

Insights Update: Understanding Attendance

Spring 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.

Since our first national Understanding Attendance reports were published in 2024, 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.

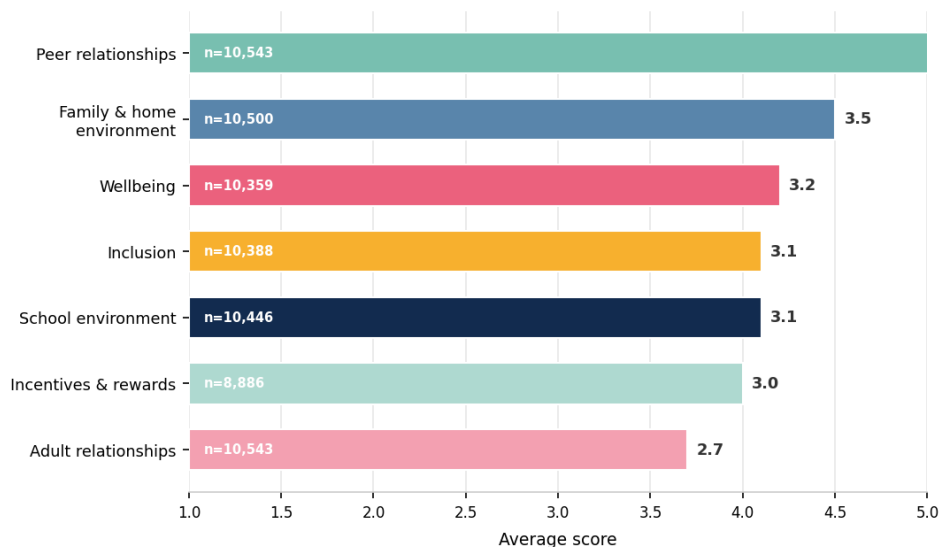
In this latest Insights Update, we analysed data from 10,543 secondary pupils across Years 7–11. This analysis combined attendance data from half terms 2 and 3, with demographic data and pupil-reported survey insights into key social and emotional domains. The findings reinforce several key themes from our earlier work and offer further clarity on where targeted action is most likely to improve attendance outcomes, namely:

- ▶ The role of the family and home environment is the strongest predictor of attendance overall. It is a particularly strong protective factor for Pupil Premium and SEND pupils.
- ▶ Persistent attendance gaps remain for pupils eligible for Pupil Premium and pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND).
- ▶ Attendance declines across year groups, with the steepest drop between Year 7 and Year 8.
- ▶ Incentives and rewards show a small but positive association with attendance.

1. Domain scores across the Spring cohort

Figure 1 shows average scores across the seven survey domains for the Spring 2026 cohort. Scores are on a 1–5 Likert scale, where higher scores indicate more positive responses. Average scores ranged from 2.7 for adult relationships to 4.1 for peer relationships. Of the remaining five domains, family and home environment had the highest average score (3.5) and incentives and rewards the lowest (3.0). School environment and inclusion scored similarly at 3.1, and wellbeing at 3.2. Scores are broadly consistent with Autumn term patterns.

Figure 1: Average survey domain scores (Spring 2026)



Pupils eligible for Pupil Premium report lower scores across most domains compared to non-Pupil Premium peers, most notably on peer relationships (4.0 vs 4.2) and family and home environment (3.3 vs 3.5). Pupils

with SEND follow a similar pattern, with lower scores on peer relationships (4.0 vs 4.2), inclusion (3.0 vs 3.2), and family and home environment (3.3 vs 3.5). Notably, Pupil Premium and SEND pupils score higher on adult relationships (2.7 and 2.8 respectively) than non-PP (2.6) and non-SEND peers (2.6), which may reflect greater reliance on adult support in school. EAL pupils return similar or marginally higher scores than non-EAL peers across most domains.

2. What drives attendance?

Family and home environment is the strongest predictor of attendance: a one-unit increase in a pupil's score is associated with approximately 2.5 percentage points higher attendance. This reinforces our Autumn findings: routines, sleep, and decisions made at home about attending school play a significant role in whether pupils attend school regularly.

Figure 2: Family & home environment scores by attendance band (Spring 2026)

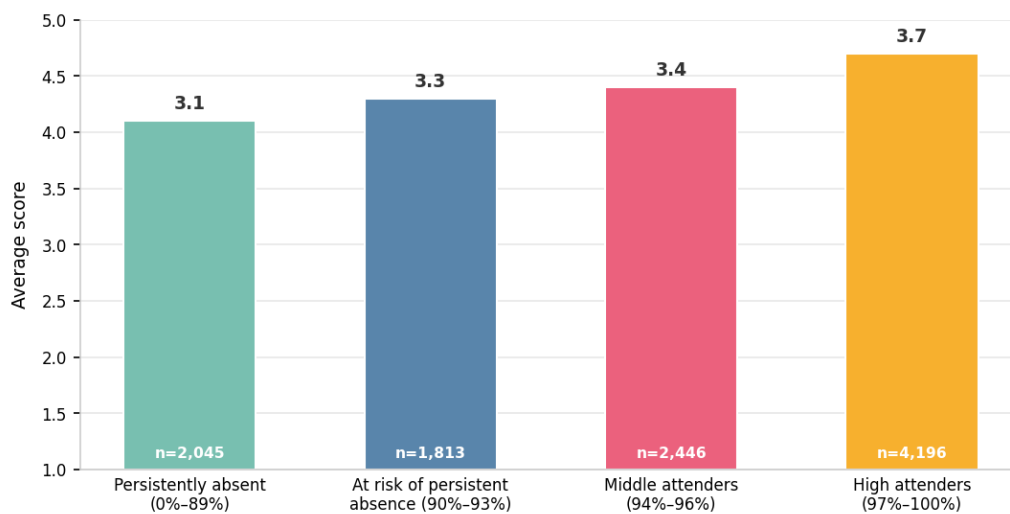


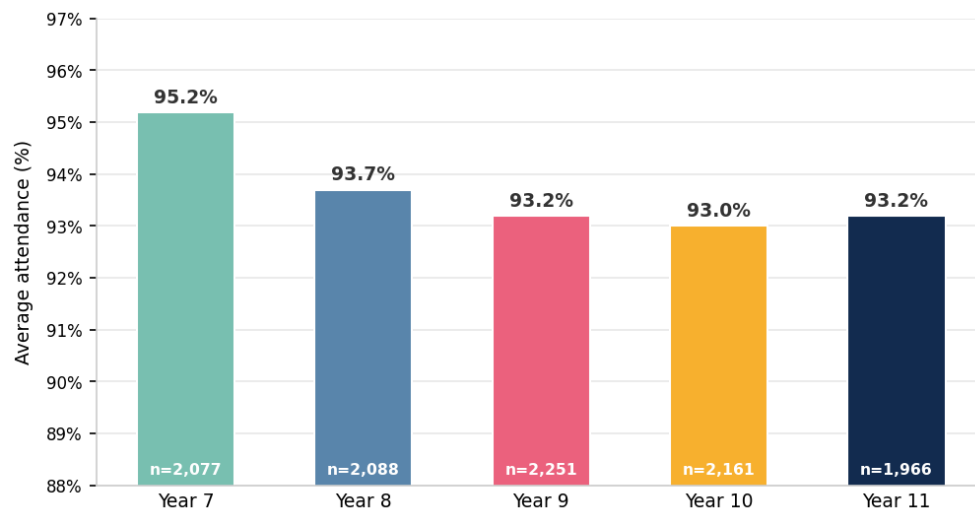
Figure 2 shows a clear gradient between family and home environment scores and attendance, with pupils who are persistently absent scoring considerably lower (3.1) than high attenders (3.7).

Incentives and rewards show a small but statistically significant positive association (+0.4 percentage points). In this cohort, inclusion, school environment, and wellbeing do not show statistically significant direct effects once other factors are accounted for.

3. Demographic differences

Year group effects are consistent with prior findings, with the steepest drop between Year 7 and Year 8. Average attendance falls from 95.2% in Year 7 to 93.7% in Year 8, a drop of 1.5 percentage points, before broadly plateauing through Years 9 to 11.

Figure 3: Average attendance by year group (Spring 2026)



Pupil Premium pupils attend around 3.4 percentage points less than non-Pupil Premium peers and SEND pupils around 2.3 percentage points less than those without identified needs, after controlling for other demographic factors, year group, and domain scores.

Critically, the positive association between family environment and attendance is stronger for Pupil Premium and SEND pupils than for their peers, suggesting that improving sleep and morning routines and attendance decisions may offer a meaningful lever for closing the attendance gap for these groups.

4. Implications for schools and MATs

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

- ▶ **Prioritise family engagement strategies, particularly for Pupil Premium and SEND pupils.** The data consistently points to the home environment as the strongest driver of attendance. Interventions that build trust with parents and carers and support conversations around sleep, morning routines and attendance decisions are likely to have the greatest impact.
- ▶ **Focus on the Year 7–8 transition.** The consistent dip in attendance at this point suggests transition support and relationship-building should continue well into Year 8, not just during the start of Year 7.
- ▶ **Review whether your rewards and recognition system is working for all pupils.** Ensuring reward systems feel meaningful and achievable to all pupils may contribute to tangible gains in attendance.
- ▶ **Use pupil scores as diagnostic tools, not just outcome measures.** Low scores on inclusion or wellbeing may matter as indirect drivers; schools should not overlook these domains simply because they do not directly predict attendance in this analysis.

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