



Attendance in Plymouth schools: summary findings and recommendations from the student and parent/carer surveys

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Introduction

Introduction

In 2025, Plymouth Marjon University was commissioned by Plymouth City Council (PCC) to undertake research on attendance, focusing on:

- The key **factors influencing** school attendance
- The main **challenges** that affect school attendance
- The **school-based enablers** that support attendance
- The **parental/carers actions** that **help students attend** school.

The research sought to understand attendance from the **perspectives of both students and parents/carers and comprised two surveys**: one for students and one for parents/carers.



Between March and May 2025, we surveyed 1,164 students and 2,132 parents/carers across Plymouth schools, covering Years 6 to 11.



This report presents the key findings from the student and parent/carers surveys and outlines considerations for further supporting attendance in Plymouth schools. Please contact Elpida Achtaridou (eachtaridou@marjon.ac.uk) if you wish to discuss the detailed student and parent/carers survey results/reports.



Participation rates varied among students and parents/carers from different schools, resulting in some schools being more heavily represented within the dataset than others. Consequently, the experiences of participants from these schools have a greater influence on the findings.

Nevertheless, the size and breadth of the dataset provide valuable insight into school attendance experiences in Plymouth, highlighting key themes and patterns reported by participating students and parents/carers rather than representing universally applicable experiences across all schools.



Further information on the student and parent/carers survey findings, methods, sample and research limitations can be found in the Appendices.

Key findings from the student and parent/carer surveys

What do students and parents/carers report about students' sense of belonging?

Finding 1: Year 8 emerges as a potential pressure point for belonging in the student data, with indications that belonging challenges may persist somewhat throughout the remainder of secondary school. Student and parent/carer perspectives do not necessarily align. In Year 6, there is a relatively even distribution across the belonging levels, while Year 7 shows a somewhat more positive profile. In Year 8, however, a shift towards lower levels of belonging is observed. There are also indications that these challenges persist across Years 9–11. Parents/carers, however, report relatively similar levels of belonging across secondary school.

Finding 2: Belonging challenges appear more pronounced among female students in Years 9–11 than in Years 6–8, with female students in Years 9–11 also reporting lower levels of belonging than their male peers. Student and parent/carer perspectives do not always align. Parents/carers report broadly similar levels of belonging for male and female students and identify a higher proportion of male students as experiencing lower levels of belonging than male students report themselves, especially in Years 9–11.

Finding 3: Belonging may be lower among some student groups. There are indications that students with certain self-reported characteristics, particularly those with SEND, may be more likely to report lower levels of belonging than their peers. However, some of the groups analysed contained relatively small numbers of students and these findings should therefore be interpreted with caution.

What are the main factors influencing school attendance positively?

Finding 4: Attendance appears to be shaped by the interaction of multiple factors rather than by individual influences operating in isolation, with different supports and experiences potentially combining and interacting in ways that reinforce one another over time. There are also indications that the relative prominence and nature of attendance supports may differ depending on students' levels of belonging and wider school experiences.

Finding 5: Attendance appears to be strongly influenced by relational factors.

- **Peers emerge as the strongest reported factor positively influencing attendance.** While many students seem to view their school as supportive for building friendships, students in Years 9–11 and those with the lowest sense of belonging are less likely to feel as supported.
- **Parent/carer influence emerges as the second most important factor** supporting attendance, particularly for students in Years 9–11 and those with the lowest sense of belonging.
- **Relationships with teachers and the wider relational climate of the school** also appear important in shaping attendance.

What are the main barriers to school attendance – Part 1

Finding 6: Health and mental health issues emerge as the most significant barriers to attendance, as identified by both students and parents/carers.

Finding 7: Although students point to year group, gender and belonging-related differences in how health and mental health barriers affect attendance, parents/carers report less variation in health and mental health challenges across student groups.

- **Year group:** Students in Years 9–11 are more likely than those in Years 6–8 to identify health and mental health as barriers to attendance. Parents/carers report a similar pattern, although the difference between year groups is less pronounced.
- **Gender:** Female students are notably more likely than male students to identify health and mental health as barriers to attendance. Parents/carers report a relatively similar pattern, although the difference between female and male students is less pronounced. In contrast, fewer male students identify health and mental health difficulties as attendance barriers, yet a substantially higher proportion of parents/carers of male students report that such challenges affect their attendance. This mixed picture may point to differences in how such challenges are experienced, expressed and/or recognised.
- **Belonging:** Students in Years 9–11 with the lowest sense of belonging are considerably more likely to identify health and mental health as attendance barriers than those with the highest sense of belonging. Parents/carers also report somewhat higher levels of health and mental health challenges among students with lower belonging, although the differences between belonging groups are notably smaller than those reported by students.

Finding 8: Support with health, mental health and SEND often requires coordinated support beyond the school itself across families, health services and wider systems; however, such support appears to be inconsistently experienced. While some students and parents/carers describe highly supportive responses that, in some cases, they directly associate with improved attendance, many comments point to difficulties accessing support, long waiting times, inconsistent implementation of adjustments, and children's needs being misunderstood. Parents/carers frequently call for improvements both within schools and across wider services.

Finding 9: Difficulty waking up in the morning emerges as the second most important attendance barrier reported by students, particularly in Years 9–11, and is often compounded by homework demands, travel challenges and morning and bedtime routines. Parents/carers, however, are less likely than students to identify difficulty waking up in the morning as an attendance barrier. Morning tiredness seems to be a particular challenge for students with the highest sense of belonging. Perceived heavy homework demands - with some students reporting staying up late or missing school to complete assignments - and transport challenges appear to compound morning-related difficulties for some students. Both students and parents/carers point to morning and bedtime routines as factors that can support morning punctuality, with students also emphasising personal skills such as time management and organisation and calling for later school starts and flexible timetabling.

What are the main barriers to school attendance – Part 2

Finding 10: In contrast to students, parents/carers identify term-time holidays as the second biggest challenge to attendance.

Term-time holiday-related attendance policies appear to be a source of tension when attendance expectations conflict with some families' circumstances, priorities and values. Parents/carers referred to issues of equity (e.g., for families who can only afford holidays during term-time), inclusion (e.g., for those with children with SEND who may need to avoid crowded airports), family connection (e.g., for children with dual heritage and relatives living abroad) and the wider cultural and educational benefits of travel.

Holiday-related fines appear to be a particular point of contention. Many parents/carers perceive such fines as unfair and punitive, believing they prioritise attendance targets and accountability measures over the best interests of children and families. These perceptions appear to contribute to strained relationships between parents/carers, schools and the local authority.

Many parents/carers who referred to term-time holidays report their children as having the highest sense of belonging, suggesting that holiday-related attendance policies may be a source of tension, including among families who otherwise may feel engaged with and connected to their child's school.

Parents/carers commonly suggested more flexible approaches, including limited authorised holiday absences, **greater consideration of a child's overall attendance record and circumstances, conditional approval arrangements and improved support for catching up on missed learning.**

Finding 11: Curriculum and lesson engagement emerge as important attendance considerations for many students, even if they are not typically identified as the most influential attendance barriers, and they may become relatively more prominent when relational, emotional and wellbeing-related attendance barriers are less salient, particularly among students in Years 9–11 with the highest sense of belonging. Overall, 45% of students perceived lessons as unengaging and 14% identified them as one of their top attendance barriers. Among students in Years 9–11, 6% of those with the lowest sense of belonging identified lessons as an attendance barrier, compared with 21% of those with the highest sense of belonging. Concerns centred on perceptions of the curriculum and lessons as overloaded and overly exam-driven, with content seen as outdated or misaligned with preparation for the modern workplace, all within an environment of mounting academic pressure. Feedback called for more engaging and interactive lessons, reduced exam pressure, and a more flexible and tailored curriculum.

Finding 12: Explaining the importance of attendance and related rules, and the swift notification of parents/carers when their children are absent were viewed as school practices most supportive of attendance by both parents/carers and students.

However, the effectiveness of these practices appears to depend on how they are experienced. When attendance expectations and related communications were perceived as punitive, impersonal, or insufficiently responsive to individual circumstances, students and many parents/carers described more negative experiences and, in some cases, reduced trust in schools.

While parents/carers generally viewed school attendance positively, they were less willing to prioritise it when they believed it came at the expense of their children's health, mental health, wellbeing, or individual needs. In some cases, they questioned whether attendance expectations and related communications adequately reflect fairness and responsiveness to family circumstances and individual student needs.

What other factors support or deter attendance – Part 1

Finding 13: The way behaviour policies are implemented and experienced appears to matter for attendance, with parents/carers and students raising concerns, and, in some cases, expressing strong views about some schools' behaviour policies and the way in which they are enacted in practice. Perceptions of overly rigid approaches were seen to negatively affect students' experiences of school, their relationships with staff, and, in turn, their attendance. These concerns often related to strict uniform rules, toilet restrictions during class time, punishments or detentions for what were perceived as minor infractions and, more broadly, rules and staff behaviours perceived as inconsistent with the norms and expectations of real-life settings.

Finding 14: Attendance rewards are generally viewed as supportive of attendance, especially by students with the lowest sense of belonging who seem to rely on them more to support their attendance than students with the highest sense of belonging.

The effectiveness of attendance rewards, however, depends on whether they are perceived as meaningful, fair, and inclusive. Attendance reward practices appear to vary across schools, and their impact appears to weaken when they are perceived as superficial (e.g., a certificate versus a trip), unfairly applied (e.g., excluding students with perceived legitimate absences such as illness), or non-inclusive (e.g., recognising only high attendance rather than progress made). In these cases, rewards may have unintended negative consequences, particularly for students with the lowest sense of belonging, who appear to rely more heavily on such rewards to support their attendance.

Finding 15: The most common attendance barriers are not always the most influential, with different barriers appearing to become more salient at different stages of secondary school. The barriers most students identify as affecting attendance are not always the same as those they rank as most important. Thus, some barriers may function as broader background conditions shaping students' overall experience of school, while others appear more immediate or influential in relation to attendance. There are also indications that the relative importance of different barriers may shift across the secondary years. For example, younger students appear to prioritise slightly more relational and behavioural experiences as attendance barriers, while older students appear to prioritise mental health and academic pressure. At the same time, some barriers—particularly difficulties getting up in the morning and unengaging lessons—appear to remain relatively consistently important across year groups.

Finding 16: students with the lowest sense of belonging, who previous research suggests may be more likely to experience attendance difficulties than those with stronger belonging, reported a different pattern of attendance experiences and support needs. They were considerably more likely to identify health and mental health difficulties as barriers to attendance and appeared to rely more on parents to “make them go to school”, drew more on emotional support from parents, counselling, and attendance rewards, and were less likely to identify the school as a safe place. Students with stronger belonging, by contrast, generally reported fewer barriers and appeared more likely to emphasise practical supports and positive aspects of school life.

Finding 17: For most students, parental/carer support for attendance is primarily experienced through the provision of school supplies and clothes. However, students with the lowest sense of belonging appear to place greater importance on a broader combination of practical, emotional, and attendance-related support. Although most students identified the provision of school supplies and clothes as the most important way in which their parents/carers support their attendance, students with the lowest sense of belonging appear to place relatively similar importance on such practical support, parental encouragement to attend and support with managing worries about school, including concerns relating to exams, relationships with teachers and wider school-related challenges.

Recommendations

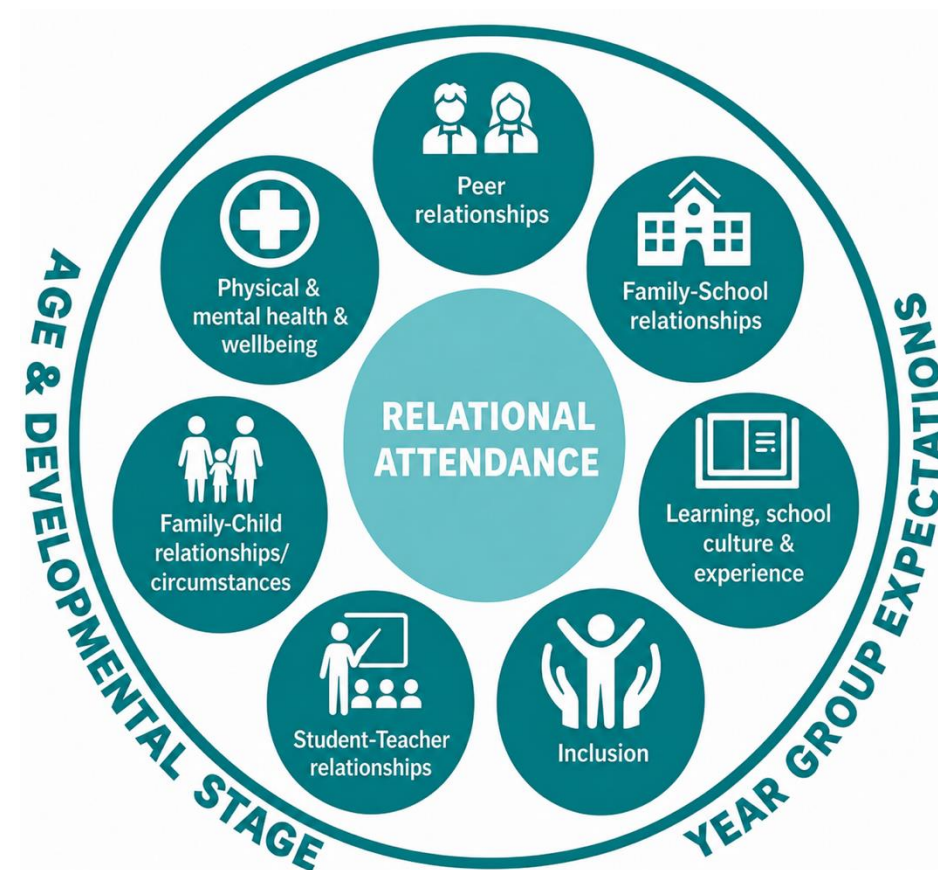
Consideration 1: One Education Strategy - a unified approach to attendance, belonging, inclusion and attainment – Part 1

- Although this study focused specifically on attendance, the findings point to important connections between attendance and, among other factors, belonging, family engagement and circumstances, inclusion, health, mental health and wellbeing, curriculum and lesson engagement, and behaviour systems.
- Across Plymouth City Council's existing educational frameworks, ongoing programmes and the work of different teams, there are clear areas of complementarity and interconnected practice that shape the student journey, including the above elements, which do not operate in isolation but intersect with attendance and reinforce one another, collectively contributing to broader school improvement priorities.
- Building on the strong foundations already in place across Plymouth City Council's work, there may be value in exploring how these interconnected areas could be brought together more intentionally under a system-wide 'One Education' strategy. Existing priorities/areas of focus provide a valuable platform, and further developing a unified approach could enhance practice, strengthen coherence, and reduce unintentional duplication, while still recognising the unique and interdependent contributions of each priority/area of focus. Progressing this through continued collaboration and multidisciplinary engagement may support more consistent messaging across the system and create clearer pathways for improving attendance outcomes (and beyond).

In summary, Plymouth City Council and Leaders of Education across Plymouth could consider:

- Working further towards a single strategy that aligns attendance with related areas such as belonging, behaviour, SEND support, curriculum design, family engagement, health, mental health and wellbeing, and attainment under one Plymouth-wide vision.
- Positioning attendance as a relational and educational priority.
- Continuing to align frameworks within a consistent architecture guided by shared outcomes.
- Further developing coordinated priorities, aligned support structures, and shared monitoring and evaluation approaches across schools and services.
- Building on existing strategic foundations to further support Plymouth-wide coherence related to workforce development, resource allocation, evaluation, and data-sharing.

Framework for Attendance: A starting point



Note: While some recommendations relate to national policymakers and others relate to Plymouth City Council or schools, all are intended to support more joined-up and effective attendance approaches across the wider system.

Consideration 1: One Education Strategy - a unified approach to attendance, belonging, inclusion and attainment – Part 2

Consideration could be given to...

1a. Embedding a relational approach to attendance Plymouth-wide by:

- Recognising that attendance is relationally driven, with peer connection and parents/carers as attendance co-agents, working alongside schools at the centre of shaping attendance behaviours.
- Using the Framework for Attendance as an anchor and shared reference point to support alignment across different educational frameworks/priorities. This could potentially support relational values and connected, relational approaches to be consistently embedded across policies, practices, and support structures.
- Applying a relational and connected approach through local structures such as the Plymouth Belonging Framework, with the *quality of connection* acting as the mechanism linking students' experiences across domains.
- Promoting belonging consistently across the student journey, enabling it to act as a protective factor that supports attendance.
- A relational approach may benefit from being positioned as a longer-term, system-wide commitment, with the potential to strengthen the conditions for ongoing improvements in attendance over time. At the same time, there are pressures for 'quicker' improvements through statutory accountability measures. While accountability measures can play a role, the findings of this study suggest they may also carry risks of unintended negative consequences for some families and may not always align with the values, needs/lived experiences of parents/carers and students. A balanced approach that combines necessary short-term actions with a stronger relational foundation may therefore offer a more sustainable route to improvement.

1b. Reviewing attendance policies, communications and support structures through a relational lens. Based on the study findings, such reviews could include:

- National term-time holiday absence policy and the use of fines, as well as the tone of attendance-related communications, with a view to further strengthening empathetic and supportive approaches (such as authorised or conditional term-time holidays (for example, accompanied by required homework completion), structured and intentional catch-up support following a holiday, and attention to broader structural factors such as airline pricing).
- Exploring opportunities for national initiatives to further embed connection and restorative practices.
- Reviewing behaviour and uniform policies to ensure they do not act as deterrents but reflect relational practice.

1c. Supporting data, monitoring and evaluation, and Plymouth-wide improvement by:

- Further aligning attendance-related metrics, monitoring approaches and data collection processes to support coherence, reduce potential duplications, and strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of the One Education Strategy.
- Strengthening how attendance and related data are shared, interpreted, and used to support data quality, collaborative learning, student voice, and continuous improvement.
- Further supporting data-related skills for staff responsible for attendance, including how data is interpreted and used to inform decision-making and practice.

Consideration 2: Positioning priority support groups - and all students - within a secondary journey defined by continuous, year-on-year transitions

The study identified groups of students who appear to be most negatively affected and could be considered priority groups for more immediate support with attendance. Although these groups are identified as priorities, there appears to be a cumulative effect of challenges that may not have been addressed in earlier years. It seems that these challenges may intensify and become more visible over time, especially as students move through secondary school and adolescence. During this period, brain and emotional development undergo important changes, expectations for independence increase, and the particular social and developmental pressures of adolescence combine with shifting expectations from both school and, in some cases, families.

Consideration could be given to...
2a. School transition could be viewed as a process that extends across all secondary years, with relational practices playing a central role. This approach seems to recognise that each stage brings its own shifts in adolescent development, emotional growth, changing year-group expectations, and increasing independence - all of which can influence a young person's sense of belonging depending on how effectively they are accommodated.
2b. Taking the above factors into account and being intentional in everyday practices, interactions, interventions, and support to develop relational pathways from Year 7 onwards - particularly ahead of and during Year 8, when belonging tends to decline - may help prevent emerging challenges from becoming more entrenched.
2c. It appears that priority groups for attendance interventions include: • Students in Year 7 and 8, who may benefit from early intervention to help prevent the decline in belonging observed in Year 8. • Female students in Years 9–11, who report more health/mental health barriers to attendance and lower belonging than males, alongside some indications of greater challenges in peer relationships. • Students with SEND, who experience lower belonging and who could, it seems, benefit from more consistent and effective Plymouth-level support. • Male students in Years 9–11, who report fewer health or mental health issues themselves, but whose parents/carers identify concerns that may not be recognised or expressed openly, suggesting a potential hidden need.
2d. Adopting a year-group-sensitive approach to attendance that responds both to how widely barriers and supports are experienced and how strongly they are prioritised by students. This may include ensuring that support is shaped not only by the most commonly reported challenges and supports, but also by how important these are perceived to be at different stages of students' school journeys. For younger students, this could involve a stronger focus on how behaviour expectations, rules, and relationships with staff are experienced in practice, alongside clear, consistent, and supportive approaches to behaviour. For older students, consideration may be given to addressing the increasing impact of academic pressure, schoolwork, and health and mental health challenges, including how these are supported within the wider school environment. Across all year groups, this may also involve recognising that some challenges may become more widespread but less likely to be explicitly prioritised by students and ensuring that these are not overlooked in identification and support processes, particularly at earlier stages to help prevent them from being exacerbated over time.

Consideration 3: Resourcing and scaling up attendance support for peer and student, parent/carers and staff connection

Consideration could be given to...

3a. Funding and scaling up evidence-based **programmes that strengthen peer connection**, including early identification and targeted support for students with weaker social networks (e.g., 1:1 and/or small group interventions, peer mediated programmes, and/or by more explicitly supporting the development of friendship and empathy skills through universal social and emotional learning programmes – e.g., how to make friends, repair conflicts, and notice loneliness).

3b. Considering **school-level, and curriculum and lesson-based improvements as vehicles for enhancing peer and staff connectedness** (e.g. through curriculum design, flexible timetabling, extracurricular/interest-based activities, lunchtime structures/durations, classroom layout, structured peer group organisation and pairings over time, and peer-led inclusion initiatives).

3c. Piloting and scaling up **relational pedagogy, restorative practices, and trauma-informed approaches** as whole-school approaches and **providing CPD for effective implementation.**

3d. Offering training to staff working on attendance recovery on **relationship repair and reintegration, and relational communication.**

Consideration 4: Resourcing and scaling up attendance support for students with early morning and transport-related challenges

Consideration could be given to...

4a. Monitoring data to identify schools/cohorts/students with **morning-related attendance dips**, understanding the challenges and providing tailored support.

4b. Reviewing school-level practices and routines relating to the start of the day — including timetabling, lesson sequencing, and expectations around punctuality — to better support students' developmental needs and reduce avoidable morning-related barriers to attendance. This may include exploring more flexible approaches to start times (at whole-school or targeted year group levels), as well as structured and supportive starts to the school day that promote readiness, connection, and engagement instead of sanctions.

4c. Reviewing travel-to-school arrangements and identifying students most affected - considering factors such as reliability, distance, route, safety, personal circumstances, and equity - to provide tailored support, including for students with very early morning starts (e.g., affordable fares, bus and school timetables and route alignment, and/or dedicated transport arrangements for students who need it the most, safe walking routes, and car-share options). In addition, further consideration could be given to **reviewing school-readiness support**, particularly access to uniforms and essential school supplies.

4d. Funding evidence-based **programmes that help students develop organisational and time-management skills** early on and continue to strengthen these as needed throughout their schooling, alongside **local 'morning hub' programmes** (e.g., breakfast clubs, calm spaces, structured starts that support peer and student-staff connection).

Consideration 5: Knowledge and practice sharing

Consideration could be given to...

5a. Creating a **centralised repository of effective practice/case studies accessible to all schools**, with resources to support the effective implementation of different aspects of the Attendance Framework, prioritising areas identified in this study, such as peer connectedness, family engagement - especially for students with low attendance -, adolescent brain development, attendance reward practices, multi-agency working, SEND identification and support in classrooms.

Consideration 6: Further strengthen family support and engagement

Consideration could be given to...

6a. Reviewing parent/carers guidance, communications, and support to strengthen understanding of the factors influencing attendance and the support available.

Content could be reviewed against practical, relational, emotional, and family preparedness needs, with connection underpinning it, and expanded to address gaps in parents/carers' understanding identified in this study.

6b. Funding and scaling up evidence-based parent/carers engagement programmes that focus on understanding and strengthening attendance-related routines and expectations within families, as well as building stronger school-family relationships to support attendance.

6c. Developing a formal pathway for restoring relationships between schools and parents/carers when they become strained. This could be complemented by guidance on building and sustaining positive and collaborative relationships over time, particularly for student groups with lower attendance.

6d. Including family liaison expertise as part of attendance teams, if not already in place.

Consideration 7: Further health/mental health support

Consideration could be given to...

7a. Reviewing indoor and outdoor school environments for improvements to potentially reduce illness and limit spread (e.g., enhanced classroom ventilation, air purification through technological innovations, and behaviour-focused campaigns).

7b. Expanding funding for health and mental health services to further support timely and effective intervention.

7c. Evaluating the effectiveness of current multi-agency working and identifying opportunities for improvement, including strengthening the timely and accurate identification of SEND and mental health needs.

Consideration 8: Curriculum and lesson engagement

Consideration could be given to...

8a. Reviewing curricula to further strengthen curriculum relevance and real-world application.

8b. Reviewing teaching approaches with the aim of further supporting the effective implementation of a variety of teaching and learning practices (e.g., active learning strategies that promote participation and interaction, the consistent use of formative assessment alongside guidance to help learners use it for self-improvement, and the introduction of meaningful extension tasks that provide depth).

8c. Further embedding student voice in curriculum planning where appropriate, and using **frequent evaluation to gauge learning, engagement, and challenge** (e.g., through short pulse surveys, quick polls, and brief reflective tasks).

8d. Supporting teachers with high-quality professional development that strengthens effective teaching and learning practices for engagement and learning, including purposeful use of technology.

Appendices

The evidence base

Navigating the survey findings

01

The survey questions

Students and parents/carers completed surveys with the same set of questions. Students answered for themselves, and parents/carers answered about their child. The surveys asked four main questions:

- What helps you (your child) want to go to school?
- What makes it hard for you (your child) to go to school?
- How does the school help you (your child) want to go to school?
- What are the most important things your parents/carers (you as a parent/carer) do, or can do, to help you go to school?

02

Selecting & ranking answers

Selecting answers: Students and parents/carers chose from a list of possible answers (response options) for each question (e.g. “*spending time with friends*” or “*lessons are interesting*”). Participants could select as many options as they felt applied. These responses show how many participants selected each option and therefore indicate how widespread or commonly reported different experiences, motivations, or barriers are. In these slides, findings from these selected options are described using terms such as “widespread,” “most common,” “most selected,” and similar phrases.

Ranking answers: After choosing their response options, participants were asked to rank the options they selected from most important (1st) to least important. These rankings, therefore, indicate the relative importance or priority participants placed on different factors, rather than simply how commonly they were selected overall. In the slides, terms such as “ranked 1st,” “top reason,” “highest priority,” “most important,” and similar descriptors refer to these ranking responses.

03

Open-ended questions

Students and parents/carers also answered two open-ended questions:

- Is there anything else you think could help your (your child’s) school attendance?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about your (your child’s) school attendance or school attendance more generally?

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04

Belonging measures

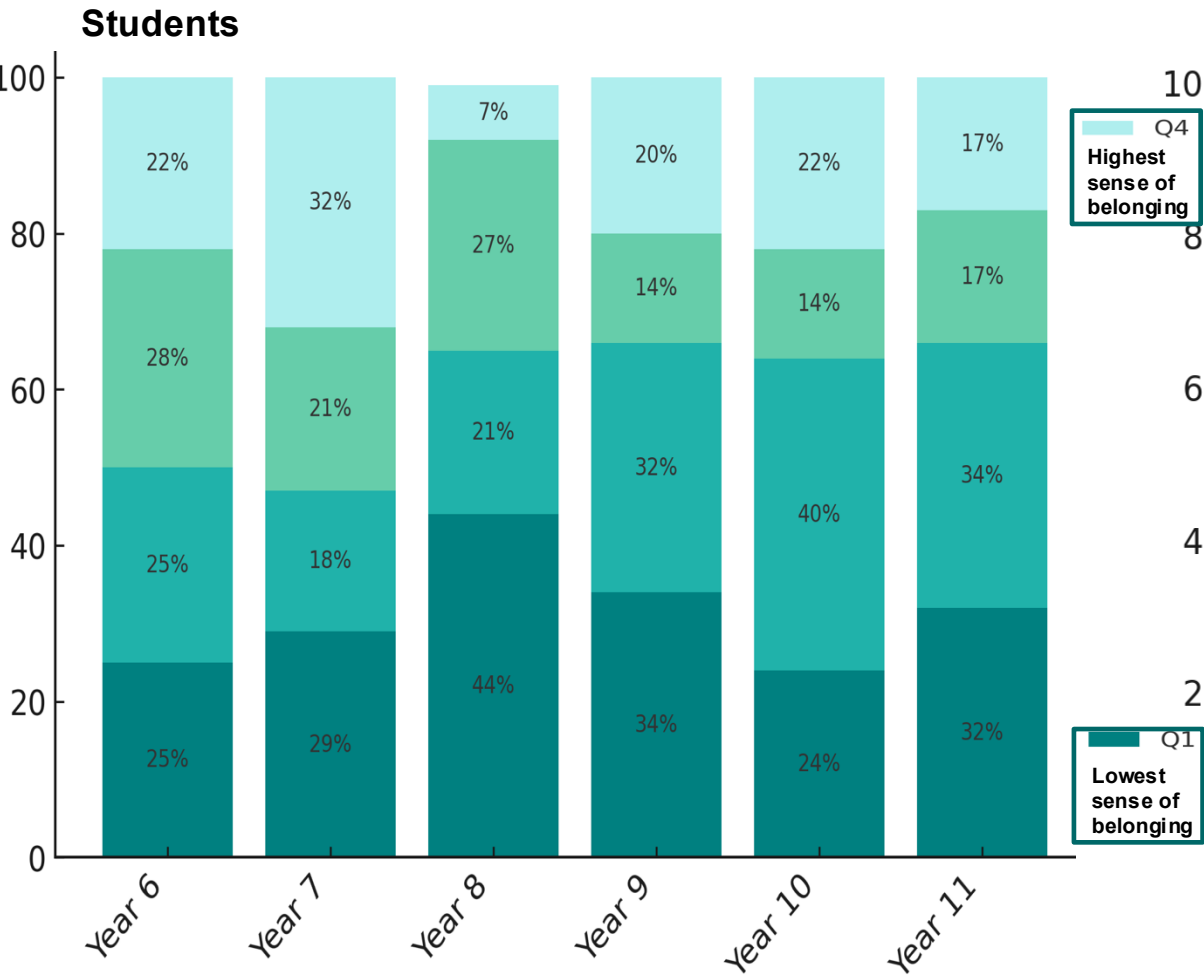
Students’ sense of belonging was measured using the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) PISA 2015 belonging scale for students in Years 9–11, and age-appropriate items informed by OECD PISA 2015 and PIRLS 2016 for students in Years 6–8.

Based on their results, students were classified into four quartiles, with **Quartile 1 (Q1) representing the lowest sense of belonging and Quartile 4 (Q4) the highest.** Sense of belonging was examined overall and by comparing the Q1 and Q4 groups across the different survey questions.

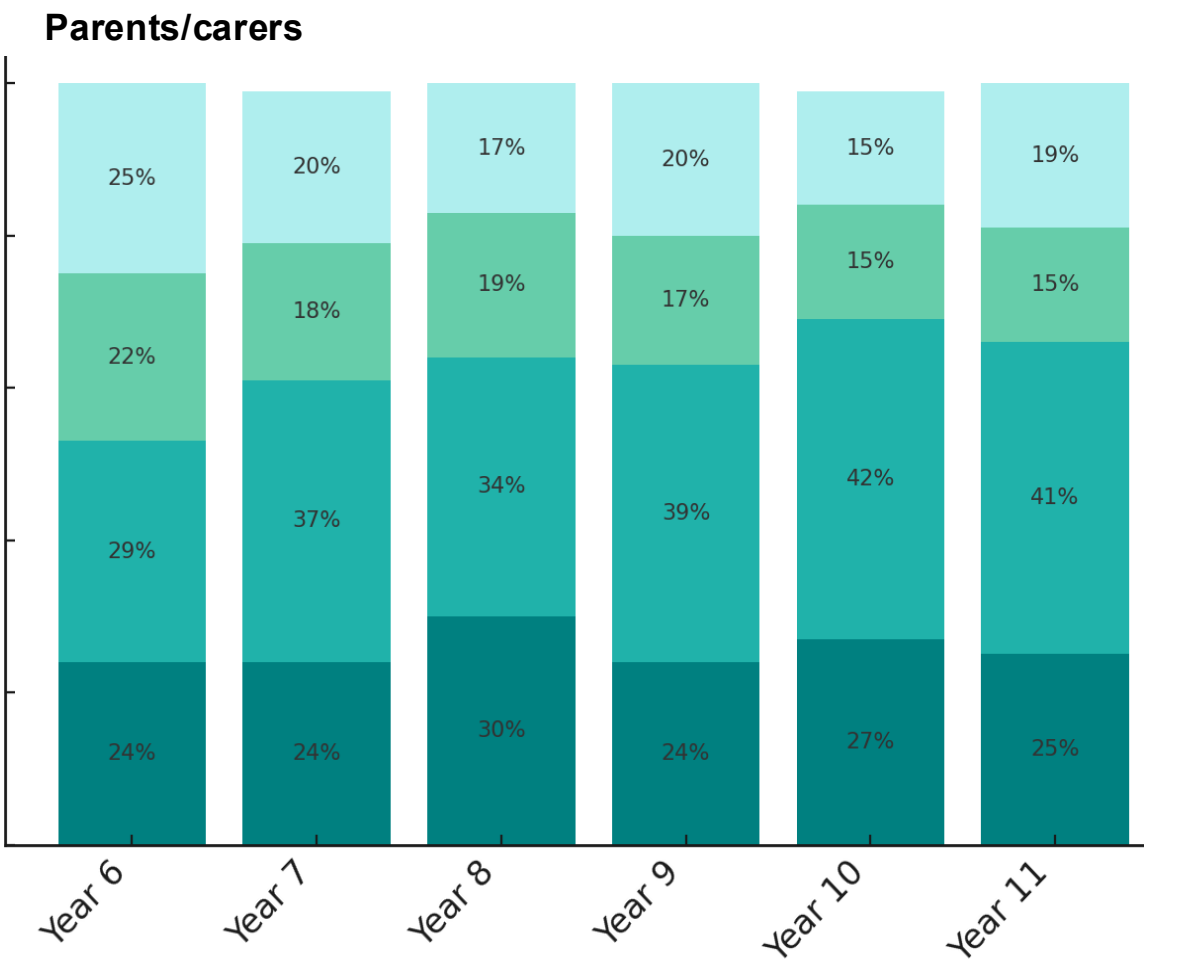
**What do students
and parents/carers
report about
students' sense of
belonging?**



Year 7 students report a somewhat higher sense of belonging than Year 6 students. However, there is a notable dip in belonging reported by students between Years 7 and 8. Although belonging improves somewhat in Years 9–11, it does not seem to return to the more positive profile observed in Year 7, suggesting that belonging-related challenges may persist for many students throughout the later secondary years. Parents/carers, however, indicate that their children's sense of belonging remains relatively similar across secondary school.

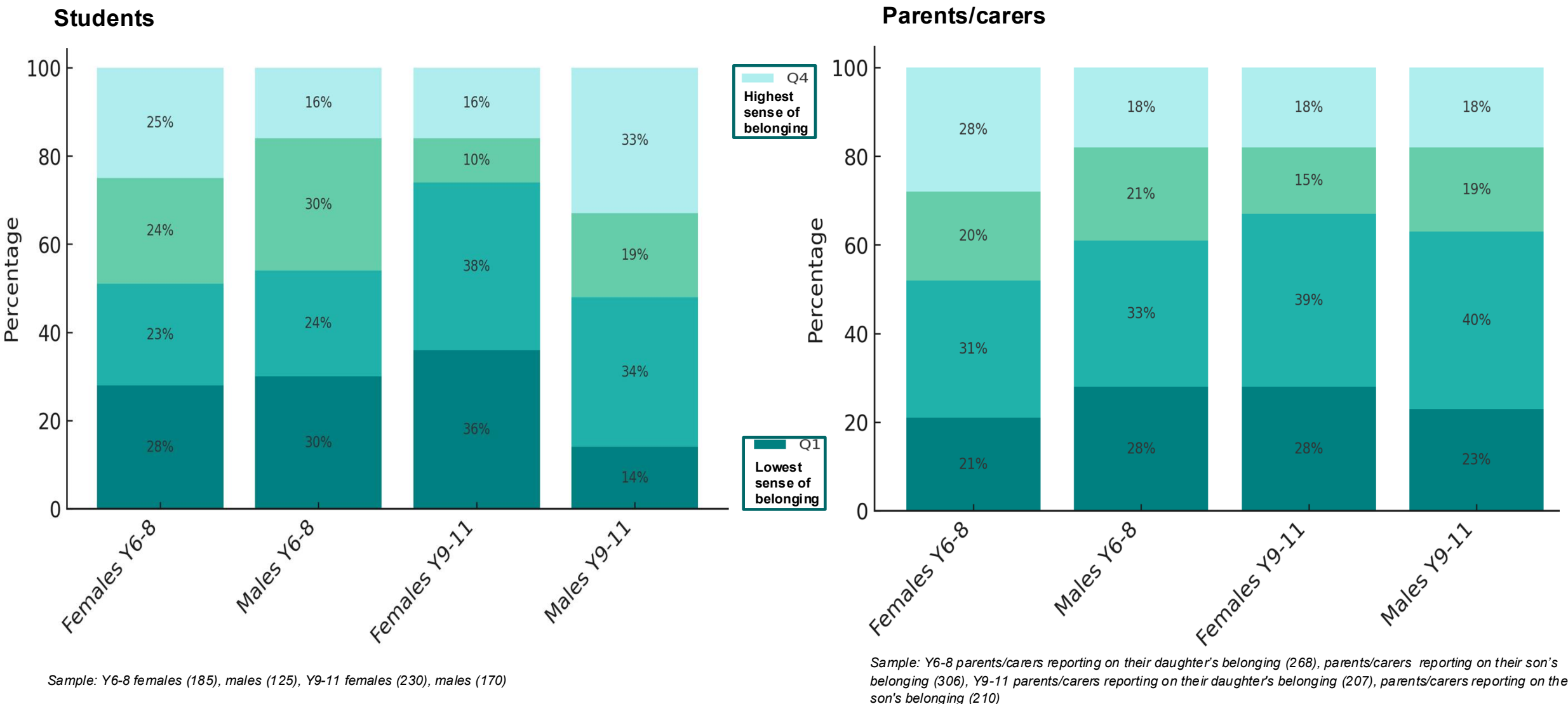


Sample: Across Y6-11 (859), Y6 (169), Y7 (109), Y8 (94), Y9 (117), Y10 (265), Y11 (105)



Sample: Y6-8 parents/carers reporting on their daughter's belonging (268), parents/carers reporting on their son's belonging (306); Y9-11 parents/carers reporting on their daughter's belonging (207), parents/carers reporting on their son's belonging (210)

Female students report a relatively notable drop in belonging from Years 6-8 to Years 9-11. Their reported belonging is also notably lower than that of males in Years 9-11. Parents/carers, however, report broadly similar levels of belonging for male and female students, although parent/carer and student reports diverge more noticeably for male students.



There are indications that students with particular characteristics, especially students with SEND or students supported by a social worker, may be more likely to fall into the lowest sense of belonging quartile. However, the sample sizes are relatively small, so this finding needs to be treated with caution.

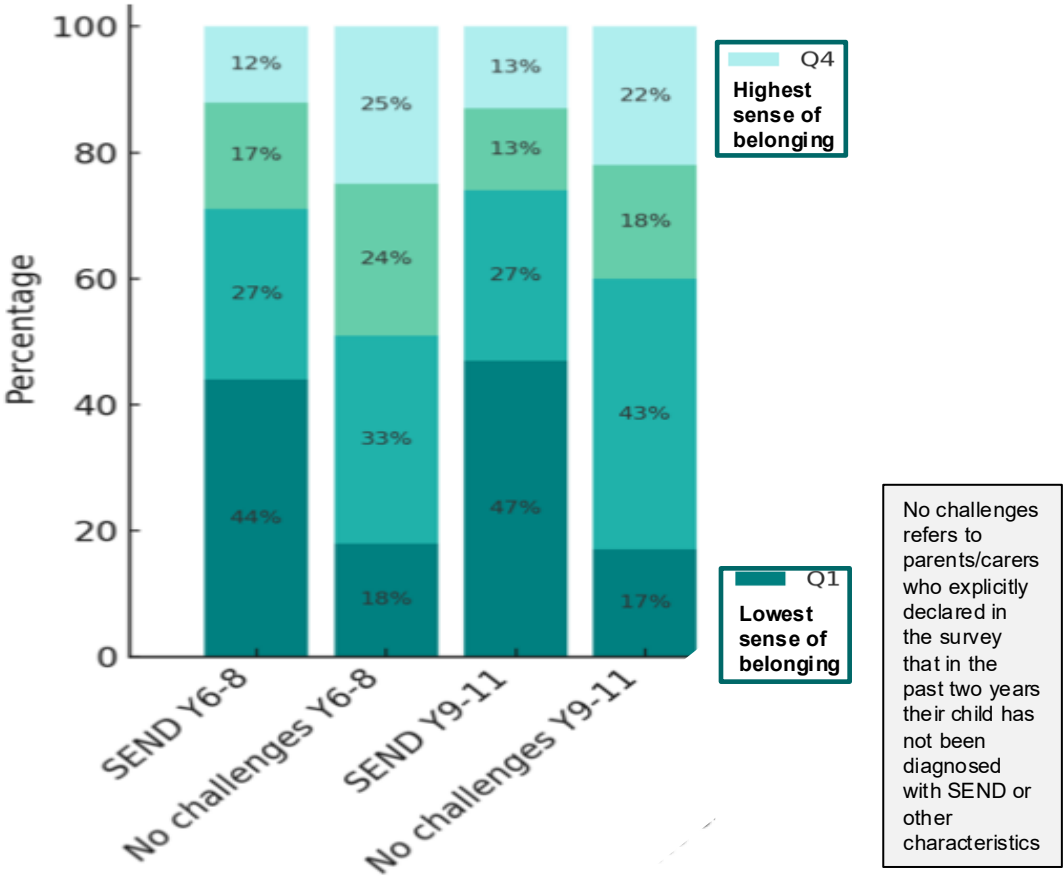
Parents/carers of children with SEND in Years 6–8 are almost 2.5 times more likely to report their child in the lowest belonging quartile (Q1) than parents/carers of children with no SEND or other characteristics. A similar pattern appears in Years 9-11.

Students

Self-reported characteristic	Total number of students	Number of students in the lowest belonging quartile (Q1) out of the total number of students sharing the same characteristic	% of students in the lowest belonging quartile (Q1) out of the total number of students sharing the same characteristic
SEND	107	57	53%
A carer	32	11	34%
In foster home/children's home/LA care	11	5	45%
Supported by a social worker	70	39	56%
None of the above	387	74	19%

*Figures are based on students who responded to this question

Parents/carers



Sample: SEND Y6-8 (129), No challenges Y6-8 (332); SEND Y9-11 (104), No challenges Y9-11 (230)

What are the main factors influencing school attendance?

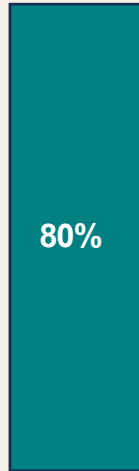


Spending time with friends appears to be the strongest factor influencing school attendance.

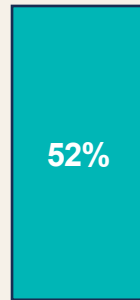
52% of students rank spending time with friends as their top reason for going to school

Q: What makes you want to go to school?

% of students who chose '*Spending time with friends*'



Consider it a reason for attending school



Rank it their top reason for attending school



Most students appear to experience school as an important social setting for peer interaction

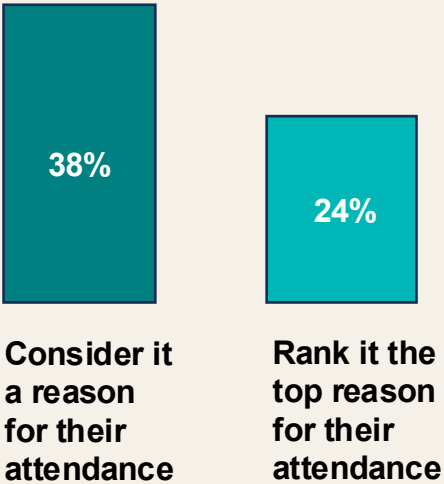


Most students report that their school helps them build peer connections. However, this appears to be reported less frequently by Years 9-11 students and those with the lowest sense of belonging.

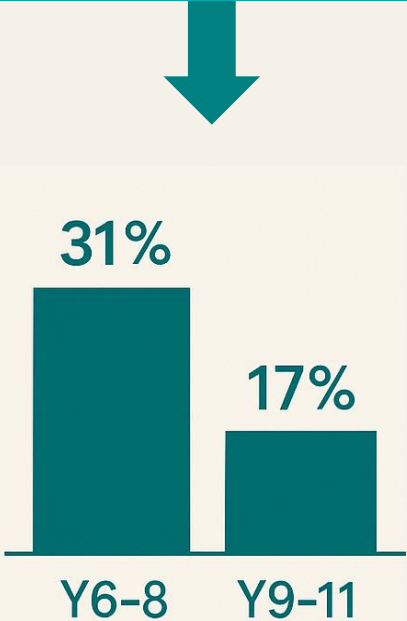
Q: How does the school help you want to go to school?

Most students rank “the school helps me make friends” as their top school attendance enabler

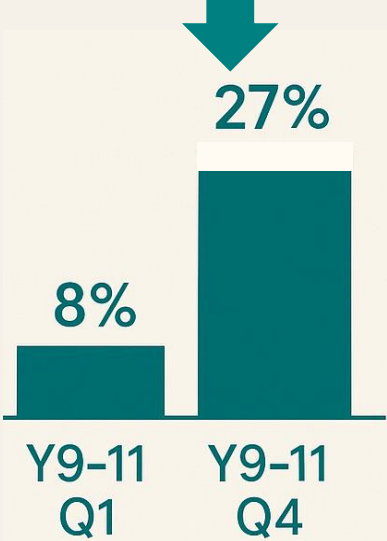
% of students who selected “Helps me make friends”



Y6-8 students are more likely to report that their school helps them make friends



Among Y9-11 students, those with the lowest sense of belonging are much less likely to indicate that their school supports them with making friends

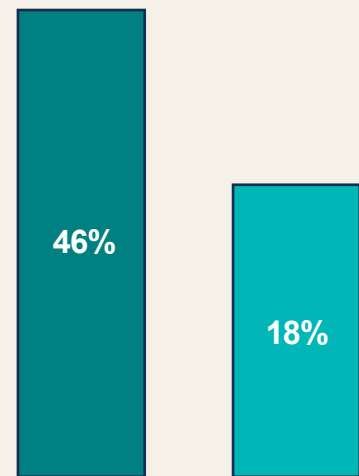


Students rank parental/carer influence as the second most important reason for attending school, and most parents/carers identify making sure their child attends school as the main way they support/can support students' attendance. Parent/carer qualitative feedback suggests that, in many families, attendance is understood as a matter of parental/carer responsibility and/or expectation.

Students rank parental/carer influence as the second most important reason for going to school

Q: What makes you want to go to school?

% of students who chose 'My parents/carers make me go to school'



Consider it a reason for attending school

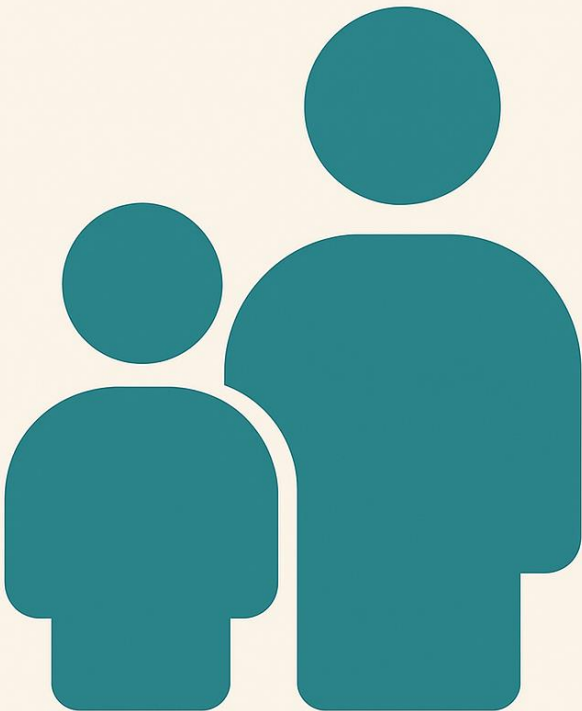
Rank it their top reason for attending school

Most parents/carers (28%) rank 'I make them (their child) go to school every day, if they are not ill' as the most important way they support/or can support their child's attendance

"I feel its my responsibility as a parent"

"I make them go in unless they have an illness "

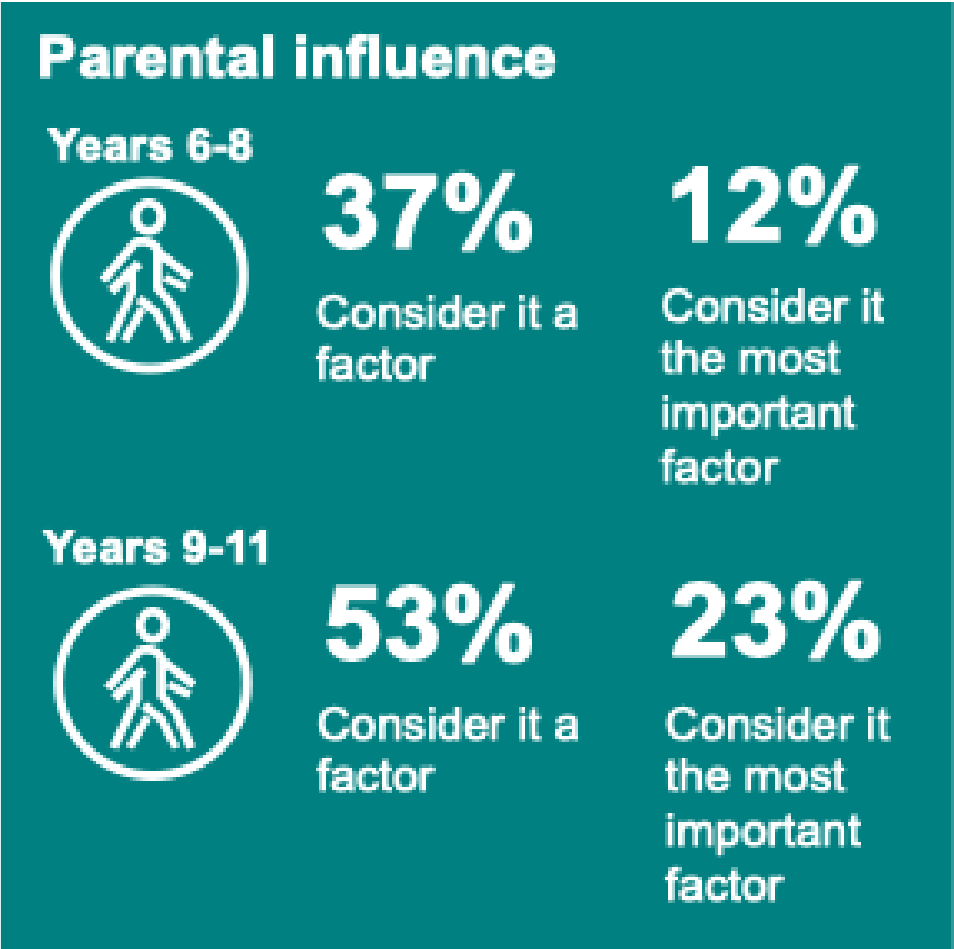
"Attendance is really important to us as parents and we encourage it daily"



Parental/carer influence appears to be more important for students with the lowest sense of belonging across both Years 6–8 and Years 9–11 compared with students with the highest sense of belonging.

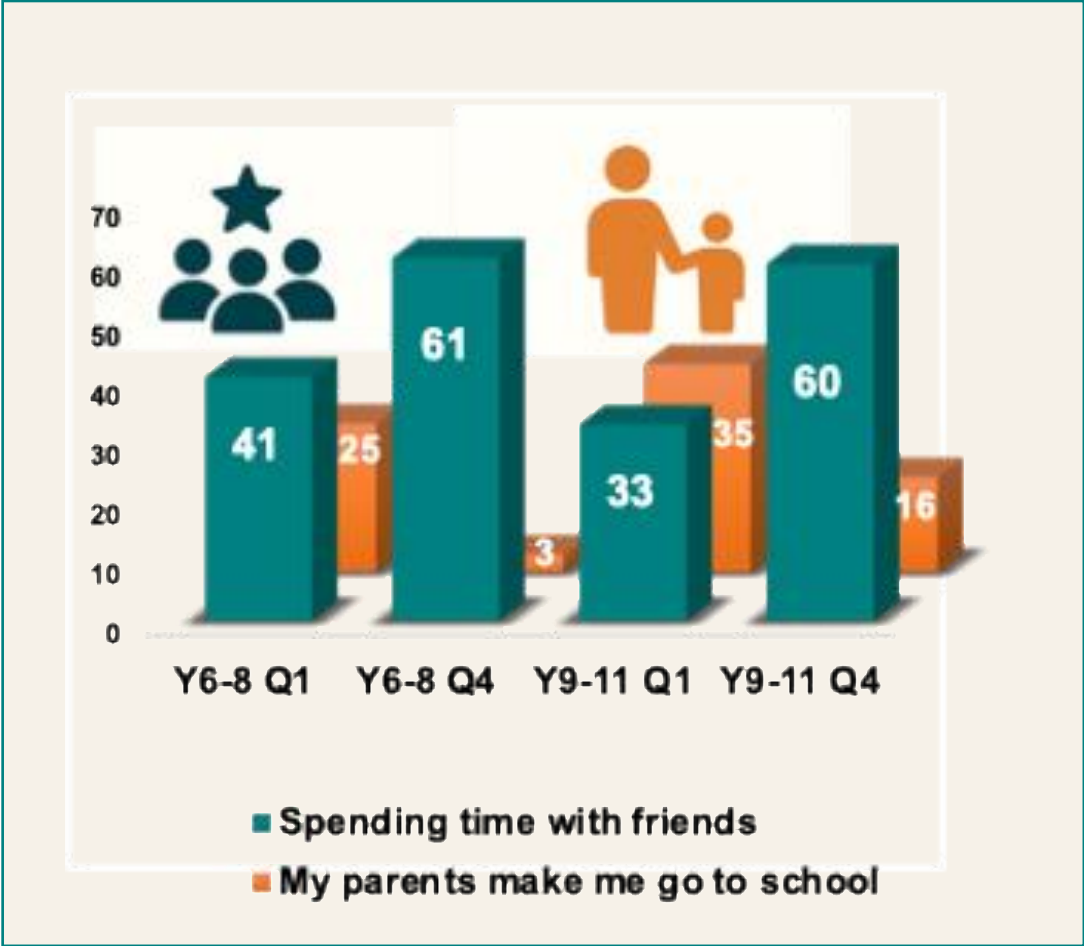
Parental/carer influence appears to become an increasingly important attendance factor for Y9-11

Student responses



Parental/carer influence appears to be more important for students with the lowest sense of belonging (Q1) compared with students with the highest sense of belonging (Q4).

Student responses



**What are the main
barriers to school
attendance?**



Health/mental health rank as top barriers to attendance by both students and parents/carers, particularly for female students. A notably higher proportion of parents/carers report health/mental health barriers for male students than male students report themselves.

Health / Mental Health



STUDENTS

29% rank it as their top attendance barrier

42% say it is an attendance barrier

PARENTS

48% rank it as the top attendance barrier for their child

57% say it is an attendance barrier for their child

Parents/carers were more likely to report health/mental health issues as attendance barriers than students

- 18% more female than male students report health/mental health as their top attendance barriers, while 9% more parents/carers identify these issues for female students than for male students
- Male students report notably fewer health/mental health issues than parents/carers report for them

Students: %
ranking
health/mental
health as their
top barriers



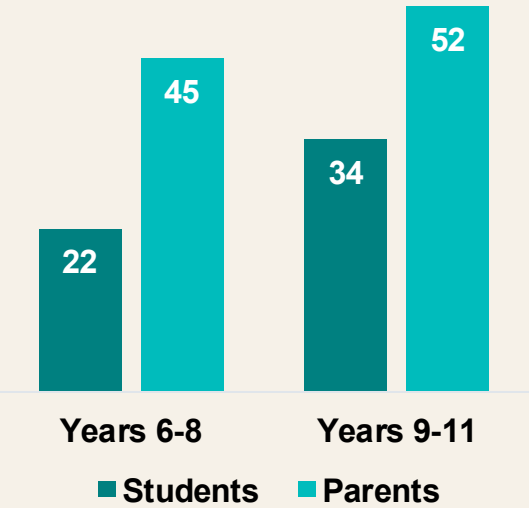
Parents/carers:
% ranking
health/mental
health as top
barriers for
their child



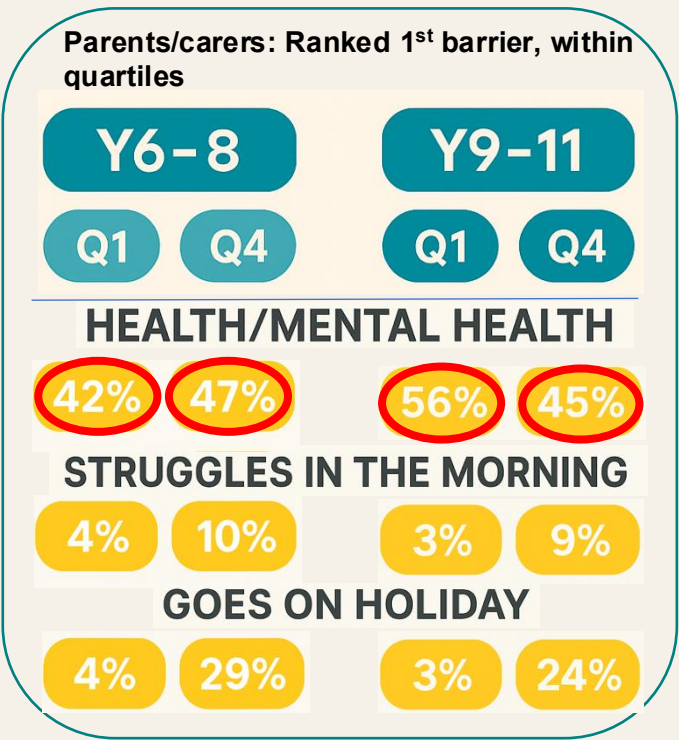
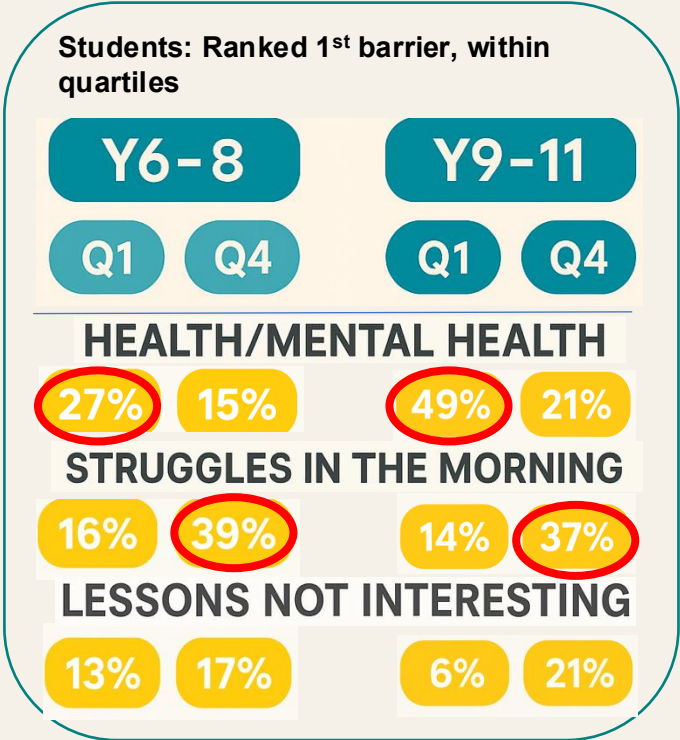
According to students, health/mental health appear to be prominent attendance barriers among Years 9-11 and those with the lowest sense of belonging. Parents/carers, however, perceive these challenges as affecting a relatively larger proportion of students across year groups, including those with both the lowest and highest levels of belonging.

Students and parents/carers in Years 9–11 are more likely than those in Years 6–8 to rank health/mental health as their top attendance barriers

% of students & parents/carers who ranked health/mental health as the most important barrier to attendance



- By Years 9–11, a notably higher proportion of students with the lowest sense of belonging (Q1) cite health/mental health as their main attendance barriers compared with those who report the highest sense of belonging (Q4).
- In contrast, students with the highest sense of belonging identify difficulty waking up in the morning more often as their top barrier.
- Overall, parents/carers agree that health/mental health are the main barriers to attendance but tend to perceive these challenges as affecting a larger proportion of students than students themselves.



When responses to health/mental health and SEND are perceived to be supportive, attendance barriers appear to lessen.

1. There are some exemplary responses to individual student needs discussed in the data, with reported positive impact on attendance.



My child's school has supported him from going from no school attendance to a little attendance to full attendance in 2 and a half years, since he started...

[Child's name] has had poor attendance since year 8 but seems to be finally finding school less stressful and after work with [support service name] is coping a lot better and has better friendships

His attendance is perfect since starting [at] this school they are amazing

2. However, most comments called for service improvements.

3. Overall, student and parent/carer feedback align on health/mental health challenges and solutions, although parent/carer feedback is richer and more explanatory. Parents/carers of children with SEND appear to express stronger concerns.

4. BARRIERS

-  Long waiting lists for assessment and support; challenges making GP/medical appointments outside school hours
-  Plans not followed through or denied; adjustments made that parents/carers feel are not in their children's best interest
-  Children's needs misinterpreted as misbehaviour

Parent/carer

“...Get help and support from camhs. We have been waiting for over 2 years for help/diagnosis... It makes it challenging to get to school especially when she can be up till 3-4am as she can't sleep.”

Parent/carer

“...schools don't seem to acknowledge mental health difficulties and... make promises to families... to support attendance, but miscommunication with other staff members means...adaptations are not always consistent.”

5. PARENTS ASKED FOR

System level



Easier and timely access to GP and mental health services



More funding for health/mental health services



Better multi-agency collaboration & communications

School level



More understanding of the impact of health/mental health issues on children's behaviour in school



Adapting school rules based on children's needs



Flexibility in school timetabling, i.e., reduced hours, appropriate phased returns



More effective school staff training, including on SEND and trauma informed response



More mental health days



Sensory / quiet spaces for students who need them

According to students, difficulty waking up ranks as the second most important attendance barrier. While most parents/carers value morning and bedtime routines, few identify morning difficulties as an attendance barrier.

Students

Difficulty getting up in the morning



STUDENTS

25% rank it as their top barrier

58% say it is an attendance barrier

PARENTS

6% rank it as the top barrier for their child

18% say it is an attendance barrier

- This supports the well-known misalignment between school start times and adolescent sleep cycles

- This misalignment, combined with personal, family and contextual factors, can further shape attendance patterns, either positively or negatively

- Individual factors include sleep patterns, morning routines, time management, parental/carer involvement in getting to school and anxiety about unfinished homework

Parents/carers

1 Most parents value good morning and bedtime routines



2 Not many, however, see getting up in the morning as a barrier for their child

3 This may suggest limited awareness that biological changes in adolescence make early mornings harder



4 As a result, sleep-related challenges may be underestimated or seen as behavioural rather than developmental

Q: What makes it hard for your child to go to school? Selected as an attendance barrier:

- struggles to get up in the morning, 18%

Q: What are the most important things that you, as a parent/carer do or can do to help your child go to school? Selected as a parental/carer enabler:

- have a good morning routine, 67%
- makes sure they go to bed on time, 63%

In response to difficulties waking up in the morning, some students suggested self-management strategies that they believed could support their attendance, while others proposed changes that schools could consider.

Self-management suggestions to support attendance

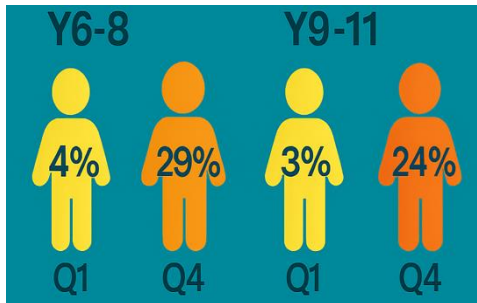
- **Morning routines, sleep habits, time management and organisation:** set an alarm / wake up on time; go to bed earlier / better sleep schedule; plan the night before (e.g. pack bag, list tasks)
- **Punctuality and presence:** arrive on time / don't be late; try to attend even when slightly unwell (*"if you have a cold, still try to come in"*)
- **Self-care to avoid illness:** stay warm / look after one's health (*"keeping warm...because sometimes that can cause a cold"*), although it was acknowledged that avoiding illness is not always within their control



School-related suggestions to support attendance

- **Later school start times:** to allow for more sleep, a manageable morning routine and transport delays. An early start was related to lack of readiness for school and tiredness, affecting attendance. Some students suggested that having too much homework led to late nights, which, compounded with early mornings, negatively impacted attendance. In some cases, students reported skipping school in the morning to complete homework
- **Shorter days and longer weekends:** such as half days or a four-day school week to allow for more personal time
- **Flexible and split timetables, and longer breaks:** suggestions included curriculum subjects of interest to students being spread across the week; longer breaks were mentioned for both holiday times and lunch breaks; and a less 'schoolwork' heavy environment

In contrast to students, parents/carers identified term-time holidays as the second most important attendance barrier, with parents/carers who reported their children as having the highest sense of belonging appearing to be the most affected. Holiday-related fines appear to have caused relative dissatisfaction among many parents/carers.



A notably higher proportion of parents/carers reporting their children as having the highest sense of belonging (Q4) identified term-time holidays as their child's main attendance barrier than parents/carers reporting their children as having the lowest sense of belonging (Q1).



"If I fly in school holidays prices can be £300 more per person per flight. As there is 3 of us that can be £1800 more which would mean I wouldn't be able to afford to go"



"Schools have forced parents into lying [about holiday]... if you are honest you are simply fined"



"...responsible parents whose children are doing well SHOULD NOT BE PUNISHED if they go "on holiday" for a week or 2"



"Taking my children away [on holiday] in quieter periods is the only way my autistic son can cope. ... When I'm old and grey I will reminisce about our holidays together, I won't think about the holidays tax on working class families or my potential criminal record"



"it could almost be considered racial discrimination to penalise...for...a necessary trip... for...'dual heritage' children"

There appears to be tension between holiday fines and parents/carers' values and/or lived experiences



While fines aim to maximise attendance, many parents value affordability, family connection, and opportunities for cultural and educational enrichment



This values gap can weaken trust and increase the sense of disconnect between schools and families



For some families, particularly those on low incomes or with children with SEND, fines add further strain to already challenging circumstances

What solutions did parents/carers suggest?

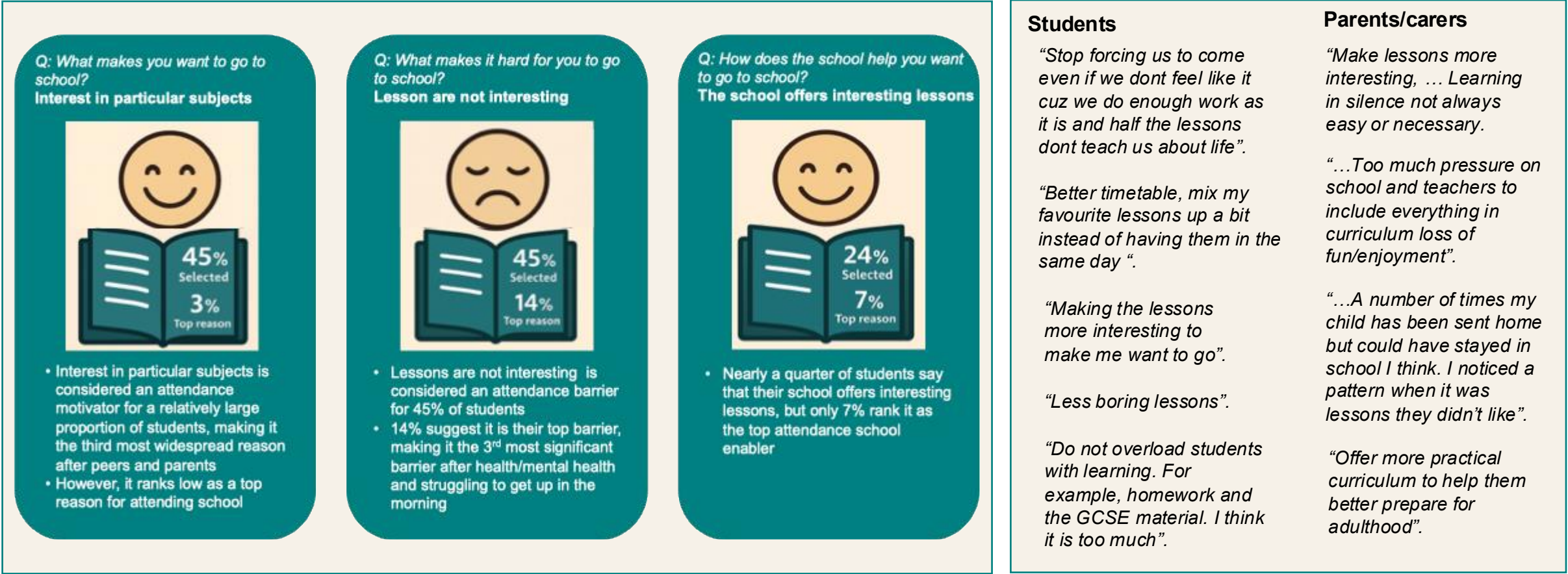
- **1 or 2 weeks of authorised holiday absences** – (or family events); or absence decisions to be assessed based on attendance across years/months for fairer judgements
- **Implementing conditions** for holiday absence – i.e., completing a 'holiday homework pack'
- **Better school catch-up support** after a holiday
- **Government action** to address high travel costs

**What other factors
contribute to
school
attendance?**

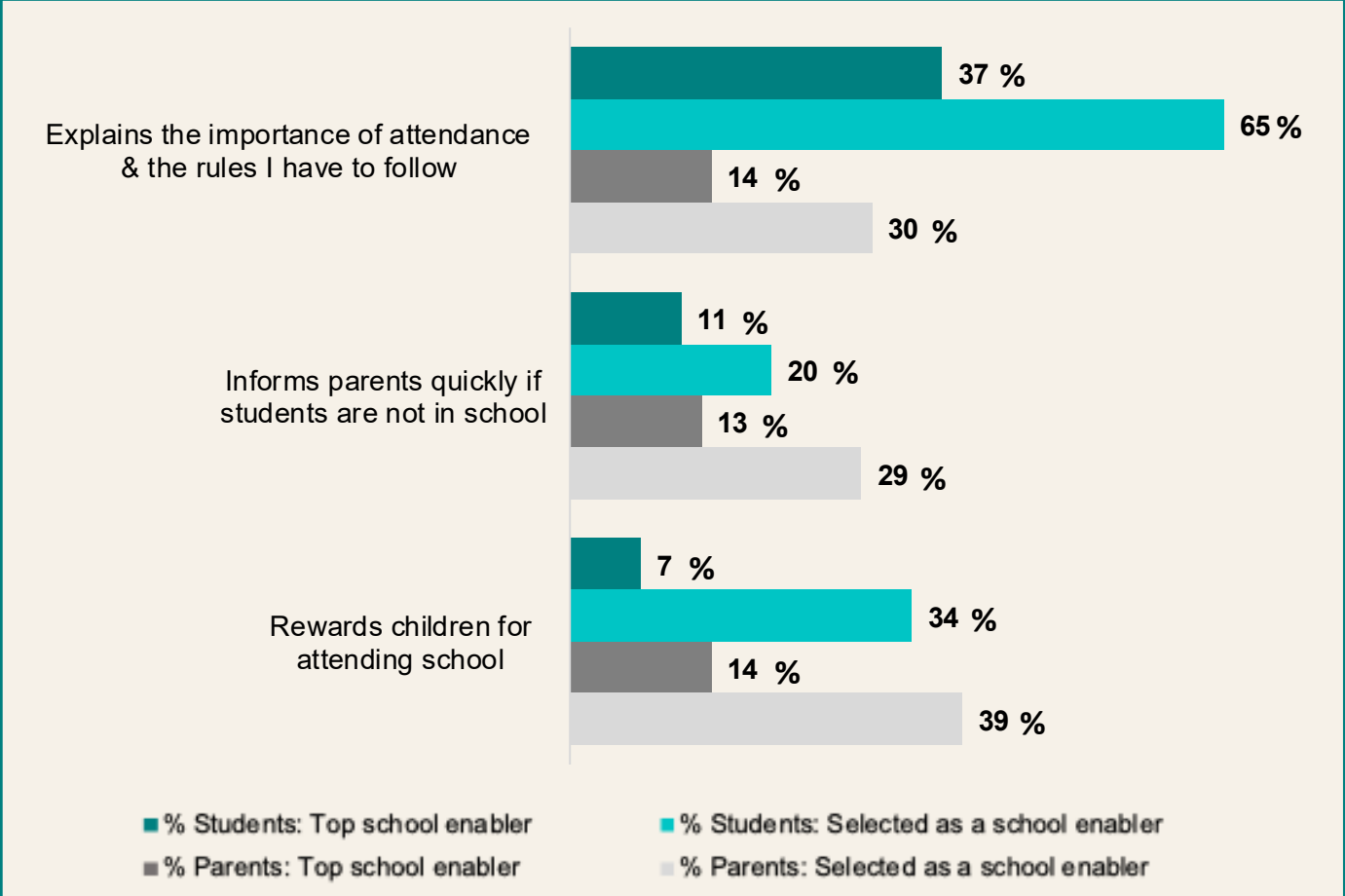


According to students, the curriculum can have a positive impact on attendance when it aligns with their interests. Regarding lessons, nearly a quarter of students suggest that interesting lessons are offered by their school and that these positively influence their attendance. However, 45% perceive lessons to be unengaging, with 14% ranking them as the third most significant barrier to their attendance. Parent/carers feedback broadly echoes students' views.

Concerns centred on perceptions of the curriculum and lessons as overloaded and overly exam-driven, with content perceived as outdated or misaligned with preparation for the modern workplace, all within an environment of mounting academic pressure. These factors appear to influence students' overall experience of school and, in turn, their motivation to attend. Suggested improvements included making lessons more engaging and relevant, reducing exam pressure, and providing a more flexible and tailored curriculum and timetable.



Explaining the importance of attendance and related rules, timely communication of absences to parents/carers and attendance rewards emerge as school practices supportive of attendance according to both students and parents/carers.



Students with the lowest sense of belonging (Q1), especially in Years 9-11, appear to rely more on school structural and pastoral enablers than those with the highest sense of belonging (Q4). They also appear less likely to view school as a place that helps them build friendships and/or more likely to feel unsafe at school. Overall, parent/carers responses appear to agree.

Student responses

- Apart from parental/carers influence, students with the lowest sense of belonging (Q1) in Y9-11, appear to rely more on structural and pastoral supports within school, such as attendance rewards, access to psychological/emotional support, clear attendance rules and timely notification to parents/carers of their absence.
- The relative greater reliance of these students compared to those with the highest sense of belonging (Q4) on these supports may reflect weaker peer connections or other pressing challenges, as these students are less likely to view school as a place that supports them in building friendships – particularly in Years 9–11- or to report feeling safe at school, compared with those with the highest sense of belonging (Q4).

% Y9-11 students in Q1

Attendance rewards
19

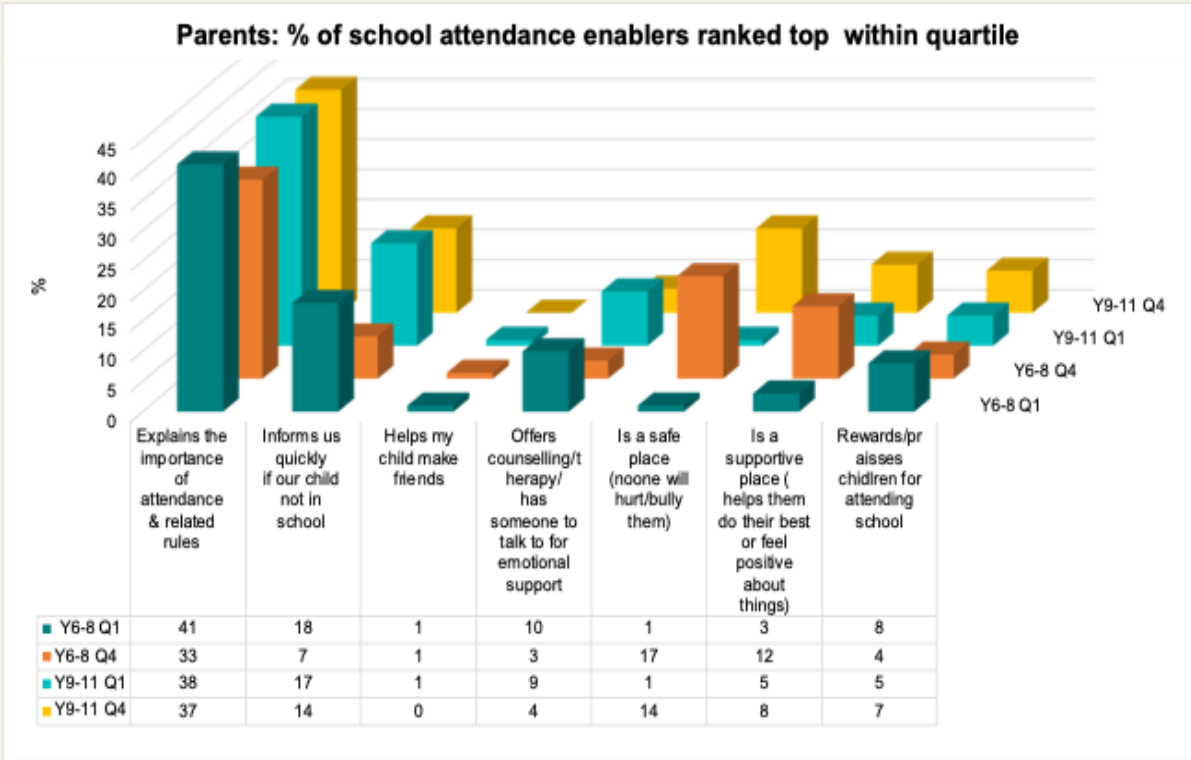
Counselling/therapy/some one to talk to & School informs parents/carers swiftly of absence
16

School explains attendance importance & rules
15

	Year 6-8		Years 9-11		Year 6-8		Years 9-11	
	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4
School helps me make friends	31%	36%	8%	27%	1%	1%	1%	0%
School offers counselling/therapy/someone to talk to	5%	1%	16%	0%	10%	3%	9%	4%
Is a safe place/no one will hurt me physically/bully me	3%	12%	1%	10%	1%	17%	1%	14%
Students & staff like each other	8%	3%	5%	3%	1%	10%	2%	6%
Is bullied/feels unsafe at school	7%	0%	4%	0%	15%	0%	8%	0%

Parent/carers responses

- Parents/carers’ perspectives who reported their children in the lowest sense of belonging (Q1) broadly align with students’ responses in the same group.
- However, parents/carers appear less likely than students to view attendance rewards and year group-related factors as important school enablers of attendance, suggesting some differences in perceptions.



Although explaining the importance of attendance and related rules is valued by students and parents/carers, many questioned their intent, validity, and fairness, which, in turn, appeared to strain parent/carer–school relationships. While most parents/carers expressed positive attitudes toward attendance, they were less willing to prioritise it when they felt it came at the expense of their children’s health/mental health and wellbeing.

Attendance expectations and/or their enforcement were perceived as:

- 1 Strict, pressuring, punitive and/or unfair, particularly where absences were viewed as legitimate.
- 2 Unrealistic, failing to account for physical and mental health, wellbeing, medical appointments, SEND needs and other perceived legitimate absences.
- 3 Applying a “one-size-fits-all” approach, lacking flexibility and consideration of individual circumstances.
- 4 Prioritising attendance over health and wellbeing, reflecting a perceived lack of compassion or discretion.
- 5 Creating pressure to attend whilst unwell, which was viewed as counterproductive.



There appears to be a tension between the values parents/carers perceive as underpinning attendance policy and the values they themselves hold



...But 100% attendance is not achievable or realistic. (Student)



Not give punishments for being late because that person who is late won't bother to turn up to school to avoid the punishment. (Student)



It's more important that we're taking care of ourselves, if we need a break or just can't get out of bed one morning. Attendance does not matter, the students matter. Support students. (Student)



Don't punish a child or their parents for low attendance, chances are they are struggling. (Student)



They take attendance too seriously sometimes people struggle to come into school and then they get negatives from parents and school; it makes them feel worse. (Student)



We always ensure school attendance, but I think there is also a lot of pressure on families so when children are genuinely unwell they feel they have to send their children to school which then spreads germs and has a knock-on effect on the attendance of others. (Parent/carer)



...before all this attendance rubbish started I would be more likely to send my child into school if they were feeling a bit unwell, I would trust the school to send them home if they needed too. Now I no longer trust the school, if my child is feeling a bit unwell I now keep them off just in case they get more poorly throughout the day. Therefore they will now have more days off due to lack of confidence in the school. (Parent/carer)



We took our child out of school for three days for a funeral. Even then I felt I had to negotiate with the school for this, which felt intrusive. Whilst I recognise the importance of school attendance, some things are more important. ... If missing a day is detrimental to their learning, then there is something wrong with how the curriculum is designed. (Parent/carer)



...all the schools are worried about is attendance and how it looks good for them they are not concerned with what damage they are causing a child in the long term.... (Parent/carer)



... I work in [a hospital] as a {specific role} support worker, daily I see ...bullying, school refusal, overdoses in our young people. So I do agree yes it is our business to make sure they attend school, IF they are able, IF the school are meeting their needs, IF they aren't penalised for additional needs and not at the expense of mental health... (Parent/carer)



We are extremely supportive of our daughter attending school all the time. We do not want to be made to feel like bad parents when our daughter has had very little time out for appointments we could not get outside of school hours. (Parent/carer)



...My child's mental health is important and is sometimes jeopardised by the ridiculous attendance rules in place. (Parent/carer)

Whilst timely communications about absences were appreciated, parents/carers expressed concerns about the tone, approach, and follow-up of communications relating to unauthorised absences.

Communications about unauthorised absences were perceived by some parents/carers to be:

- Procedural, automated and standardised, with limited evidence of individual consideration
- Disproportionate for absences parents/carers considered legitimate, such as illness, mental health challenges, term-time holidays, or family crises
- Impersonal, punitive and insensitive to individual circumstances, reflecting limited understanding of the reasons for absence
- Lacking appropriate follow-up

In a few instances, when these concerns were discussed and the school's response was perceived as sympathetic/supportive the situation seemed to improve, highlighting the approaches that parents/carers viewed as strengthening parent/carer-school relationships in relation to attendance communications

“

Apart from being sick, and the odd one day to accommodate a holiday approximately once a year, my children have 100% attendance. They are working at or at greater depth in all their subjects,... and... , I understand all the arguments regarding attendance. The policy of threatening letters for one or two days unauthorised absence causes everyone to not want to cooperate in any way with attendance policies. ... (Parent/carer)

“

If a child is sent home ill don't then phone the parent who collected them when requested to do so & state its a stage one Intervention phone call- you sent them home! (Parent/carer)

“

I have only had an issue once with attendance. Family bereavement & the school attendance officer showed a lack of empathy and understanding by not assessing and reviewing the few absences over a short period prior to sending standard letter home. After a conversation they realised just how insensitive they were and didn't liaise with head of year, Family or pastoral team to ensure the health, and mental health at this time was provided. (Parent/carer)

“

I find the sending of letters regarding attendance records when absences are well understood, communicated and justified to be at time officious and process driven, with no understanding of individual cases. (Parent/carer)

“

The school seem to start late/finish early for ridiculous reasons (the start of a holiday they finish early, the day after an Open Day they start late etc) but I took my children out of school for 4 days for an outdoor activity holiday to [name of place] which we could never afford in the school holidays and received what felt like threatening letters from school regarding fines and court summons. (Parent/carer)

“

...sometimes there's good reasons for not being in school, such as being sick, but they still send you letters after two days of being ill. This can sometimes be unreasonable, like a student could be in hospital or home with the flu and they still want evidence or more information. (Parent/carer)

“

Stop sending letters threatening fines and court. Offer more help with anxiety not just awkward counselling sessions that don't work. Replying to emails and properly organising parent meetings, at this time I have waited 2 weeks for a meeting ref attendance to be organised. (Parent/carer)

“

...I find the communications to be quite severe in tone. (Parent/carer)

Although attendance rewards seem to support attendance, their impact may be weakened when they are perceived as ‘superficial’, unfairly awarded, or non-inclusive. This may be particularly relevant for students with the lowest sense of belonging, who appear to rely more on rewards to support their attendance.

Students and parents/carers referred to superficial, unfair and non-inclusive rewards

- **Superficial rewards** – e.g., rewards such as certificates were perceived as less motivating than trips, which were seen as more ‘substantial’
- **Unfair rewards** – when students were excluded from rewards because of illness, medical appointments or other absences perceived as legitimate
- **Non-inclusive rewards** – highlighting the need for rewards that recognise attendance progress and/or consistent good attendance, rather than only ‘perfect’ attendance

“ ...Other schools have trips like the theatre, bowling, adventure golf etc as a reward. [The school] gives you a certificate if they rewarded students with a special treat I think attendance would improve. (Student)

“ if your attendance improves give your students rewards. (Student)

“ Reward my improved attendance. (Student)

“ Praise me for my improvements in attendance even though there not as significant as other students. (Student)

“ Attendance awards are rubbish. I had time off for my Nana’s funeral and lost out on a reward. (Student)

“ Schools rewarding not only the people that go to school every day but the people that generally struggle to go to school everyday. (Student)

“ ... my kids attendance is almost perfect but a lot of that is related to privilege ... for kids whose family is struggling rewarding attendance just excludes them all over again. So focus should be on change not absolute numbers. (Parent/carer)

“ The rewards given to those that attend school are often not good or something people want. (Student)

“ By the school rewarding everyone for good attendance not just 3 students randomly. (Student)

“ In general there shouldn’t be attendance awards-this discriminates against SEND, sickness, appointments needed, anxiety and anything else that causes barriers to attendance. Every child’s needs should be met. (Parent/carer)

“ I don’t agree with students being praised for perfect attendance. When my child has been off, it has been due to illness. I don’t think it is fair that children who suffer more with being poorly should be penalised. (Parent/carer)

“ The rewards system for good attendance is unfair to those who need to take time for medical appointments. My daughter has had to have regular medical appointments for her hearing but has not had any sick time or holidays in term time but as a result she is not put into the attendance rewards schemes as she has been absent which is unfair. (Parent/carer)

“ Rewards for children whose attendance has got better but still not at the required level. (Parent/carer)

“ Rewards for good attendance. But do not discriminate for genuine illness. (Parent/carer)

Strict behaviour rules were perceived to have a negative impact on students' school experience and, in turn, on attendance. Both parents/carers and students raised concerns about some schools' behaviour policies and their implementation.

1. What school rules are perceived as strict?



- Uniform and appearance rules
- Punishments/detentions for perceived minor infractions
- Restrictions on toilet access during class time

2. How are these rules experienced/perceived?



- Rigid, outdated, disproportionate
- Punitive rather than supportive
- Misaligned with the real world or educational values

3. Impact of these rules on students



Students

- Schools perceived as uncaring
- Fear-based environments and emotional distress
- Feeling unfairly treated
- Disengagement and loss of respect for teachers
- Loss of self-expression/individuality

4. Impact of these rules on parents



Parents

- Frustration and dissatisfaction with the school
- Erosion of trust when school values conflict with family views of care
- Tensions in home-school relationships

The barriers students report most widely are not always the same as those they prioritise, suggesting that some barriers may function as broader background conditions shaping students' overall experience of school, while others appear more immediate, emotionally salient, or influential in students' decisions about attendance. There are also indications that the relative importance of different barriers may shift across the secondary years.

- There are indications that younger students may prioritise relational and behavioural experiences, while older students may place greater emphasis on mental health and academic pressure as attendance barriers. At the same time, some barriers — particularly struggles getting up in the morning and unengaging lessons — remain consistently important across both age groups.
- For example, compared with younger students, older students are both more likely to report health/mental health difficulties (Y6–8 31.5% vs Y9–11 49.6%) and more likely to identify them as their main attendance barrier (Y6–8 21.9% vs Y9–11 33.3%). Similarly, school pressure for academic results is both more widely reported (Y6–8 19.0% vs Y9–11 34.4%) and more frequently prioritised as the main attendance challenge (Y6–8 3.5% vs Y9–11 7.4%) among older students.
- In contrast, although strict behaviour rules are reported slightly more widely by older students (Y6–8 24.8% vs Y9–11 30.2%), younger students are slightly more likely to identify them as their main attendance barrier (Y6–8 4.2% vs Y9–11 3.1%). A similar pattern emerges for problems with teachers, which are reported more widely by older students (Y6–8 13.5% vs Y9–11 21.6%), but are more likely to be prioritised by younger students as their main attendance challenge (Y6–8 3.5% vs Y9–11 2.4%). Getting in trouble with behaviour is slightly more widely reported by younger students (Y6–8 14.5% vs Y9–11 10.7%) it is also more likely to be identified as their main attendance barrier (Y6–8 4.5% vs Y9–11 3.1%).

Students and parents/carers told us (non-exhaustive)...

... Choose your battles if I forget a pen I'll borrow one if I throw a chair or hit a teacher punish me. If I disagree with a teacher allow me to say my piece rather than being told I'm answering back and sent out... (Student)

School is more interested in a uniform policy than meeting my needs for education. A more relaxed approach would set a better learning environment. (Student)

Rules too strict on toilets, should be able to refill our bottles in class, too strict on detentions - giving them out without warnings first. No phones in school grounds - if you insist on having no phones at least let us check the time in breaktime. (Student)

uniform rules such as (nails and false eyelashes) to be less harsh, as they make me feel confident enough to come in. (Student)

Be less strict on school rules, as it feels too stressful to keep up with all the rules. (Student)

Not having so strict rules and letting us have more mufti days. (Student)

I think ... we should be allowed our phones in school and teachers shouldn't take away our phones as it is our personal stuff and not theirs. (Student)

...teachers punish children too fast and push children away from wanting to be at school. (Parent/carer)

have seen prisons that are not as strict. The rules don't create an environment for wanting to learn. (Parent/carer)

No detentions it makes me want to die. (Student)



They implement such harsh punishments for trivial things. ... Within less than a month of starting there in year 7 all the misdemeanors that added up as they didn't understand his behaviour set a what's the point they hate me attitude... Detentions for minor things like not bringing a green pen to school, ... this school cares more about appearances and their military style class room rules than the children themselves. If they did many more children would attend. (Parent/carer)

... Detentions are given out like sweets and they lose their power, as a parent with some of the reasonings it is hard to take them seriously. Not in this school but previous a detention because a green pen was dropped and stood on is beyond the child's control. They had a new one the next day. It makes the whole system...a complete joke. (Parent/carer)

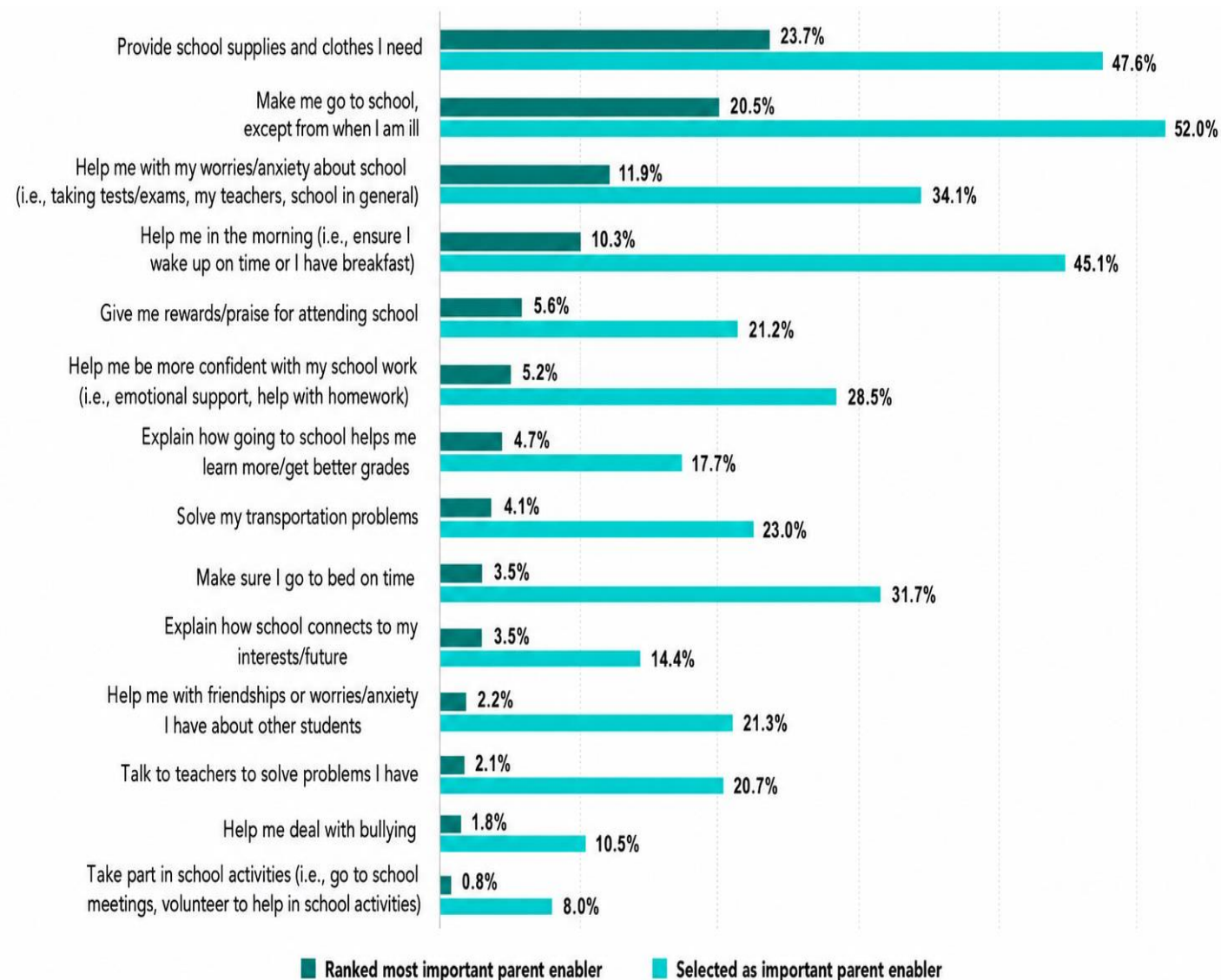
The school disciplinary policy is also unnecessarily strict and confrontational, and has meant my son and his friends have little to no respect for many teachers or the school rules because they are perceived as petty and arbitrary. (Parent/carer)

Both parents are HE educated (PhD level) and believe in education, but honestly, the rules are ridiculous. They are made to feel like prisoners. The rules have no bearing on real life - how we treat people or the workplace. The first week of secondary, I saw my once enthusiastic school loving child who had never been sick in primary, turn away from learning. She got a detention for having the wrong pen. This crushed her and labelled her as a problem... it's been downhill from there. (Parent/carer)

Schools seem to have gone mad, they are coming from a place of constant lack, lack of good behaviour rather than encouraging good behaviour. Detentions are so easy to hand out and so frequent they are meaningless. The school ethos is making children miserable with no desire to go! (Parent/carer)

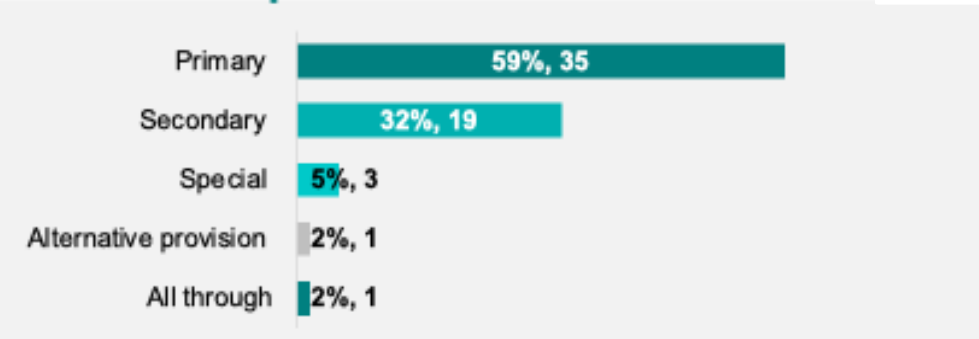
... I also feel if the teachers were kinder and more respectful to young people that would be a much better example to set to young people in their care. Currently they learn that adults shout at them - no respect whatsoever. I also fully disagree with detentions for losing pencil cases and other minor issues. Young people need help and support not punishment especially in year 7. I also disagree with the no toilet rule. I appreciate there is some abuse of going to the toilet by a few but to make all children scared to ask for a basic human need is very wrong. My son has wet himself due to this. ... It is disgraceful and worse than prison I'm sure. I feel that to teach young people to be respectful they need to be treated with respect. I think if attitudes were to change then my son would feel much happier to go. Currently he begs me every day to not go in. It is so sad. (Parent/carer)

Students rank providing school supplies and clothes and parental influence as the most important ways parents/carers support their attendance. However, the selected responses highlight the multifaceted nature of the support parents/carers provide.

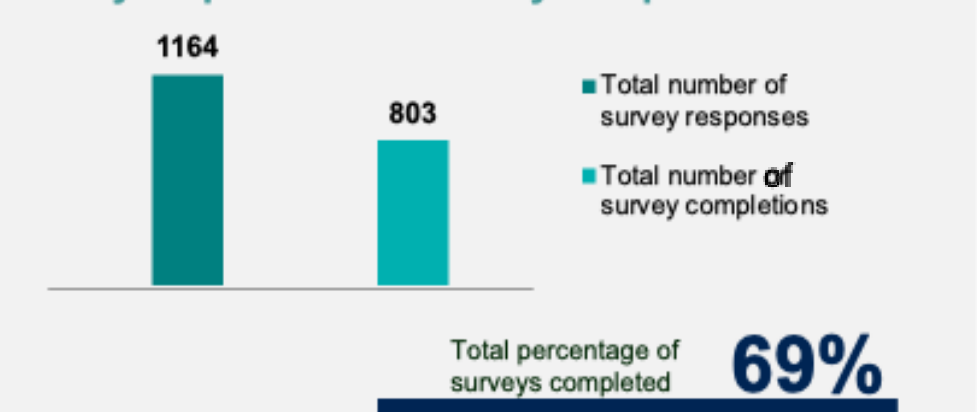


Brief sample overview

Student Sample



Survey responses and survey completions



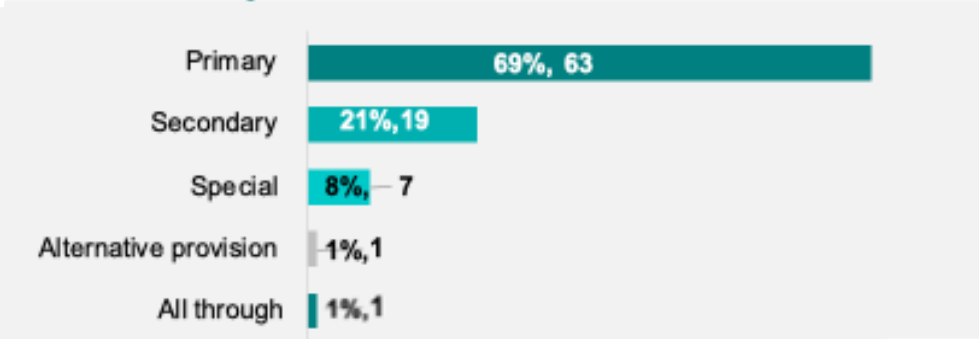
Per Year Group (N=885)



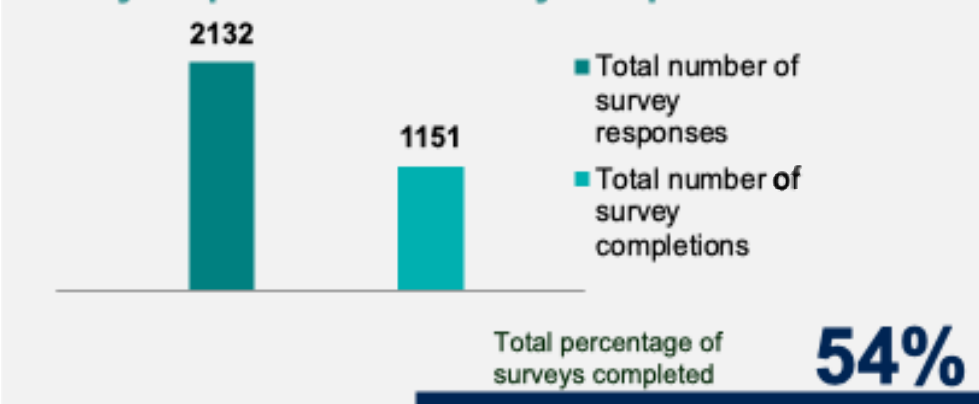
Gender (N=797)



Parent Sample



Survey responses and survey completions



Per Year Group (N=1238)



Gender of children (N=1146)



Note: Analysis was conducted only for participant groups with more than 100 responses in most cases (n>100).

**Brief overview of methods, analysis
and research limitations**

Brief overview of methods, analysis and research limitations

- The survey design was informed by a desk review. This review identified key factors influencing school attendance and included academic and grey literature.
- Both surveys were administered online.
- Students and parents/carers completed surveys with the same set of questions. Students answered for themselves. Parents/carers answered about their child, and if they had more than one child, they were asked to respond for the child with the lower attendance. Including both student and parent/carer perspectives enabled the study to explore areas of alignment and divergence between how attendance-related experiences and challenges are perceived across groups.
- Students and parents/carers also answered two open-ended questions: *“Is there anything else you think could help your (your child’s) school attendance?”* and *“Is there anything else you would like to say about your (your child’s) school attendance or school attendance more generally?”*
- Participants were asked to identify up to five answer options related to the four main questions asked in the surveys, including: factors that help them attend school, factors that act as barriers, ways in which their school supports their attendance, and ways in which their parents/carers support their attendance. In practice, some participants selected fewer than five options, while others selected more. They were then asked to rank their selected options in order of priority.
- Students’ sense of belonging was measured using the PISA 2015 belonging scale for students in Years 9–11, and items from the PIRLS 2016 student questionnaire for students in Years 6–8, aiming to reflect the different age groups included in the study. Based on their results, students were classified into four quartiles, with Quartile 1 (Q1) representing the lowest sense of belonging and Quartile 4 (Q4) the highest. Sense of belonging was examined overall and by comparing the Q1 and Q4 groups across the different survey questions.
- Descriptive analysis was conducted on the survey data. For the ranking results, the percentage of options ranked first (top priority) was used. To assess belonging, the Rasch Rating Scale Model (RSM) was used to: (a) examine the psychometric properties of the set of Likert-type items measuring students’ sense of belonging at school, and (b) estimate a belonging index for each student.
- Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data from the open-ended questions. To indicate the relative prominence of each theme and subtheme, the number of direct quotes was counted. Where possible, differentiated analysis of the qualitative data was conducted.
- Quantitative and qualitative data from students and parents/carers were analysed separately to preserve within-group nuance. They were then compared and contrasted to identify convergent and divergent themes across the two participant groups.
- The student survey achieved 1,164 questionnaire responses. These responses came from students across 35 of the 69 primary schools in Plymouth and all 19 maintained secondary schools. Responses were unevenly distributed across schools, with a substantial proportion — approximately 60% for the primary phase and 50% for the secondary phase — originating from a relatively small number of schools, while covering a relatively broad range of educational contexts across Plymouth. The analyses focused on overall response patterns rather than comparisons between individual schools, which helps reduce the influence of uneven response distribution and, in places, the survey was designed with overlapping themes, enabling internal cross-checks to support the consistency of the findings. Together, this provides useful insight into the experiences and perceptions of the students who participated and helps inform understanding of attendance-related issues for policy and practice in Plymouth. The parent/carer survey achieved 2,132 questionnaire responses and, whilst response levels varied across schools, it captured perspectives across a relatively broad range of educational contexts in Plymouth.

Please contact Elpida Achtaridou (eachtaridou@marjon.ac.uk) if you wish to discuss the detailed student and parent survey results/reports.

Acknowledgements and credits

Acknowledgements and credits

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- **Photos and icons were sourced from Unsplash or created using Copilot or ChatGPT.**