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The kids staying away from school

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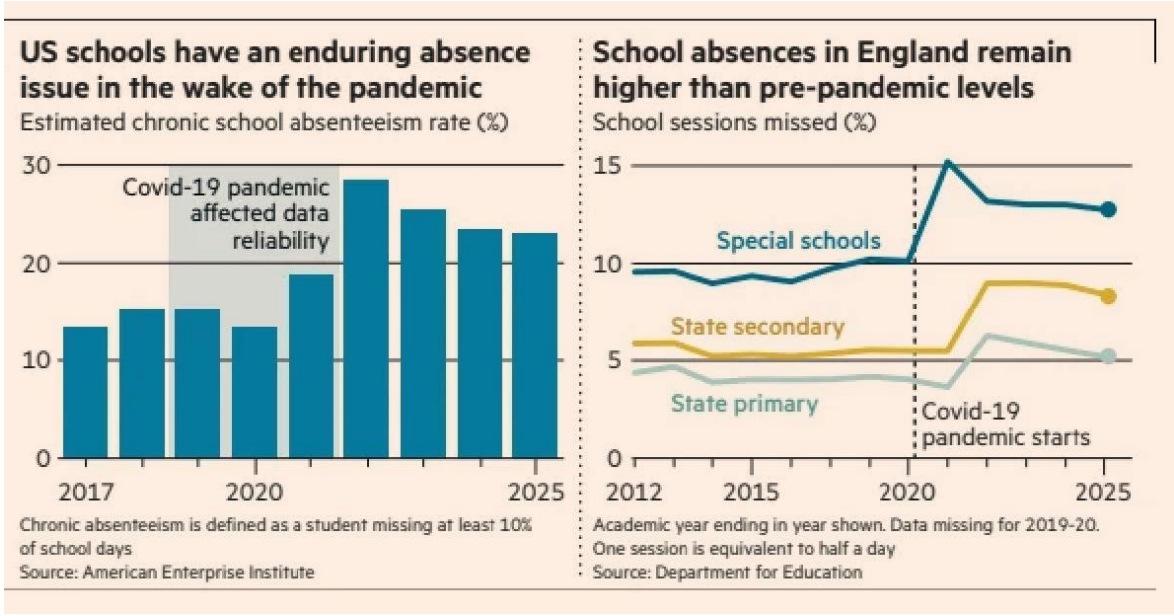
Absenteeism that rose dramatically during Covid-19 has failed to return to pre-pandemic levels. Unless policymakers, educators and parents find a way to reverse the trend, the costs could be felt across society.

Caroline Barnes' eldest son struggled with the transition to secondary school at age 11. Once there, he was repeatedly pulled out of lessons for distracting others with his fidgeting, fiddling with pens, or chatting.

Separated from his peers in another classroom, he would generally watch YouTube videos, making learning harder, his difficulties compounded by dyslexia. He became anxious about attending school. "It was hard to get him out of the door," says Barnes. "He'd go into almost comical slow behaviour. Every day was becoming a huge fight or upset. You can't manage your life." His attendance became increasingly patchy.

His experience is part of a broader international trend of school absence that accelerated sharply during Covid-19 and has failed to return to prepandemic levels. It has been underpinned by digital distractions and AI raising existential questions about education and work, with widespread implications for children, their families, schools and society more broadly.



The UK's Department for Education estimates that 18.14 per cent of pupils in England were persistently absent (missing 10 per cent or more of half-day sessions) in 2024-25, slightly down from post-lockdown highs but far higher than before the pandemic (2018-19) at 10.9 per cent. Severe absence,

defined as pupils missing 50 per cent or more of sessions, has risen from 0.9 per cent of pupils in 2018-19 to 2.4 per cent in 2024-25.

In the US, meanwhile, the proportion of school children missing 10 per cent or more of school (which the federal government defines as "chronic" absenteeism) was 23.5 per cent during the 2024-25 school year, according to a study by the American Enterprise Institute think-tank. That is down from a post-pandemic peak, but far higher than previous levels. The OECD's next batch of student assessment data, to be published later this year, is expected to show absenteeism at persistent highs.

The pandemic made an existing issue much worse, says Sarah Stein, who created a Facebook group in Cleveland, Ohio, to support parents. "Being online and isolated added to the already growing mental health issues among kids, and once they saw they could do school from home it made the idea of being in the building triggering for some."

Pam Shime, a counsellor hired in 2023 to work with San Francisco-area schools to help tackle the growing scale of the problem, warns of the spiralling consequences. Once children miss 10 per cent or more of their schooling, "there is a negative impact on learning, healthy socialisation, graduation rates, and economic and family outcomes for a child", she says.

Once absenteeism reaches 30 per cent, "lesson plans can go askew and it's destabilising for teachers, other students and the system", Shime says. Multiple studies have found the same.

A UK Department for Education study from 2025 found that each day missed for persistently absent pupils was associated with a £650 loss of future lifetime earnings. Such children are far likelier to eventually claim benefits and not be in stable employment, it found.

Bridget Phillipson, the UK education secretary, has described absence as "scar[ring] life chances" and pledged to bring levels down.

A large range of potential explanations has been put forward for the failure of absenteeism to track back to its pre-pandemic levels, including disillusionment with overrigid curriculums and education more generally, a surge in mental health problems among younger people, and significant differences in the ways schools approach the problem.

But experts say that unless policymakers, educators and parents find ways to address the issue, the impact could be felt society-wide.

The trend may "depress economic earning potential not only for individuals but also collectively", says Christopher Kearney, chair of the department of psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In the long term, he adds, that means "less tax revenue and higher likelihood of need for public services".

Despite the mounting evidence, the scale of the absenteeism problem remains hard to track.

Collecting and analysing information about the trend is difficult. Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's director for education and skills, cautions that the data is difficult to compare because definitions — and even a willingness to measure absences — vary widely.

Kearney says: "One might think that absenteeism is obvious to define — for example, a missed day from school, but variation creeps in when considering tardiness, missed classes, early departures, excused and unexcused absences, and online and hybrid formats for learning."

Broadly, experts cite concerns over physical safety at school, mental health, special educational needs and digital distraction, as well as the difficulties faced by families who often work long hours and are unable to fully support their children.

Each country has its own perspective on the trend. In Japan, Natsu Sasaki, a junior associate professor in the department of mental health at the University of Tokyo, says: "Many of the main factors are psychological or physical, such as anxiety, low motivation and fatigue. In some cases, bullying or family problems are also involved."

She says contributing factors in her country include "strong group-oriented culture, uniform classroom education, the slow progress of inclusive education, and cultural values that assume children should attend school as a matter of course".

Schools in the US, meanwhile, are contending with mental health and pastoral and special educational needs on top of teaching, says Kearney. "The problem [is] we've shifted a lot of the mental health focus on [to] schools but [support] isn't mandated."

Shime sees absences among children who have fallen behind in learning to read. "They start to worry if a teacher calls on them to read aloud in class; they feel humiliated, especially in front of their peers," she says.

In the UK, scrutiny has fallen on the education system. Anne Longfield, chair of the UK's Commission on Young Lives, and a former children's commissioner in England, criticises the impact of "a rigid curriculum that hasn't allowed a lot of the more varied aspects and creative aspects of education".

"There are some children who feel that's too stifling," she adds. "It's too much of a process machine [and that affected] children's abilities to feel that school was a place for them."

Secondary or high school is often where the trend peaks, according to US and UK data. In primary school, says Barnes, teachers were "engaged" with her son. "I would know who to talk to. It's not like that at secondary school — you drift as a parent."

The pandemic intensified this trend, raising existential questions about the value of school. "The contract with the school, both with parents and with children, was broken," says Longfield.

Research by Impetus, a non-profit that ran focus groups with children aged 14 to 15 in English schools, concluded that the "assumption that attending every day is expected or automatic has broken down. Instead, pupils now see daily attendance as a decision — one that can be made every morning depending on circumstances, mood or competing priorities."

"Some young people discovered that actually they learnt really well on their own at home," says Roisin McEvoy, head of schools training and national programmes at Anna Freud, a UK charity focused on improving mental health among young people. "Also, some parents now have different working patterns, which means that it's easier when a child is upset or just stressed about going to school to make some space for them at home."

Another more recently cited factor is "disengagement" by students, as they increasingly question the value of schooling in the era of AI. "It's very clear for young people that school is losing relevance," says Schleicher at the OECD.

Its 2022 survey showed that nearly 19 per cent of students absent for three consecutive months said they missed school because they were bored. "During Covid, they found out that there is a world without school, and since then it's been very hard to get them motivated to return," says Schleicher.

Schools' approaches to tackling absenteeism can vary widely. "One school might do everything to help navigate this chapter, while another will send truancy letters and even take parents to court," says Stein, of the US system. "Some have the psychologists and counsellors in place to tackle the issue head-on and procedures to help facilitate the academic challenge of keeping kids on top of school work when they can't be in the building . . . Other schools leave parents high and dry to figure it all out on their own while they tally absences and threaten truancy."

Traditional approaches to tackling absences often focus on monitoring and social support. Shime argues for the need in the US for a national reading programme and greater support for parenting but also, in more extreme cases, tougher enforcement to pressure families to ensure their children attend — an approach that she says faded during the pandemic and has yet to return.

One study in Norway before the pandemic supported a relatively low-cost yet blunt intervention: refusing to give a final grade to students who missed more than 10 per cent of their classes without a medical reason resulted in a 21 to 28 per cent reduction in absences.

It also highlighted that the approach was cheap and backed by clear evidence, compared with the high costs and less clear outcomes of many broader approaches for cash-strapped school systems and governments.

Kearney warns that a punitive model places the onus on "families, courtbased sanctions [and] exclusions. Most of those procedures are politically palatable [but] don't really work."

Rebecca Winthrop, director of the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution in the US, adds: “You need a pull factor, not just a push factor . . . Stern letters to the home don’t seem to work that well. We should incentivise attendance.”

She cites a programme in the US state of Virginia that uses Spanish speakers to engage with the Latino community, sending messages as simple as “[we] miss you, we love you”; and an initiative in Ohio called “Stay in the Game”, which links students with sports teams

Communication between the school and parents is key, says Hannah Tippler, a therapist and deputy service manager at Anna Freud. Children “can tell us why they’re not at school, but those conversations are often missed because there’s a lot of anxiety from parents and schools around getting children to school.”

Schleicher at the OECD also stresses the importance of school culture, with lower absences when there is a supportive, engaging learning atmosphere in schools and a good relationship between students and their teachers.

But the levels of engagement with school study also suggest the need for education to be more aligned to prospective employment opportunities afterwards.

Schleicher points out that attendance is now higher in vocational than in academic institutions, with learning more closely aligned to future jobs.

But policymakers are also attempting to tackle the mental health dimension of the trend. The UK government recently proposed that schools work with children’s services to identify struggling children, and that every school be given mental health support teams, up from 60 per cent today. New tools identifying at-risk children, including disengagement from lessons, would help prevent absence from escalating.

For parents dealing with teenage children who persistently avoid school, such policy commitments may not come quickly enough.

Barnes’ experience of advocating for her son has been stressful, but she has had some success by placing him at a smaller college for 14- to 16-year-olds on a slimmed-down timetable. There is no uniform, more freedoms, no penalties for being late. It has not been straightforward, she admits, but she at least had a glimpse of hope. “You could see him come back to the child I knew,” she says.