# Concerns rise over increased school suspensions under Athena Learning Trust



Recent data has revealed a significant rise in suspensions and permanent exclusions at schools operated by the Athena Learning Trust, following its acquisition of several institutions and the appointment of CEO Benjamin Parnell. This surge in disciplinary actions has sparked concerns among parents, particularly regarding the treatment of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The trust, which originated in Launceston College, now oversees six secondary schools and three primary schools across Cornwall and Devon, including Camborne Science and International Academy and Pool Academy. The controversial nature of its strict disciplinary measures has often been a point of contention among the local community.

Statistics released by the Department for Education indicate that a predominant share of suspensions in over 50 schools throughout Cornwall were attributed to just three institutions under the Athena Learning Trust during a single term in 2022. This trend has raised alarms, especially as the trust expanded its operations at the end of 2022.

Following a Freedom of Information request, the data indicated that the number of suspensions was notably high, with Camborne Science and International Academy reporting 372 suspensions in one academic term of 2022/23. This figure escalated dramatically to 1,953 suspensions within just seven months, from December 2023 to July 2024, with 592 of those affecting SEND pupils. Furthermore, during this period, the school initiated 30 permanent exclusions, including 12 SEND students.

The statistics reveal that 111 students left Camborne Science and International Academy during the 2023/2024 school year, amidst rising concerns regarding disciplinary actions. When examining the situation across all six secondary schools managed by the trust, 425 pupils are stated to have left during the same timeframe, including 57 classified as SEND.

In response to these figures, representatives from the Trust are adamant that strict disciplinary measures are vital for creating an effective learning environment. A spokesperson commented, "At Athena Learning Trust, we are committed to creating a learning environment where every young person has the opportunity to thrive." The spokesperson highlighted that disruptions in class could significantly detract from valuable teaching time, citing national research which indicates that approximately seven minutes per lesson are lost to disruptions.

The Trust has also pointed out improvements in recent figures, noting that suspensions at Launceston College and Camborne Science and International Academy have seen a reduction of over 50% in the latest reporting term of autumn 2024. They further emphasised their dedication to ensuring that all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and with special educational needs, are afforded opportunities for success in their educational journeys.

Athena Learning Trust claims to be making progress in improving attendance and academic performance among disadvantaged students, stating, "We hold an ambitious vision for all of our schools and firmly believe there are no limits to what any student can achieve." They have touted their ranking as the fourth most improved trust in the country for overall student outcomes across all subjects over the past year, with one of their schools, The Ilfracombe Academy, recognised as the most improved for disadvantaged students nationwide.

Despite the trust's assertions of commitment to student welfare and academic success, community sentiments reflect unease over the disproportionate impact of their disciplinary policies, particularly on vulnerable student populations.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england> - This URL provides data on suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, which can be used to contextualize the trends observed in schools managed by the Athena Learning Trust. It highlights the national context of disciplinary actions in schools.
* <https://www.launcestonprimary.uk/attachments/download.asp?file=493&type=pdf> - This document outlines the suspension and exclusion policy of the Athena Learning Trust, detailing the procedures and considerations for disciplinary actions within its schools. It supports the trust's approach to maintaining order in the educational environment.
* <https://www.cambornescience.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/suspension-and-exclusion-july-2024.pdf> - This policy document from Camborne Science and International Academy, part of the Athena Learning Trust, explains the criteria for suspensions and permanent exclusions, aligning with the trust's broader disciplinary strategies.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education> - The Department for Education's website provides resources and guidance on school policies, including those related to suspensions and exclusions. This can help understand the regulatory framework within which the Athena Learning Trust operates.
* <https://www.sendiass.co.uk/> - This website offers information and support for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), which is relevant to concerns about the impact of disciplinary policies on vulnerable student populations within the Athena Learning Trust.