# Insights Update: Understanding Attendance

**February 2026**

Improving attendance continues to be one of the most pressing challenges facing schools across the country. In response, ImpactEd Group is leading the Understanding Attendance research project – a large-scale national study of attendance in England – designed to help schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs) uncover the underlying drivers of pupil absence within their contexts. Through this research, we aim to equip education leaders with the evidence they need to take targeted, effective action.

Our first national Understanding Attendance report was released in January 2024, and this was followed by the publication of a second national report in July 2024. These reports looked at attendance rates for over 70,000 pupils and surveys from over 30,000 pupils to understand the relationship between social and emotional measures and their attendance. Since these national reports were published, we have continued to share regular updates with the sector through our Insights Updates to ensure that schools and MATs are able to act on the most up-to-date data and evidence.

In this latest Insights Update, we analysed data from over 46,000 secondary pupils across Years 7–11. This analysis combined attendance data with demographic data and pupil-reported survey insights into key social and emotional domains. Overall, the findings show clear patterns and insights that highlight where targeted support could have the biggest impact, namely:

- The most at risk demographic groups in terms of lower attendance are pupils eligible for Pupil Premium and pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND).
- There is a dip at Key Stage 3, with, attendance dropping noticeably between Year 7 and Year 8.
- The role of the family and home environment is the strongest predictor of attendance overall.
- Peer relationships are positively correlated with higher attendance for pupils eligible for Pupil Premium and pupils with SEND.

## Analytical Aims

We draw on our latest attendance and survey data from 2025. In total, we analysed attendance and survey responses from 46,602 secondary school pupils from 62 secondary schools across England. In terms of the census window, the attendance data covered the first half of term from September 2025, and pupils completed the survey in November 2025. The survey was a Likert scale survey (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), and included items grouped into six domains that research shows can impact attendance levels:

1. Adult and Peer Relationships
2. Family and Home Environment
3. School Environment
4. Inclusion
5. Wellbeing
6. Incentives and Rewards

We focused our research on the key demographic factors, below, as well as the six survey domains, above.

- Year Group
- Pupil Premium (PP)
- Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND).
- English as an Additional Language (EAL)
- Gender

The purpose of the research was to examine how the survey domains and demographic factors impacted attendance separately, as well as how they interacted together to impact attendance:

**Survey domains** x **Demographics** → **Attendance**
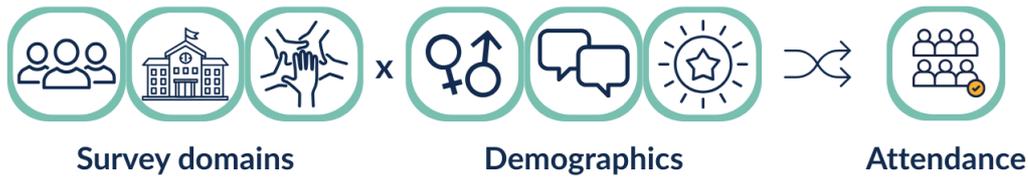
In terms of the analyses, this included a series of regression models with attendance as the outcome variable, accounting for school differences, that look at:

- The relationship between demographic factors and attendance.
- The relationship between survey responses and attendance.
- The interactions between demographic factors and survey responses and how that relates to attendance.

In what follows, we present the key findings and reflect on what this means in practice for schools and MATs supporting pupil attendance.

## Key Findings

### 1. The Attendance Landscape: Who Is Most at Risk?

Across the sample, average attendance sits at 95.3%; however, there are significant demographic effects on attendance rates. For example, pupils eligible for Pupil Premium (PP) show the largest attendance gap, attending 2 percentage points less than their peers (**Figure 1**). This highlights that socio-economic disadvantage continues to be one of the strongest predictors of reduced attendance. Pupils with SEND also attend less, with a gap of 1.3 percentage points, suggesting there may be additional pressures linked to need and support structures. In contrast, pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) attend slightly more than non-EAL pupils, and gender differences are minimal in terms of attendance levels.

**Figure 1: The impact of demographic factors on attendance**
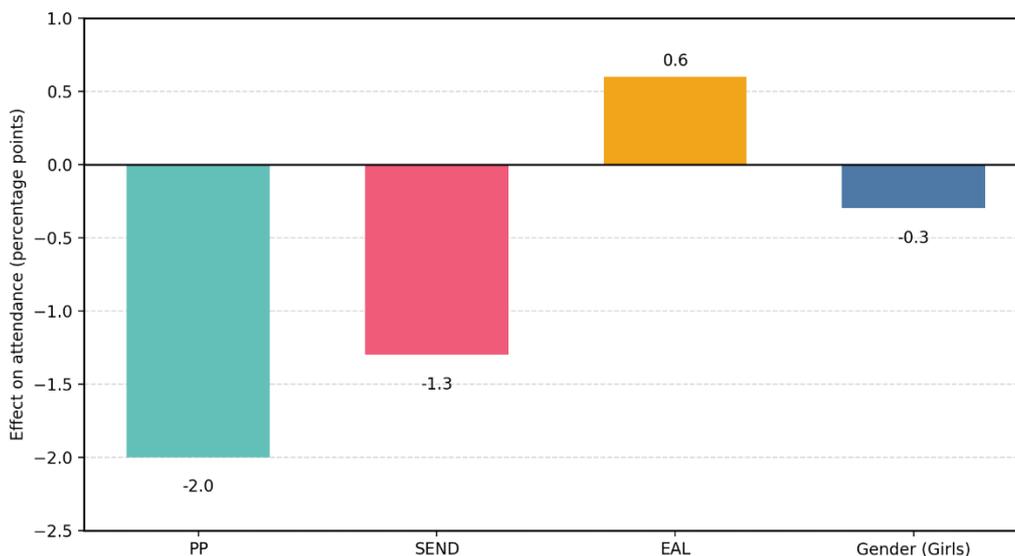


### 2. Year Group Matters: The Dip in Lower Key Stage 3

During Key Stage 3, attendance drops noticeably between Year 7 and Year 8, from 96.9% to 95.4% (**Figure 2**). After this, attendance continues to decline gradually through to Year 11, before rising again in Year 12 and dropping in Year 13. This finding highlights lower Key Stage 3 as a critical stage for preventative interventions. The combination of early adolescence, shifting peer dynamics, and increased independence may create challenges that influence attendance patterns.

**Figure 2: The impact of year group on attendance**
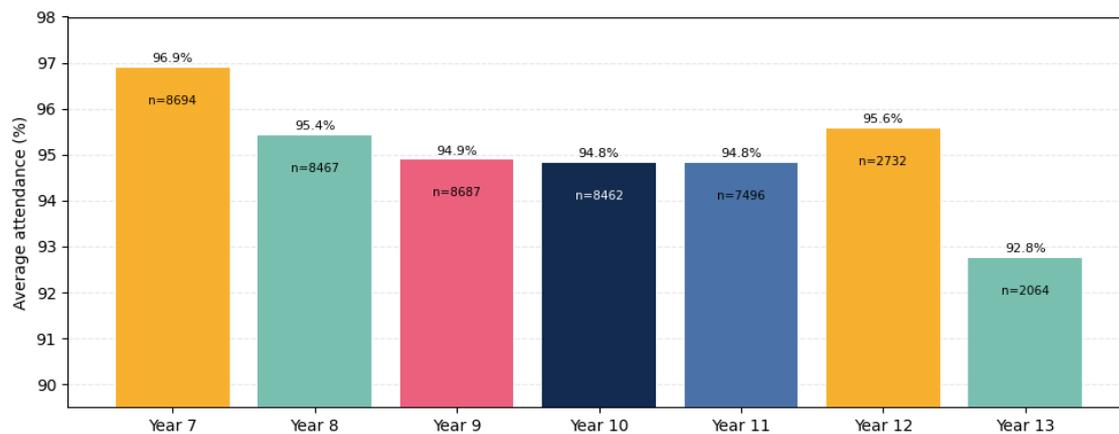


## 3. What Predicts Better Attendance? Insights from Survey Domains

Beyond demographic factors, the research reveals important relationships between pupil experience and attendance. The higher score in the family and home environment domain is the strongest predictor of higher attendance, linked to more than a one percentage point increase for each scale point on the measure (**Figure 3**). This finding highlights the relationship between family contexts and attendance, suggesting that routines, motivation, and engagement beyond school are linked to how regularly pupils attend. In addition, school climate is also relevant: pupils who report a more positive school environment and clearer, meaningful incentives are more likely to attend regularly. Stronger peer relationships are linked to higher attendance, reflecting the protective role of social belonging. Whereas stronger adult relationships are shown to have a *negative* impact on attendance; this effect is small but statistically significant overall. However, for each demographic group the findings do not hold and are not statistically significant suggesting that strong adult relationships is not a driver of low attendance (see Section 4). Finally, wellbeing and inclusion does not show direct effects once other factors are accounted for suggesting their influence may operate through intermediary experiences.

**Figure 3: The impact of survey domains on attendance**
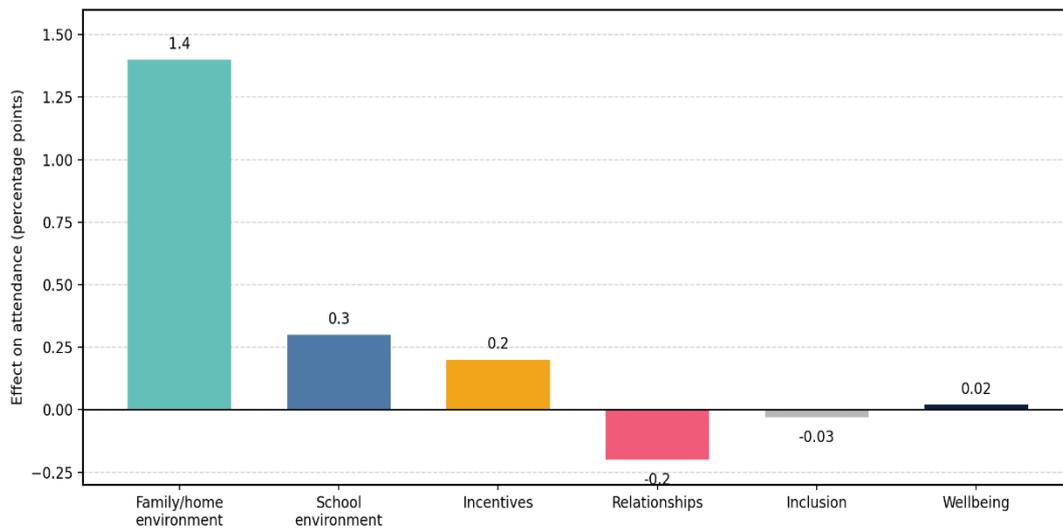


## 4. Understanding how Survey Domains Interact with Pupil Demographics to Impact Attendance

A key focus is understanding how different domains interact with pupil demographic characteristics to impact attendance. Exploring these interactions allows us to offer insights that reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of the factors influencing pupils' attendance. Given the significance demographic factors like Pupil Premium, EAL and SEND have on attendance, shown above, our interaction analysis focused on those characteristics.

**Family and home environment domain:** Looking to understand deeper what factors inside the family and home environment domain drive attendance, we find that the attendance decisions subdomain (decisions about whether pupils are well enough to attend school) is the biggest driver for attending school. Most importantly, this attendance decision can be a lever for the most vulnerable groups: Pupil Premium pupils and SEND pupils.

While pupils (both Pupil Premium and SEND) show a lower baseline for attendance, they are more sensitive to improvements in their decision making than their peers. For a non-Pupil Premium pupil, a point improvement in their attendance decision scores lead to a 1.4 points improvement in attendance, while this effect for a Pupil Premium pupil is 1.8 (**Figure 4**). For SEND pupils, the effect is of 1.7 points compared to 1.4 points for a non-SEND pupil. For EAL pupils, this effect is much lower, a point increase in their attendance decision scores could improve attendance by 0.9 points, while for non-EAL pupils is 1.6. This suggests that improving pupils' scores in attendance decisions, may be particularly beneficial for certain pupils, narrowing the gap between Pupil Premium and non-Pupil Premium pupils, and SEND and non-SEND pupils.

**Figure 4: The impact of attendance decisions as a function of demographic factors on attendance**
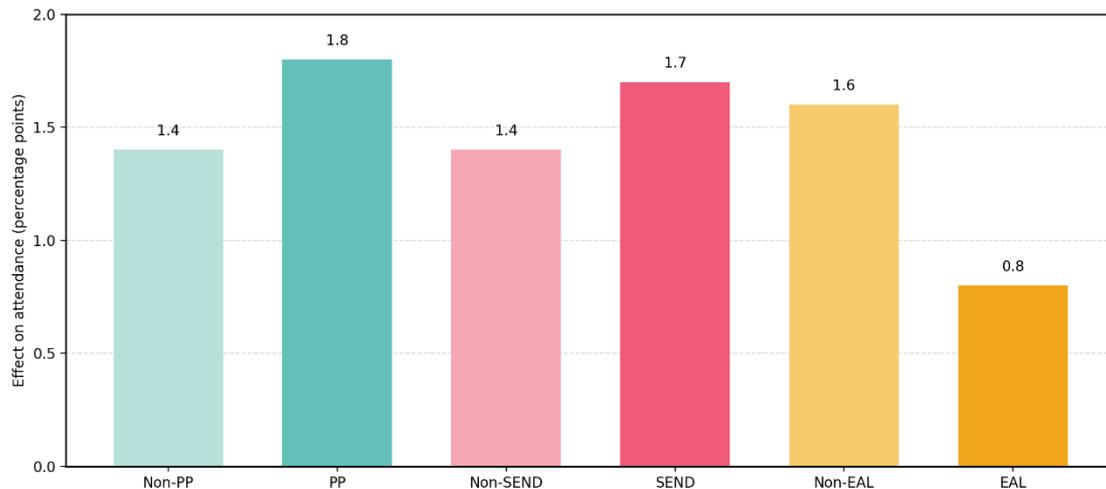


**Adult and peer relationships domain:** Next, looking closer at the adult and peer relationships domain, scores in the adult relationships subdomain specifically may have a negative association with attendance (Section 3). However, these findings were not statistically significant for each of the groups (Pupil Premium, EAL and SEND). On the other side, peer relationships show statistically significant results when they interact with each of these demographic characteristics, reinforcing that peer relationships is a crucial driver of attendance. In particular, the peer relationships scores are positively correlated with higher attendance for Pupil Premium and SEND. This effect, however, is not as large for EAL pupils. A point increase in peer relationships leads to a 1.4-point increase in attendance for Pupil Premium pupils, 1.5 points increase for SEND pupils, but only a 0.8-point increase for EAL pupils (**Figure 5**).

**Figure 5: The impact of peer relationships as a function of demographic factors on attendance**
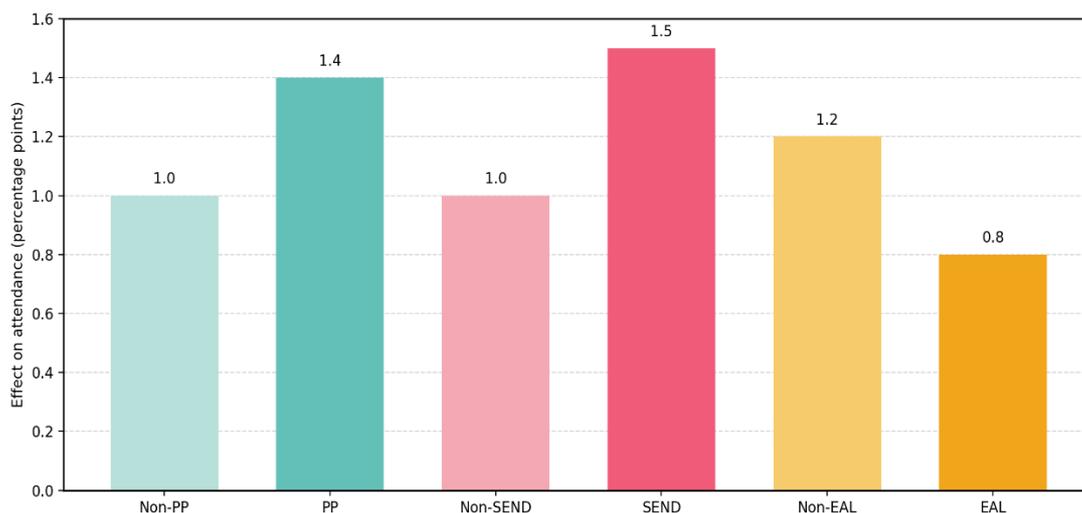
**5. Implications for Schools and Systems**

These findings point to several priority areas for schools and MATs:

1. The largest attendance gaps remain among Pupil Premium and SEND pupils, suggesting that early identification and personalised, relational support should remain central to attendance strategies.
2. Linked to this, Pupil Premium and SEND pupils' attendance patterns are particularly influenced by attendance decisions and peer relationships and are areas for exploration in terms of how these domains can be used as targeted strategies to improve attendance.
3. The investment in school climate, and in particular high-quality peer relationships and meaningful incentives, can play an important role in supporting attendance.
4. The dip in early Key Stage 3 attendance suggests that transition support should extend beyond Year 7, with a focus on strengthening engagement and belonging throughout Key Stage 3.
5. The strong predictive power of the family environment, particularly around attendance decisions, highlights the importance of trust-building with parents and carers and aligns with our earlier findings from previous cohorts.
6. Finally, one area for further exploration is understanding how families and communities are driving positive attendance outcomes for EAL pupils and what we can learn from this in terms of supporting other groups of pupils.

Overall, this analysis reinforces that attendance is influenced by a complex interaction of relationships, routines, and environments both inside and outside school. As schools continue to navigate attendance challenges these insights can help direct resources towards the drivers most likely to create sustainable improvement.

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