Policy Briefing
School Attendance in Wales

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NATIONAL COLLABORATING CENTRE FOR **MENTAL HEALTH**

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About this report

This briefing provides an overview of school attendance in Wales, including details of the key barriers to regular attendance and the policy initiatives put in place to tackle absenteeism.

We also include the latest evidence on interventions to address attendance summarising a systematic review conducted by the Public Mental Health Implementation Centre (PMHIC), the Royal College of Psychiatrists Wales, University College London and Swansea University.

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Introduction

School attendance is a critical issue in education, with significant implications for both individual learner outcomes and future trajectories, and the wider education system. In Wales, the Welsh Government, local authorities, schools and communities are all involved in promoting regular attendance and addressing absenteeism. Poor attendance at school, whether due to absenteeism or exclusion, leads to multiple social, educational, and lifelong socioeconomic disadvantages. This briefing focuses on attendance and persistent absence (rather than exclusion), and evidence-based interventions to improve attendance.

The Welsh Government's approach to school attendance focuses on a range of support systems, interventions, and strategies to reduce barriers to regular attendance, ensuring that all learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are able to participate fully in their education.

School Attendance in Wales

School attendance has been the focus of considerable scrutiny in Wales in recent years. This includes a Senedd Cymru inquiry,[1–3] a thematic review by Estyn,[4,5] a Welsh Government-commissioned report by Parentkind,[6] and academic research.[7,8]

The Welsh Government's vision for education is outlined in 'Education in Wales: Our National Mission', which includes breaking down barriers and improving educational outcomes for all learners.[9] In terms of school attendance, this means ensuring that learners are supported to attend school regularly, as good attendance is linked to better academic performance, improved mental and physical health, and positive social outcomes.

School attendance trends in Wales have shown both recent positive progress and ongoing challenges. For example, the average attendance for this academic year to date is 91.7%, up from 91.3% over the same period in the 2023/24 academic year.[10] However, the average attendance for the 2023/24 academic year was 90.2%, down from 94.3% pre-pandemic in 2018/19.[10] This is a fall in attendance of 4.1%. Moreover, the percentage of half-day sessions missed by secondary school aged pupils has nearly doubled to 12.0% between 2018/19 and 2023/24.[11]

Notwithstanding nascent signs of improvement, there remain significant disparities, especially among vulnerable groups, such as learners eligible for free school meals.[10] These trends reflect the complex interplay of social, economic and health factors that influence pupils' ability to attend school regularly.

Barriers to
School Attendance

The Welsh Government acknowledges that there are many reasons why learners may have irregular attendance, and these are often linked to socio-economic factors.

Understanding barriers to attendance is essential for developing effective interventions. Some of the most common barriers to school attendance in Wales include:

1 **Poverty and Socioeconomic Disadvantage**
Families facing economic hardship are most likely to experience factors such as poor housing, food insecurity, and lack of access to necessary resources, all of which can contribute to absenteeism. Poverty can also exacerbate mental health issues of both parent and child, which in turn can affect a child's motivation to attend school. According to the latest statistics, 29% of children in Wales were living in relative poverty in the financial year ending March 2023 (once housing costs had been taken into account). [12] This is an increase compared to 28% in previous financial year.[13]

2 **Mental Health and Wellbeing**
There have been long-standing trends of an increase in anxiety and depression in young people for over a decade. Increasing evidence suggests that mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression and stress, significantly impact a learner's ability to attend school regularly.[8] This has been exacerbated in recent times by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to disruptions in education, making it harder for some to return to school regularly. Research suggests that 1 in 6 children and young people have a diagnosable mental health condition.[14] Mental health is also one of biggest issues raised with the Children's Commissioner for Wales by children and young people themselves and their parents and carers.[15] Evidence based on education and health data in Wales found that children 3 with records of mental health problems, neurodiversity and who self-harmed were more likely to be absent from school than those who did not.[8]

3 **Family and Domestic Issues**
Family breakdowns, domestic violence and other family-related challenges can also affect children's ability to attend school. These issues are often hidden, making it difficult for schools to identify learners in need of support. Welsh Women's Aid estimate that refuge-based support services directly supported 987 children in Wales during the financial year ending March 2023, while the charity's Live Fear Free Helpline indirectly supported at least 6,183 children in the same period.[16]

4 **Additional Learning Needs**
Children with additional learning needs or disabilities may struggle with school attendance, particularly if schools do not have the appropriate resources or support systems in place. These children may also face barriers related to both physical accessibility and social inclusion. According to recent research, nearly 1 in 2 children (47.9%) born in 2002/2003 were identified additional learning needs at some point during their schooling years.[17]

5   **Bullying and School Climate**

A negative school environment, including bullying and poor teacher-learner relationships, can lead to disengagement and absenteeism. Learners who feel unsafe or unsupported are less likely to attend school regularly. Recent trends show a rise in bullying among secondary school learners in Wales, with 38% reporting that they had been bullied in 2023 compared with 32% in 2021.*[18]* At the same time, the number of young people reporting that they felt supported at school declined from 73% in 2017 to 59% in 2023.*[18]*

6   **School Transport**

The availability of reliable and affordable school transport can directly influence attendance. Although school transport in Wales is often subsidised, the cost of travel can still be a barrier for some families. Rural schools are also particularly dependent on efficient transport services, without which learners are more likely to miss school due to logistical challenges. The Children's Commissioner for Wales has argued that the current 3-mile radius threshold for free transport to secondary school is too high.*[19]* Moreover, Estyn recently reported that the cost of public transport for those who live outside of the 3-mile limit is a common reason why pupils do not attend school.*[4]*

Policy Initiatives

In Wales, several interventions are in place to tackle pupil absenteeism, with a focus on prevention, early intervention, and multi-agency collaboration. These interventions are designed to address the various underlying causes of absenteeism, from socio-economic factors and mental health issues to family problems and school climate. The key interventions include:

1   **Attendance Guidance and Strategy**
    The Welsh Government provides clear guidance for schools on managing and improving learner engagement and 4 attendance, emphasising the need for a whole-school approach. This includes setting clear expectations for attendance, monitoring attendance data, and taking proactive steps to support pupils with attendance difficulties. Schools are encouraged to promote a positive school culture that values attendance, with rewards for good attendance and targeted support for those who struggle. The latest guidance was published on 24 October 2023, setting out suggested good practice in terms of approaches to improving learner engagement and attendance, and signposting to further guidance and resources.*[20]*

2   **Targeted Funding and Initiatives**
    The Welsh Government has allocated funding for specific initiatives aimed at improving attendance, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes additional funding for pastoral care, outreach programmes, and community-based interventions. For example, funding of £13.1 million has been made available in 2024-25 for the School Essentials Grant (formerly known as Pupil Development Grant) to assist lower income families to buy school uniform and equipment.*[21]* In 2022-23, the grant supported 100,055 children, helping schools address the wider socio economic factors that may contribute to absenteeism.*[22]* On 3 December 2024, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Lynne Neagle MS, announced new funding of £8.8 million to increase school engagement and attendance over the next two years, as well as funding in the next financial year to enhance community focused schools.*[23]* In terms of school transport, a recent evaluation of the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 has concluded that there should be no immediate amendment to the legislation due to budgetary pressures.*[24]*

3   **Early Intervention and Monitoring**
    Early identification of pupils at risk of poor attendance is a key strategy in Wales. Schools are encouraged to track attendance closely and use data to spot patterns of absenteeism. In October 2023, the Welsh Government changed the statistical definition of persistent absence from missing 20% of sessions to 10% of sessions, with the aim of encouraging earlier intervention.*[20]* Early intervention is aimed at addressing the issues before they become more serious. This could involve offering targeted support such as counselling, mental health services, or adjustments to school routines and environments for pupils who are struggling. Estyn has highlighted the important capacity that engagement or attendance officers can add to dealing with the most challenging cases of absenteeism.*[4]* However, at present, the quality of data evaluation and improvement related to attendance is far too variable across Wales.*[4]*

4   **Wellbeing and Mental Health Support**

Given the growing recognition of mental health issues as a significant barrier to school attendance, the Welsh Government has prioritised mental health support for learners. All schools are required to consider the Framework on Embedding a Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing when developing their vision, strategy and policies.[25] The statutory guidance encourages schools to implement mental health and wellbeing programmes that aim to support learners' emotional needs. Initiatives include counselling services, peer support programmes, and access to school-based mental health professionals, such as educational psychologists. However, according to a recent survey, nearly two thirds (62%) of school leaders and practitioners said they were not aware of funding to support the development of a whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing.[26]

5   **Support for Vulnerable Groups**

The Welsh Government provides targeted support for specific groups of pupils who are at higher risk of absenteeism. These include free school meal recipients, looked after children, children on the Child Protection Register (CPR), excluded pupils, those with additional learning needs, young offenders, and young carers. Schools may receive additional resources to ensure that these pupils have access to appropriate support, including Individual Development Plans, additional teaching assistants, and access to Education Welfare Services. Family Engagement Officers are employed by schools to establish positive relationships with families and provide clear guidance and information on good attendance. £6.5 million has been invested in the financial year 2023-24 to support around 200 FEO posts,[27] and a further £1.5 million will be provided over the next two years to support greater capacity.[23] Local authorities also employ Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) to work closely with learners, families, and schools to identify the reasons behind absenteeism and take appropriate action. This might include home visits, family support services, and working with other professionals (e.g., social workers or educational psychologists) to address underlying issues. If necessary, EWOs can help initiate legal proceedings, although this is generally seen as a last resort. £2.5 million has provided in the financial year 2023-24 to enable Education Welfare Services to provide earlier support.[28]

6   **Restorative Approaches and Positive School Culture**

Schools in Wales are encouraged to foster a positive school climate that promotes inclusion and a sense of belonging. Restorative practices, which focus on repairing relationships and resolving conflicts constructively, are increasingly being adopted in schools to improve school attendance. By promoting a supportive, inclusive environment, schools aim to reduce bullying and improve the relationships between learners and staff, which can have a positive impact on attendance. Estyn recently reported that secondary schools are making increasing use of pupil voice to involve pupils fully in the development of strategies and to identify the types of support that may help improve attendance, but this work too often excludes those learners with the weakest attendance.[4] The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Lynne Neagle MS, recently announced £300,000 for the remainder of this year to facilitate provision of additional sporting, cultural and creative activities in schools.[23] This is intended to support learners' positive engagement with school and to foster belonging.

7   **Incentives and Rewards for Good Attendance**

Many schools in Wales use rewards systems to encourage good attendance. These can include certificates, special privileges, or recognition in school assemblies. By rewarding learners for consistent attendance, schools aim to reinforce positive behaviours and create a culture where attendance is valued and celebrated. Estyn recently reported that, where schools were effective in improving attendance, leaders focused well on rewarding individual pupils with notable improvements in their attendance.[4] However this may have unintended consequences for learners whose attendance is poor because they need support.

8   **Legislative Support and Enforcement**

The Education (Wales) Act 2014 requires local authorities to act to promote regular school attendance. Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide support to schools and families in improving attendance and can take enforcement action, such as issuing Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) or pursuing legal proceedings, in cases where other interventions have not been successful. Local authorities were discouraged from issuing FPNs during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they were reintroduced in May 2022. Figures obtained via Freedom of Information requests reveal that thousands of FPNs were issued to parents whose children missed school in the academic year 2023/24, with some leading to prosecutions.[29] However, evidence as to the effectiveness of FPNs is mixed, 1 and legal action is seen as a last resort. The focus remains on early intervention and support

Interventions

Evidence based interventions should be at the core of activities to improve pupil's attendance across Wales.

In 2022 the Education Endowment Foundation published a Rapid Evidence Review on Attendance Interventions[30] focusing on impact evaluations and studies published since 2000 that evaluated an intervention with a primary goal of increasing school attendance and that reported on a measure of pupil attendance or absenteeism . We conducted an update of this review focusing on evidence from randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that aimed to improve pupils' school attendance. We followed the systematic search strategy of the EEF review with some amendments and searched for articles published between the years 2020 and 2024. We identified 9,315 abstracts. Screening the abstracts and full texts yielded a further 41 randomised controlled trial publications eligible for this review, which adds to the 21 RCTs identified in the EEF review. Below, we summarise the evidence from the 62 RCTs identified across both the EEF review and the review update. By pooling the studies, we provide an overview of the evidence from RCTs published between the years 2000 and 2024.

We identified nine categories of interventions to improve attendance (Figure 1). We report each study within one intervention category (note: this differs from what was done in the EEF review for the categorization of two studies[31,32]). We provide a summary statement about the direction of evidence per study for each category, stating whether 'none', 'some', 'most' or 'all' studies support effectiveness of the intervention type. The quality of evidence is reflected in our confidence statements based on assessments of risk of bias. We report the total 7 number of randomised controlled trials in each group, their study populations in terms of age and socio-economic, mental health or behavioural difficulties, the direction of effects, and the studies' risk of bias assessments.

Mentoring programmes
some studies support

Parental Engagement programmes
most studies support

Responsive and Targeted approaches
all studies support

Social and Emotional Learning programmes
most studies support

Behavioural programmes
emerging evidence

Meal provision programmes
no studies support

Incentive and Disinsentive programmes
emerging evidence

Extracurricular programmes
most studies support

Other approaches
emerging evidence

High confidence, medium confidence, low confidence

Fig 1 | Categories of interventions to improve school attendance identified

Mentoring programmes

1   **Some studies found mentoring programmes to be effective in improving school attendance (medium confidence).**

Ten RCTs on mentoring programmes were identified.*[33–42]* Two studies targeted middle school students,*[33,42]* one primary and middle school,*[34]* and the remainder targeted secondary school students.*[35–41]* Several of the studies reported populations with majority of students eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch.*[34–39,42]*

Six studies showed the interventions were associated with improvements in attendance, *[34,37,39–42]* however one of these studies found that their observation did not reach statistical significance,*[40]* and another found that the effect size was very low.*[39]* One study also identified that positive average effects mask heterogeneity by age, such that no effect was found for younger primary school children, but a positive effect was seen for older primary school children and middle school children.*[34]* The remaining studies found no effect of the interventions on attendance.*[33,35,36,38]* Only one study focused on students with mental health or behavioural difficulties, specifically ADHD, and for these students the intervention reduced absences over time.*[37]*

We identified one trial with a high risk of bias arising from sample selection and the allocation process,*[39]* however three of the trials had low risk of bias.*[33,35,38]* The six remaining studies were deemed to have some concerns with bias due to small sample size, bias occurring through the allocation process, or unclear reporting of students' baseline characteristics.*[34,36,37,40–42]*

Parental engagement programmes

2   **Most studies found parental engagement programmes to be effective in improving school attendance (medium confidence).**

Eleven RCTs on parental engagement approaches were identified.*[31,43–52]* Four studies targeted preschool to primary school-aged students,*[43–46]* one study targeted middle school students,*[47]* two studies focused on secondary school students,*[31,48]* and the remaining four studies focused on students of all ages from preschool to secondary school.*[49–52]* The majority of the studies reported that a high proportion of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.*[31,32,43,44,49–51]* None of the identified studies assessed the effectiveness of the interventions among students with mental health difficulties or behavioural difficulties.

Most of the studies indicated that the parental engagement interventions were associated with improvements in attendance,*[31,43–46,48–52]* although one study found the association to not be statistically significant.*[45]* On the other hand, one study found no differences in attendance between the intervention group and control group after the implementation of a family support intervention.*[47]*

One study in particular showed that a mailing intervention had a particularly large improvement in attendance for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged households and for English language learners,*[46]* and this impact was also significantly different when compared with other students who received the intervention, with a small effect size. Conversely, one study found that attendance did not differ for students with low socioeconomic status following intervention.*[48]* We identified four trials with high risk of bias due to sparse reporting of study methods and results, or lack of comparability between groups at baseline.*[45,47,49,50]* Five trials were rated as low risk of bias, *[44,46,48,51,52]* with two trials showing some concerns of bias due to poorly reported randomisation processes or results.*[31,43]*

Responsive and targeted approaches

3   **All studies found responsive and targeted approaches to be effective in improving school attendance (medium confidence).**

Five RCTs on targeted approaches to address issues of school attendance were Identified.[32,53–56] One study was implemented in schools that served either preschool through to primary school, or preschool through to middle school.[32] Two further studies focused on middle and secondary school student populations.[53,54] Most of the studies reported that students qualified for free or reduced-priced lunch.[32,53,55,56] None of the studies assessed the effectiveness of the approaches among students with mental health difficulties or behavioural difficulties.

All studies showed some degree of positive association for the interventions on attendance, however only two of these interventions displayed effects that reached statistical significance (support for students in foster care,[54] and a multi faceted truancy intervention[55]). One study reported that the observed positive impact was not statistically significant,[32] and another study found the result to be statistically significant in the first year of the trial, but this effect was not sustained in subsequent years.[56] A further study found that the impact on attendance varied between cohorts, with one cohort showing a non-significant positive association, one cohort showing no effect, and a final cohort demonstrating a statistically significant association between the intervention and attendance.[53]

One of the identified studies was rated as high risk of bias due to a lack of statistical power,[55] two were rated as low risk of bias,[32,53] while the remainder showed some risk of bias concerns due to unclear reporting of study methods, or lack of statistical power.[54,56]

Social and Emotional Learning programmes

4   **Most studies found teaching of social and emotional approaches effective in improving school attendance (medium confidence).**

Nine RCTs on the teaching of social and emotional approaches were identified.*[57–65]* Seven of these studies targeted primary school students,*[57,59,61–65]* one study targeted secondary school students,*[60]* and the final study focused on students of primary school to secondary school age.*[58]* The majority of the trials reported high percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, or students who were classified as economically disadvantaged.*[57–59,61–63]*

Seven studies indicated that the interventions were positively associated with improvements in attendance,*[57,60–65]* however one of these studies found that the association was only statistically significant when programme implementation compliance was high.*[65]* Another study did not find an overall statistical difference of the intervention on attendance for the entire sample of students, however, the authors did identify a significant improvement in attendance for Hispanic students at a 30-week follow-up, with small effect size.*[59]*

One study assessed how the intervention impacted the attendance of students with mental health problems, targeting students with high-levels of anxiety.*[60]* The authors found a significant reduction in missed class periods following the intervention, as well as a significant decrease in anxiety, depression, psychological inflexibility, student wellbeing, and positive mental health, with medium effect size. A further study assessed mental health outcomes in terms of teacher reported internalising and externalising behaviours, but found no significant differences between pre-test and post-test for either the intervention group or control group.*[64]*

Two of the identified studies were rated as low risk of bias,*[63,64]* while four were deemed as high risk of bias largely due to inadequacies arising from the allocation process and dissimilarities between groups at baseline.*[58,60,62,65]* The remaining three trials displayed some bias concerns due to unclear reporting of points estimates and variability.*[57,59,61]*

Behavioural programmes

5   **Some studies found behavioural programmes to be effective in improving school attendance. While evidence is developing it is not yet conclusive (low to medium confidence).**

Three RCTs on behavioural programmes were identified.*[66–68]* One study targeted students in primary school,*[66]* while the remaining two studies targeted students of secondary school age.*[67,68]* Each of these studies identified a small to medium proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals (between 13 and 36 percent of students).

Only one study out of the three identified a positive association between the behavioural intervention and attendance,*[68]* finding a small effect in decreasing unexcused lateness and a medium effect on decreasing unexcused absences. Another study found no difference in truancy levels at 24 months post intervention, however did find a significant reduction in truancy at the 36 month follow-up.*[67]* The remaining study found no significant effects of the intervention on absenteeism.*[66]*

Although none of the identified studies assessed the effectiveness of the intervention on students with mental health difficulties or behavioural difficulties, one study's authors found that their intervention had a medium effect on decreasing perceived negative affect.*[68]*

Two of these studies were rated as low risk of bias,*[66,67]* with one trial rated as high risk of bias, with bias largely arising from the randomisation process, sample comparability, and poor presentation of points estimates.*[68]*

Meal provision programmes

6   **No studies found meal provision programmes to be effective in improving school attendance (high confidence).**

Four RCTs on meal provision programmes were identified.*[69–72]* Two of the studies provided meal programmes to primary school students,*[70,71]* while the remaining two targeted students of primary and middle school age.*[69,72]* All of the studies included samples with high proportions of students eligible for free or reduced price meals, with two of these studies specifically targeting schools from low socioeconomic areas.*[69,72]* None of the trials assessed the effectiveness of the interventions on students with mental health difficulties or behavioural difficulties.

None of the identified studies reported any difference in attendance following the implementation of a meal provision programme.

All of the studies identified in this intervention area were rated as low risk of bias.

Incentive and disincentive programmes

7   **Some studies found incentives and disincentives programmes to be effective in improving school attendance (high confidence). While evidence is developing it is not yet conclusive.**

Four RCTs on incentives and disincentives programmes were identified.*[73–76]* All of the studies targeted students of secondary school age. Most of the studies included students with low socioeconomic status,*[73,74,76]* with one study specifically targeting young men from low-income families,*[73]* and another targeting students who were recipients of public assistance.*[74]*

Three studies show a positive association between the intervention and school attendance;*[73,74,76]* all three of which involve a financial incentive scheme. However, two of these study's results did not reach statistical significance.*[73,76]* The remaining study looked at the impact of different types of awards for outstanding attendance, but overall found deleterious effects on attendance instead.*[75]* However, the authors did note that prospective awards led to a significant improvement in attendance for younger children only, but this impact disappears as students get older.

None of the studies aimed to assess the effectiveness of the interventions on students with mental health difficulties or behavioural difficulties, however one study did assess some mental health-related outcomes.*[73]* The study reported that the intervention did not have an impact on physical or mental health composite measures, but did find that students who received the intervention were less likely than the control group to visit the emergency department and more likely to report that they felt loved and wanted.

Three of the studies were rated as low risk of bias,*[74–76]* with one study showing some concerns of bias due to groups being dissimilar at baseline, and no presentation of points estimates.*[73]*

Extracurricular programmes

8   **Most studies found extracurricular programmes to be effective in improving school attendance (low to medium confidence).**

Eight RCTs on extracurricular programmes were identified.*[77–84]* Four studies targeted students from preschool and primary school,*[77,82–84]* one RCT initially targeted primary school students but reports the follow-up of these same students at middle school-age *[80]*, and two studies focused on middle school students.*[78,81]* An additional study targeted individuals aged 14–24 years.*[79]* Most of the studies included study samples where the majority of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, were classed as economically disadvantaged, or attended a school that mainly served low-income families.*[77,78,80–84]*

Seven studies showed that the interventions were positively associated with improvements in school attendance,*[77,79–84]* however one study did not find a statistically significant reduction in absences,*[80]* and another identified that only one component of the programme was predictive of attendance improvement,*[77]* namely the tutoring aspect rather than family engagement.

When looking at subsamples of students from the identified studies, one study found a stronger impact of the intervention for students who had higher reading skills at baseline*[82]* and one study reported a particularly strong impact for Black students, male students, and students who had low school attendance at baseline.*[83]* Another study found larger improvements for youth with initially low attendance rates and also students over the age of 16 who were legally able to drop out of school, and that improvements in attendance for all students were sustained if a second summer of programming was attended.*[79]* Finally, another study found that the improvements were larger for Black students, as well as those with low school attendance at baseline, but particularly for Black students with low initial attendance.*[77]*

Three studies investigated whether students who were identified as economically disadvantaged had significantly different outcomes compared to the rest of the study sample, but all three studies found no significant differences by income, or free or reduced-price lunch status.*[77,80,81]*

None of the identified studies assessed the effectiveness of the interventions on students with mental health difficulties or behavioural difficulties.

All of the studies had risk of bias concerns, with three studies being rated as high risk of bias,*[78,82,83]* and the remaining five studies showing risk of bias concerns.*[77,79–81,84]* These concerns mostly stem from sample selection, randomisation, baseline comparisons, and presentation of results.

Other approaches

9   **Some studies found other approaches to be effective in improving school attendance (low to medium confidence). While evidence is developing it is not yet conclusive.**

Eight RCTs looking intervention approaches that did not fall within the intervention categories above were identified.[85–92] One study targeted preschool students,[87] two studies focused on primary school students,[85,90] two studies included middle school students,[86,92] and two focused on students of secondary school age.[89,91] One study targeted all students from preschool to secondary school.[88] Some of the studies indicated that their sample of students were eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch, were otherwise classified as economically disadvantaged.[86,87,90,91] None of the studies assessed the effectiveness of the interventions on students with mental health difficulties or behavioural difficulties.

Four of the studies were focused on improving health management for children with chronic health issues.[85,88,89,92] Interventions to support children with asthma were not associated with improved attendance in school.[85,92]

Three interventions focused on teacher and/or school staff development [86,87,91]. One of the three found that a professional development intervention aimed at improving teacher-child interaction quality in preschool settings, reduced student absence rates by 1% during the school year.[87]

One study testing a writing workshop intervention found a small decrease in absences when students wrote about a success compared to students who wrote about a failure and subsequent resilience.[90]

Two of the studies were rated as having low risk of bias.[86,91] Two studies were rated as having high risk of bias,[88,89] with the remaining studies showing some concerns of bias. [85,87,90,92] Risk was largely due to issues arising during the randomisation process, problems with comparability of groups, and unclear presentation of results.

Conclusion

School attendance is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted approach. In Wales, the Welsh Government, local authorities, schools, and communities are all involved in addressing the causes of absenteeism and supporting learners to attend school regularly. There is good evidence for the effectiveness of responsive and targeted approaches and parental engagement programmes. Most studies support teaching of social and emotional approaches and of extracurricular programmes in improving school attendance but there were risk of bias concerns. By focusing on early intervention, multi-agency collaboration, and the provision of targeted support for vulnerable learners, the Welsh Government aims to improve attendance rates and, ultimately, educational outcomes across the country.

There is a clear political commitment to making school attendance a priority, with the recognition that every child's ability to attend school regularly is essential for their future success. However, challenges remain, with the percentage of learners missing school being almost double that of the pre COVID-19 level. A comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of the diverse range of policy initiatives and interventions outlined in this briefing merits further study.

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