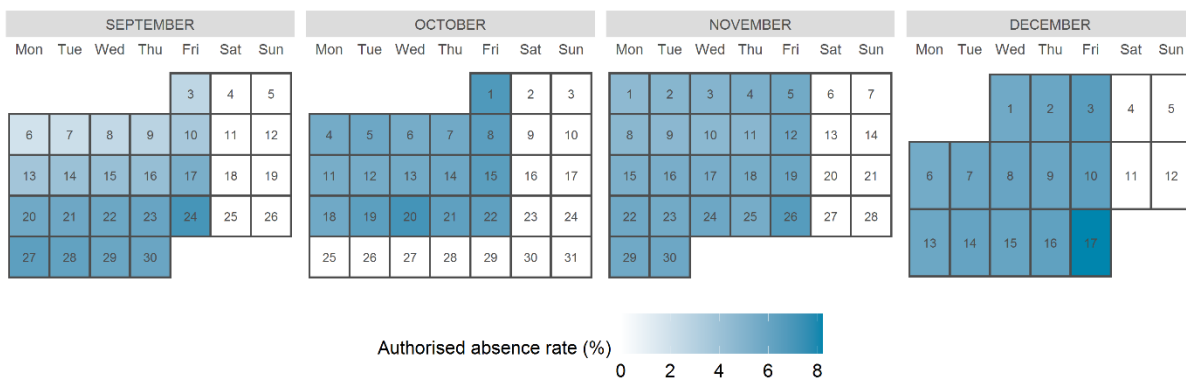


Figure 5 shows that whilst the rate of authorised absence is higher overall than unauthorised absence across the term, it follows a similar pattern to unauthorised absence, with more authorised absence on Fridays across the term and in the last few days before a holiday. Authorised absences were lowest at the start of a new half term.

Figure 5. Authorised absence rates for the autumn 2021 term.



Predictors of absence

Importance of pupil characteristics

In this analysis, we consider how the overall rate of absence (percentage of possible sessions missed), and unauthorised rate of absence (percentage of possible sessions missed due to unauthorised reasons) relate to the following pupil characteristics:

- Demographic characteristics including year group, gender, ethnicity, the pupil's school, and whether the child lived in a deprived area.
- Indicators of vulnerability including, children receiving pupil premium, LAC, children with an EHCP or those who have EAL.

We find that, controlling for these characteristics¹², children with an EHCP and children on pupil premium were more likely to have higher levels of absence than their peers:

- Having an EHCP is associated with four additional days of absence relative to not having any SEND support.
- Receiving pupil premium is associated with three additional days of absence relative to not receiving pupil premium. Living in the bottom 10% of deprived neighbourhoods is associated with one additional day of absence than living in the top 10% of deprived neighbourhoods.

Absence also increases with age. Being in year 9, 10 or 11 is associated with an additional two days of absence compared to being in year 1.

While children in care had similar levels of absence to their peers, when we control for other factors, children in care were actually slightly less likely to be off school than other children. Being in care is associated with two fewer days of absence than not being in care.

Controlling for the observable variables in our sample, children with an Asian ethnicity are associated with two fewer days of absence than children with White British ethnicity and children with Black ethnicity or Chinese ethnicity are associated with three to four fewer days of absence than children with a White British ethnicity. The full results of this regression analysis can be found in Table 2 in the Annex.

¹² Note that the day equivalents are generated by converting percentage point changes reported in Table 1 in the Annex into days assuming a term of 69 days

Importance of particular days of term

We find that children absent on the second, third or fourth day of term for unauthorised reasons were more likely to have higher levels of absence overall. As shown in Figure 6, missing the second, third or fourth day is associated with an overall absence of around 43%, or 30 days, compared to missing days before half term or near the end of term, which is associated with an overall absence of 20-30%. As shown in Figure 7, missing the second, third or fourth day is associated with unauthorised absence of around 35% compared to missing days before half term or near the end of term, which is associated with an overall unauthorised absence of 15-20%.

Figure 6: Predicted overall absence conditional on missing a particular day of school for an unauthorised reason¹³.

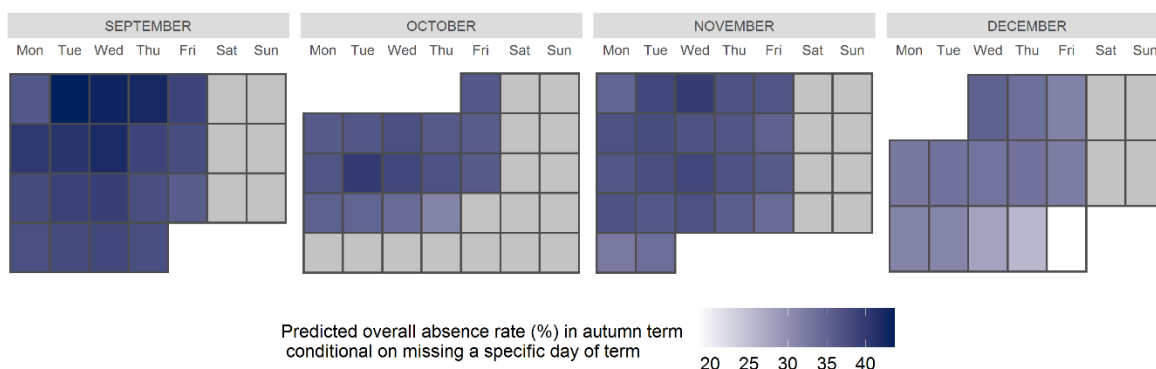
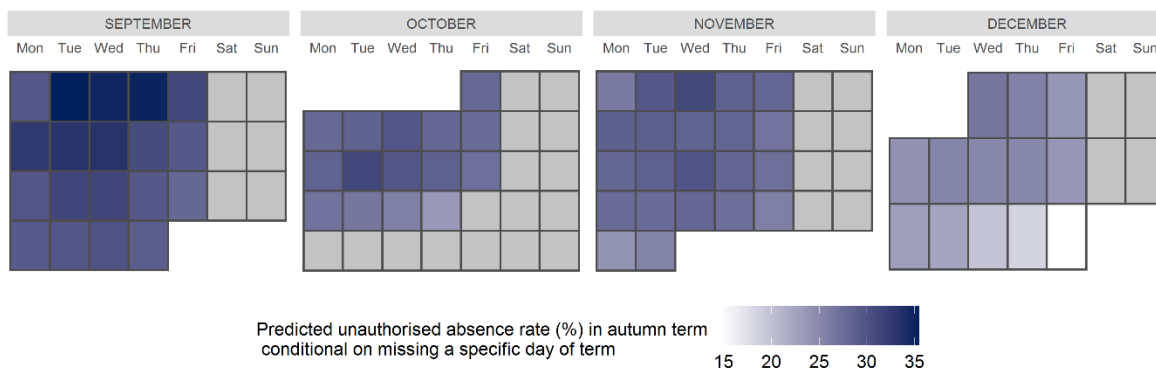


Figure 7: Predicted unauthorised absence rate conditional on missing a particular day of school for an unauthorised reason.



¹³ These predicted rates of absence are generated from running the same regression as in Table 2 of the Annex but with an indicator for unauthorised absence on a particular day of term. The results are illustrated above assuming September 6th is the first day of term and December 17th is the last day of term, as these the most common term dates in our sample.

Back Into School in September

These findings show how important it is to look beyond attendance totals to children's daily patterns of attendance.

This analysis indicates that in addition to the policy solutions previously set out by the Commissioner, there are actions which, if taken by the education sector ahead of the September term could make a real difference.

Preparing for a new term

Children need to feel excited and supported to attend school in the first week in September. The analysis of the MAT data shows how crucial the first week is for establishing the routine of school and that non-attendance in the first few days is a strong predictor of later absence. All levels of the education sector, from DfE to individual schools need to be focused on that first week of term, making sure that pupils and staff are prepared.

The Children's Commissioner will be supporting children and schools through the Back Into School campaign and will use this data and further analysis to develop guides for attendance officers and pastoral staff to share the lessons learned from our analysis¹⁴.

Absence rates are much higher for certain groups of pupils, such as those with SEND or those on pupil premium. All local authorities need to have a plan for supporting their vulnerable pupils. The Commissioner has written to Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) to ask for their plans for September and will share best practice through the Back Into School campaign. Local authorities need to advertise support that they can offer, particularly to their most vulnerable families and families who have withdrawn into elective home education (EHE) this academic year, and social workers need to see school attendance as a key outcome in their support plans for families.

Schools need to use the last few weeks of term to ensure that their pupils feel ready for the new school year and have plans in place to support children over the summer to engage or re-engage in education this autumn. In several schools that the Commissioner's team have visited they do this by transitioning pupils to the next year group in the last half term of the academic year. This means that pupils are returning to the familiar in

¹⁴ Webpage, Children's Commissioner, *Back Into School*, 2022. Available at: [Back into School | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/back-into-school/)

September having already met their new head of year and for those joining year 10, they have already started their optional subjects and GCSE preparation.

Another school visited as part of the Attendance Audit used part of their COVID-19 funding to deliver a week-long summer school in the last week of August, for their new incoming year 7 students. This gave new students a chance to settle into the routine of secondary school and meet their new teachers in a more informal way.

In another school, they have a student wellbeing mentor programme which supports primary school students transitioning into year 7 who might be nervous or anxious about moving up to 'big' school. As one 15-year-old student wellbeing mentor said during a focus group conducted for the mental health consultation:

'It's a new thing, wellbeing mentors partnering with local primary schools. It can stop the start of a mental health issue, helping with the transition into secondary school. They start off with support, someone they know' – Girl, 15.

Of course, these solutions cannot be implemented overnight. For schools which currently do not support transition in these ways, there are still things that can be done between now and the September term. For example, producing a video tour of the school, introducing new pupils to their new teachers and classrooms so they know what to expect on the first day or sending regular communications to parents over the summer with information for children on what to look forward to in the new term. Messages from school should go beyond practical information about uniform and behaviour policies and concentrate on preparing children to start school excited and ready to learn.

The Children's Commissioner has produced an assembly template which can be used by primary schools to support their pupils with the transition to year 7 ahead of the new school year. The assembly is available [here](#)¹⁵.

Ready with a school place from September 4th

The Attendance Audit found that the first few days of term can be particularly turbulent for children with additional needs who have not been allocated to their preferred school

¹⁵ Webpage, Children's Commissioner, *Back Into School: Resources for schools*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/back-into-school/resources-for-schools/> Accessed on 13/07/2022.

place. Often in these cases, families are keeping their children out of school until an appropriate place is identified.

The Children's Commissioner is responding to DfE's consultation on the SEND green paper on behalf of children with SEND. Whilst the recommendations of the SEND review and reform to the system should see this phenomenon reducing, we cannot ignore the needs of children now. Local authorities should work with families, listening to concerns about the suitability of places and proactively identify suitable places, if only on an interim basis, to avoid children missing long periods of education.

Making use of the data available

This new analysis demonstrates how powerful data on individual patterns of absence can be to identify children who are beginning to miss school and support them to avoid long periods of absence.

Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation found that targeted pupil interventions were one of the most effective means of improving that pupil's attendance¹⁶. Schools need to be making full use of their data from the first day of term. This report provides a roadmap for how schools and DfE can utilise daily attendance data to identify the children and young people who will most benefit from an early intervention.

In large secondary schools, it may not be feasible for an attendance officer to speak with every child who misses one day of school. Instead, where resources are limited, attendance officers and pastoral teams can target the children who miss one of the first days of term and children who are starting to show a pattern of missing days in the middle of the week, which are the most indicative of a move towards low attendance. These children should receive an intervention as soon as possible, with the school starting a dialogue with the child and their family as to the underlying reasons for absences and implementing bespoke solutions to support that child back into attending full-time. The Attendance Audit report provides a deeper level of understanding of the reasons children may miss school and the solutions that they need to best support them, based on research with children missing from education. Schools should use this evidence,

¹⁶ Education Endowment Foundation, *Attendance interventions rapid evidence assessment*, 2022.

Available at: [Attendance interventions rapid evidence assessment | EEF \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk) Accessed on 11/07/2022.

alongside conversations with their families and knowledge of their local community to implement the right plan of support for each individual child.

The DfE is trialling collecting daily attendance data from schools through a system which extracts data automatically, at no cost to the school¹⁷. As our Attendance Audit identified, the lag in attendance data reporting severely limits the ability of services to be proactive with falling attendance, rather they are only reacting to trends several months after the fact. The Children's Commissioner has welcomed the DfE trial and is encouraging all schools to take part. The trial is also sharing information back to schools, MATs and local authorities, who will be able to view the data and use this essential insight to respond swiftly to drops in attendance and ensure support is in place as soon as possible.

Attendance codes

The Attendance Audit found that there are inconsistencies in how and when schools are recording absences through registration attendance codes. This means that local authorities, and the Government, may not receive an accurate picture of who is in school, and why children are absent.

There are several codes used by schools in school registers to indicate reasons for pupil absence. The 'B' code, for example, is meant to be used when pupils are present at an off-site educational activity that has been approved by the school. This code is not to be used to represent children who are doing schoolwork at home. Inconsistency in the use of the code means that some children could be 'B' coded when they are not attending education provision.

The data collected for this analysis does not allow for an in-depth investigation into the use of attendance codes within the schools included in the collection. However, it has further demonstrated that the use of different codes varies significantly between schools.

The DfE have proposed simplifying the attendance register into a single list of reasons a pupil is 'attending' or 'absent', to make the national attendance codes clearer for parents, schools and local authorities. Under these proposals, it will be clearer when a child is in

¹⁷ DfE, *Share your daily school attendance data*, 2022. Available at: [Share your daily school attendance data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/107422/share-your-daily-school-attendance-data.pdf) Accessed on 01/06/2022.

an appropriate form of education – either at their original school, another school or place for approved education¹⁸.

The Children’s Commissioner welcomes this consultation, which will hopefully remove some of the variation in application of the codes. However, the consultation does not address the discrepancy caused by the authorisation of absence being applied inconsistently by headteachers between schools. Alongside the simplification of the attendance codes, clearer guidance is needed on the interpretation and implementation of the reasons for absence set out in section 444 of the Education Act 1996.

Reducing absence on Fridays

Fridays were the most common day for school absence. This could be due to parents organising holidays or long weekends starting on a Friday, or children choosing to miss Friday as it is seen as less important.

Schools must work with their children and their families to highlight the importance of attending school every day and that whilst one day may not feel like much, it can make it harder to keep up in classes, as each lesson builds on the previous one.

Schools could also consider making Fridays more appealing by holding popular clubs or extra-curricular activities at Friday lunch times or after school.

¹⁸ DfE, *Modernising school attendance and admission registers and setting national thresholds for legal intervention*, 2022 [PDF]. Available at: https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-attendance-policy-and-strategy-team/school-registers-and-national-thresholds-for-legal/supporting_documents/Consultation_Document_Pupil_Registration_Regulations_Thresholds_Legal_Intervention.pdf. Accessed on 05/07/2022.

Conclusion

This new analysis demonstrates how a forensic examination of individual patterns of attendance can help to identify pupils at risk of missing long periods of school, so that support can be provided quickly to avoid this.

This report for the first time proves how important getting children back at the start of the school term is for facilitating consistent attendance.

It is welcome that the Government is introducing a new system to gather daily attendance data and sharing this with schools and local authorities so that they can use it to increase school attendance at a local level – this pilot must be rolled out to all schools.

Everyone involved in supporting children needs to work together to encourage and support every child to get back into school in September. The Children's Commissioner will continue to lead the way so that all children can be supported back into the classroom, ready to learn, to have fun and to thrive.

Annex

Table 1: Attendance and Absence codes used a share of total possible sessions.

Attendance or absence code	Authorised	Across sample (%)	Across schools (%)	
			Minimum	Maximum
B: off-site educational activity	Authorised – off-site education	0.43	0.01	1.28
C: leave of absence authorised by school	Authorised – out of school	0.51	0.03	1.88
E: excluded but no alternative provision made	Authorised – out of school	0.34	0	1.43
G: holiday not authorised by the school	Unauthorised	0.24	0.07	0.89
H: holiday authorised by the school	Authorised – out of school	0.02	0	0.13
I: illness (not medical or dental appointments)	Authorised – out of school	4.37	1.08	8.63
J: at an interview with prospective employers, or another educational establishment	Authorised – off-site education	0.01	0	0.03
L: late arrival before the register has closed	Present at school	2.01	0.14	12.14
M: medical or dental appointments	Authorised – out of school	0.26	0.09	0.52
N: reason for absence not yet provided (temporary code)	Unauthorised	0.07	0	0.89
O: absent from school without authorisation	Unauthorised	2.76	0.09	7.94
P: participating in a supervised sporting activity	Authorised – off-site education	0.15	0	1.88
R: religious observance	Authorised – out of school	0.01	0	0.03

S: study leave	Authorised – out of school	0	0	0
T: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller absence	Authorised – out of school	0.02	0	0.09
U: arrived in school after registration closed	Unauthorised	0.13	0	0.59
V: educational visit or trip	Authorised – off-site education	0.26	0.01	1.46
W: work experience	Authorised – off-site education	0.01	0	0.04

Table 2: OLS regression results

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Overall absence (%)	Unauthorised absence (%)
Year Group (Reference: Year 1)		
Year2	-0.009** (0.004)	-0.0001 (0.002)
Year3	-0.014*** (0.004)	-0.003 (0.003)
Year4	-0.008** (0.004)	-0.001 (0.003)
Year5	-0.009** (0.004)	-0.001 (0.003)
Year6	-0.008 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.003)
Year7	-0.009*** (0.003)	-0.005** (0.002)
Year8	0.012*** (0.004)	0.006* (0.003)
Year9	0.029*** (0.004)	0.015*** (0.002)
Year10	0.031*** (0.004)	0.015*** (0.003)

Year11	0.032*** (0.003)	0.018*** (0.002)
Gender (Reference: Female)		
Male	-0.007*** (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)
IDACI Decile (Reference: Decile 1 – most deprived)		
IDACI2	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)
IDACI3	-0.008** (0.003)	-0.007*** (0.002)
IDACI4	-0.013*** (0.004)	-0.012*** (0.003)
IDACI5	-0.015*** (0.003)	-0.013*** (0.002)
IDACI6	-0.019*** (0.004)	-0.015*** (0.003)
IDACI7	-0.021*** (0.003)	-0.015*** (0.003)
IDACI8	-0.019*** (0.004)	-0.017*** (0.004)
IDACI9	-0.022*** (0.006)	-0.014*** (0.005)
IDACI10	-0.021*** (0.007)	-0.017*** (0.004)
Pupil Premium	0.042*** (0.003)	0.026*** (0.003)
Looked after child	-0.033*** (0.011)	-0.016* (0.009)
SEND (Reference: No SEND support)		
Receive SEND Support	0.033*** (0.005)	0.014*** (0.002)
EHCP	0.060*** (0.012)	0.026*** (0.008)
English as an additional language	0.008 (0.008)	0.011* (0.006)
Ethnicity (Reference: White)		
Any other ethnic group	-0.021* (0.011)	-0.006 (0.006)

	(0.01)	(0.009)
Asian	-0.026*** (0.009)	-0.013** (0.006)
Black	-0.051*** (0.008)	-0.023*** (0.005)
Chinese	-0.044*** (0.009)	-0.022*** (0.005)
Mixed	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.0005 (0.004)
Unclassified	0.011 (0.010)	0.012* (0.006)
Constant	0.069*** (0.004)	0.015*** (0.003)
Observations	31,909	31,909
R ²	0.091	0.070
Adjusted R ²	0.089	0.068
Residual Std. Error (df = 25842)	0.132	0.097
F Statistic (df = 81; 25842)	38.888***	29.280***

Note: School fixed effects included but not shown

Cluster-robust standard errors used

*p**p***p<0.01

Table 3: Overall absence by day of the week missed for an unauthorised reason

Group of pupils based on unauthorised absence	Overall absence (%)	Overall unauthorised absence (%)	Share of pupils persistently unauthorised absent (%)	Share of pupils severely unauthorised absent (%)	Median number of different periods of unauthorised absence
Missed at least one Monday	21.2	13.6	36	6	3
Missed at least one Tuesday	23.1	15.2	40.7	6.9	4
Missed at least one Wednesday	22.6	14.7	39.4	6.6	4
Missed at least one Thursday	22.6	14.8	40.3	6.5	4
Missed at least one Friday	20.8	13.2	35.3	5.6	3



**Sanctuary Buildings,
20 Great Smith Street London,
SW1P 3BT**

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