# Schools in England adopt reward-based initiatives to tackle absenteeism



A recent report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has highlighted the growing trend among schools in England to implement reward-based initiatives aimed at improving pupil attendance. This shift comes in response to the rising levels of school absenteeism, particularly after the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the NFER study, which surveyed over 600 secondary school teachers and leaders, as well as conducting interviews at nine state-funded secondary schools, many institutions are now preferring incentives such as pizza parties, prize draws for items like bikes and iPads, and trips to encourage students to attend school. In some cases, attendance is even tied to the eligibility for attending year 11 proms, providing additional motivation for students to be present.

The report emphasises that combining rewards with traditional sanctions such as fines, detentions, and letters home appears to result in higher engagement with attendance policies. "Pupils in these schools appeared to be motivated to attend, as they saw a tangible benefit to doing so," the report stated. In contrast, it was noted that students from schools focusing primarily on punitive measures often viewed these policies as unfair, especially when absences were beyond their control, such as due to illness or mental health issues.

The findings come against a backdrop of increasing concern regarding pupil absence in England. Recent data from the Department for Education has indicated that the number of pupils classified as “severely absent” hit a record high last year, a trend that has prompted the government to adjust parental fines for non-attendance. Starting in September, these fines were raised from £60 to £80, with escalating charges for repeat offenses.

Bridget Phillipson, the Education Secretary, has expressed support for these parental fines as a tool for addressing attendance issues. However, notable criticisms have emerged, including from actress Anna Maxwell Martin, who described the fines as “cruel and idiotic.” Experts in education echo concerns about the efficacy of fines, with figures such as Matt Walker, NFER senior research manager, urging a shift towards more supportive and encouraging approaches rather than punitive measures.

Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the National Education Union, voiced a similar perspective, suggesting that fines and punitive actions are ineffective solutions, particularly in light of the growing challenges faced by students, including anxiety and special educational needs. He stated, "The message is clear: fines, punitive action and bribery are not working."

Pepe Di’Iasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, added that an individualised approach is crucial in addressing the reasons behind absenteeism, emphasising the need for tailored support that identifies specific obstacles faced by students. Similarly, Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, pointed out that many issues leading to absence lie beyond the school's control, such as mental health difficulties and socioeconomic factors.

The NFER study recommends that schools and policymakers work collaboratively with parents to understand barriers to attendance, reflecting a movement towards creating an educational environment that fosters belonging and support rather than solely relying on penalties. The report calls for increased funding for attendance and pastoral support initiatives to assist schools in addressing the pressing issue of pupil absenteeism effectively.

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

## References

* <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/nfers-5-ways-to-cut-school-absence/> - This article supports the claim that the NFER recommends schools implement reward-based initiatives alongside punitive measures to improve pupil attendance. It also highlights the increasing rates of school absenteeism and the importance of individualised support.
* <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/worn3wki/impact-review-2023.pdf> - This NFER impact review underscores the challenges faced by schools, including absenteeism and financial pressures, reinforcing the need for supportive policies rather than purely punitive ones. It emphasizes the impact of socioeconomic factors on attendance.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-attendance-guidance> - This government publication provides details on school attendance policies, including measures to address absenteeism and the role of parental fines, aligning with the article's discussion on government actions.
* <https://www.nationaldeafchildrensociety.org.uk/press-release/record-number-pupils-miss-out-school-due-absence/> - This report from the National Deaf Children's Society highlights concerns over rising absence rates in schools, echoing the article's emphasis on the growing trend of absenteeism and its implications.
* <https://www.nationalhealthservice.uk/conditions/mental-health/anxiety-and-depression/children-and-young-people/> - This NHS resource underscores the importance of addressing mental health issues in children and young people, which the article cites as a significant factor contributing to school absenteeism.
* <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/press-release/naht-and-nasuwt-join-calls-for-stronger-action-tackle-absence-crisis-schools> - This article from the NASUWT highlights the need for collaborative action to address the school absence crisis, echoing the views of educational leaders and organizations mentioned in the article.