

School Attendance and Lost Schooling Across England Since Full Reopening

Introduction and background

Although pupils in England returned to school at the beginning of the autumn term, schools have faced many challenges in trying to get attendance back to normal. This short report from the Education Policy Institute analyses data from the DfE and the Children's Commissioner on local authority attendance rates for children in England's schools.

Key findings

Variation by local authority

- Rates of attendance have been considerably higher in primary schools. Most areas have seen over 90 per cent attendance which is not far off the pre-pandemic level of 95 per cent. There are, however, some areas with much lower attendance rates including parts of Birmingham (such as Sandwell and Dudley), parts of Greater Manchester (such as Rochdale and Oldham) and parts of East London (such as Newham and Tower Hamlets). In these areas, attendance has been as low as 80 per cent.
- Levels of attendance have varied even more widely in secondary schools. Attendance has averaged between 80 and 90 per cent. However, in some areas (North West, Yorkshire, and cities across the Midlands and North East) it has stood between 75 and 80 per cent. In Rochdale, it has dropped to 71 per cent and in both Sandwell and Oldham it has averaged 72 per cent.
- The Office of the Children's Commissioner uses these average attendance figures to calculate average days of lost schooling. According to these calculations, primary school children in England have lost 3.5 days of schooling over the autumn term relative to pre-pandemic levels. A small number of local authorities (parts of Birmingham and Manchester) have seen an average loss of more than 6 days of schooling.
- Secondary school pupils have seen an average loss of just over 6 days of schooling, rising to around 13 days in Rochdale, Oldham, and Sandwell. By contrast, the number of days lost in many rural local authorities is only around 4 days.
- The above figures are likely to be under-estimates and they do not take into account the fact that some schools and year groups will have seen near normal attendance throughout the autumn term, whereas others will have seen significant periods of self-isolation.

Differences by area and pupil characteristics

- As shown by the Children's Commissioner's report, these differences in attendance by area clearly correlate with differences in infection rates, as is to be expected.
- The report analyses how school attendance levels correlate with other area-characteristics, such as levels of disadvantaged and past GCSE results.
- Areas with lower prior GCSE results, such as the above mentioned areas of Knowlsey, Oldham, Rochdale, and Sandwell, have seen more days of lost schooling. However, on the Isle of Wight, pre-pandemic GCSE results also tended to be low and yet this area has had an average of just 4 days of lost schooling.
- There also appears to be a link between the level of disadvantage and days of lost schooling. However, here again, it is not consistent. For example, the share of pupils eligible for free school meals is similar across Islington and Knowlsey, but secondary school pupils in Islington have only lost about 4 days of face-to-face schooling on average, compared with 10 days in Knowlsey.

Conclusions and policy implications

- The evidence shows clearly that school closures will have the greatest impact on disadvantaged pupils, since they benefit more from school and often lack the resources required for effective remote learning.
- Certain areas have been particularly affected and it tends to be schools in more disadvantaged areas and those with low past GCSE results which have experienced the lowest attendance levels and most days of lost schooling. Educational inequalities are therefore likely to have widened over this term.

- The differences across areas will not show differences between and within individual schools. As a result, inequalities in education are likely to have widened in a complicated way which is hard to predict from current data.
- Data on attendance by local authority is key to understanding the scale and nature of the challenge facing schools and policymakers. It is fortunate that the Department for Education has committed to publishing this data each week from January 2021, as Scotland and Wales have done since September.
- Existing data collection should be expanded to include data by year group, even if only for years 11 and 13 – very little is known about the attendance of these key groups. Data for Scotland and Wales shows that year 11 or equivalent year groups have seen the lowest attendance levels within secondary schools. Without similar data for England, it is extremely hard to predict how attendance levels could affect exams in 2021.
- More catch-up resources are needed to help pupils make up for lost learning time before educational inequalities become deep-seated. Extra resources should be targeted at more disadvantaged pupils and those who have lost large amounts of face-to-face schooling.

The full document can be downloaded from:

https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ANALYSIS_School-attendance-and-lost-schooling-across-England.pdf

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