Making Attendance Everyone's Business 'Connect Event'

4th December 2024

Thank you for an amazing day!

Introduction

Our thanks to the 101 participants at this first in-person 'connect event' that sought to bring together colleagues from the education, public, voluntary and community sectors. We heard from generous guest speakers, had some time to share practice (though we know more time is needed at any future events for deeper discussion and can learn form this inaugural event) and made connections 'across the system' hopefully encouraging stronger relationships between us for effective multi-agency working in future.

A full set of verbatim notes are available for those who would like to see them and are found here: Learning together. This paper is a distilled summary of the key themes emerging from the (10) table discussions that took place on the day for the various questions posed.

Discussion topic 1: What do you think are the advantages or benefits of working together: schools + agencies + community on the topic of preventing / reducing persistent & severe absence

1. Breaking down barriers and building trust

- Schools serve as trusted, non-threatening hubs that can connect families with services, reducing stigma associated with statutory agencies.

- Localising support within schools increases accessibility and removes barriers such as travel costs or negative perceptions of authority figures.

- Building trust with families, particularly those hesitant to engage due to past experiences or poverty-related stigma, is a crucial outcome of collaborative approaches.

2. Holistic, whole-family support

- Persistent absence is often a symptom of deeper family challenges; a multi-agency approach helps address these issues comprehensively.

- Collaboration allows a "Team Around the Family" approach, focusing on understanding and tackling the broader family context.

- Sharing the responsibility between schools and agencies reduces the burden on any single entity while creating a unified support network.

3. Communication and information sharing

- Effective sharing of intelligence between schools, agencies, and charities helps identify needs, gaps, and appropriate interventions sooner.

- A central resource portal or hub could improve access to information and streamline referral pathways for all stakeholders.

- Schools benefit from understanding available services and how they align with family needs, leading to more effective support.

4. Early intervention and prevention

- Early identification of barriers to attendance, supported by shared intelligence, allows timely and proactive interventions.

- Collaborative work can address issues before absence escalates, reducing the risk of long-term disengagement from education.

- Connect events or similar initiatives create opportunities for agencies to work together to identify and address challenges early.

5. Empowering families

- Providing parents with knowledge about available resources and support builds their confidence and ability to address challenges.

- Initiatives like Connect events, Citizens Advice drop-ins, and resource-sharing empower families to navigate complex issues independently.

- Overcoming stigma and shame, such as around poverty or household conditions, helps families feel supported rather than judged.

6. Shared resources and coordination

- Collaboration enables pooling of resources such as funding, spaces, and materials (e.g., hygiene products, care packages).

- A "one-stop shop" model streamlines access to resources, ensuring timely and efficient support for families.

- Coordinators or connectors, like those in the Dormanstown model, are vital for organising and sustaining these efforts.

7. Schools as community hubs

- Schools are central to their communities, making them ideal venues for multi-agency collaboration and support.

- Connecting external services with schools fosters stronger relationships with families, making services more visible and approachable.

- Schools' daily interaction with children gives them unique insights into family challenges, which can inform community-wide efforts.

8. Networking and professional collaboration

- Multi-agency networking builds a broader understanding of community needs and enables schools to signpost families to the right services.

- Professionals working together can share insights, avoid duplication, and ensure a coordinated response to family needs.

- Regular forums and events help raise awareness of lesser-known resources and create opportunities for shared learning.

9. Addressing poverty and stigma

- Initiatives such as multibanks and partnerships with organisations like The Junction, Citizens Advice, Thrive at Five and others help address immediate barriers like hygiene and household goods.

- Reducing the stigma associated with poverty encourages families to seek and accept help, improving attendance and engagement.

- Understanding and addressing the impact of in-work poverty or material deprivation is critical for meaningful support.

10. Capacity and sustainability

- While collaboration is highly beneficial, time and capacity constraints can limit schools' ability to organise and sustain these efforts effectively.

- Having dedicated coordinators or key contacts in schools is essential for building long-term partnerships and ensuring success.

- Collaborative approaches share the emotional and logistical load, fostering a supportive culture among schools and agencies.

1. Communication and information sharing

- Inconsistent sharing of information between schools, agencies, and communities creates delays and inefficiencies.

- Important data is available but often inaccessible or siloed, leading to missed opportunities for earlier interventions.

- Practical suggestion: Develop a central, easily accessible directory of key contacts, resources, and services for all stakeholders.

2. Building trust and overcoming stigma

- Historical negative experiences and parental stigma around seeking help can hinder engagement.

- Families may feel overwhelmed by multiple agencies or perceive their involvement as a sign of failure.

- Practical suggestion: Reframe help as support for the child's benefit, using accessible, non-threatening communication methods.

3. Funding and resources

- Funding constraints limit the capacity to organise and sustain multi-agency efforts, such as Connect events and school counsellors.

- Practical suggestion: Promote an "Invest to Save" model to secure funding for initiatives that provide long-term benefits, such as Connectors and targeted events.

4. Coordinated leadership and consistency

- A lack of clear coordination among numerous agencies leads to diffusion of responsibility.

- Inconsistent staff within agencies and schools results in fragmented knowledge of family needs.

- Practical suggestion: Assign lead agencies or coordinators to manage collaboration and provide a blueprint for Connect events.

5. Tailored and holistic approaches

- Not all families or communities respond to the same approach; engagement needs to be tailored to local contexts and individual circumstances.

- Whole-family support is often missing, particularly during transitions (e.g., primary to secondary school).

- Practical suggestion: Expand community mapping and customise support to specific community dynamics and family needs.

6. Transition challenges

- The nurturing environment of primary schools is often lost in the secondary phase, making sustained engagement harder.

- Limited community events in secondary schools reduce opportunities for families to connect with services.

- Practical suggestion: Develop transition-focused initiatives to maintain continuity of support for families and students.

7. Space and accessibility

- Limited space for hosting large-scale events or multi-agency meetings creates logistical challenges.

- Families may feel daunted by attending school-based meetings, particularly in secondary settings.

- Practical suggestion: Use neutral community spaces to foster a more inclusive and approachable environment for families.

8. Capacity and training

- Staff in schools and agencies lack time, capacity, and training to fully engage in collaborative working.

- Practical suggestion: Provide training on effective multi-agency collaboration and invest in dedicated time for staff to build and sustain relationships.

9. Data and its use

- Data is essential but often misunderstood or misused, which can alienate families and damage relationships.

- Practical suggestion: Use data as a tool for early intervention and support, focusing on the story behind the numbers rather than the numbers alone.

10. Harnessing community assets

- Strong assets and leaders already exist within communities but are underutilised.

- Practical suggestion: Engage community leaders and organisations more effectively, creating spaces for them to contribute and build relationships with families.

> **Discussion topic 3: Thinking about the presentation about using data to address attendance in (a secondary) school, what do you like most about the approach that has been described – anything you're not sure about?**

1. The role of data in identifying and addressing absence

- Data is crucial for identifying patterns, cohorts, and children in need of targeted support, enabling earlier intervention.

- Internal use of data helps schools detect emerging concerns, such as specific attendance trends.

- Practical suggestion: Use real-time data and simplified breakdowns (e.g., **lost learning hours**) for better decision-making and communication.

2. Parent-friendly communication

- Simplified, clear communication helps parents understand the impact of poor attendance (e.g., "12 hours of Maths lost this term").

- Visual aids (e.g., color-coded data) and relatable metrics (like hours of lost learning) resonate better than percentages.

- Practical suggestion: Tailor data for parents with transparent, relatable language, avoiding over-reliance on percentages.

3. Balancing hard data with relational practices

- While data-driven conversations can be effective, they must be balanced with relational and restorative practices.

- Building trust through connection and empathy is essential, especially with families resistant to data-heavy approaches.

- Practical suggestion: Combine hard data with relational communication to foster understanding and build supportive relationships.

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4. Early intervention and tailored support

- Proactive approaches like attendance case conferences (ACCs) and "Our Family Plans" help address severe absence collaboratively.

- Using data for early intervention and to recognise progress (e.g., celebrating small attendance improvements) can improve outcomes.

- Practical suggestion: Focus on using data not just to identify issues but also to recognise and celebrate positive changes.

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5. Challenges in parental engagement

- Parents may disengage due to the perceived judgment in data-driven conversations or lack of understanding of their legal responsibilities.

- Simplifying language and explaining the link between attendance and attainment can help parents grasp their child's needs.

- Practical suggestion: Frame conversations as collaborative problem-solving rather than critiques, emphasising shared goals.

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6. Attendance as a Shared Responsibility

- Attendance issues often require both family and school commitment; secondary schools face unique challenges as students become more independent.

- Practical suggestion: Foster shared understanding of the problem, emphasising parents' legal responsibility while also addressing systemic barriers.

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7. Limitations of data with parents and children

- Some groups expressed reservations about presenting hard data to parents, worrying it might feel impersonal or manipulative.

- Practical suggestion: Use data selectively and with context, ensuring it supports meaningful conversations rather than feeling punitive.

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8. Contextualising attendance trends

- Attendance continues to be influenced by external factors, such as the pandemic's aftermath or teacher strikes, which shape parental attitudes.

- Practical suggestion: Consider contextual factors when analysing and discussing attendance data to maintain fairness and credibility.

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9. Supporting whole-family Needs

- A holistic approach to attendance requires understanding family dynamics and broader challenges affecting attendance.

- Practical suggestion: Incorporate health-focused and restorative practices alongside data-driven approaches to support families comprehensively.

10. Maintaining attendance as a priority

- Keeping attendance on the agenda through regular updates, transparent discussions, and celebration of successes helps maintain focus.
- Practical suggestion: Treat attendance as an ongoing priority by embedding it into broader school and community conversations.

Discussion topic 4: Could your school or organisation do anything differently – or better – to reduce persistent absence using some of the practice being discussed here?

This summary highlights actionable steps to enhance attendance efforts through data, relationships, and collaboration but we would recommend more time be made at Attendance Network meetings for more discussion.

1. Holistic use of data across teams

- **Key Point**: Sharing attendance data across teaching, pastoral, and attendance teams promotes a more comprehensive understanding of student needs.
- **Practical suggestion**: Foster a culture of collaborative data sharing within schools to ensure all staff are informed and can act proactively on attendance concerns.

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2. Building relationships and addressing root causes

- **Key Point**: Persistent absence often stems from underlying issues; building strong relationships and using tools like "Our Family Plan" helps address these challenges.
- **Practical Suggestion**: Implement relational practices and collaborative problem-solving frameworks, like Early Help Coordinators and Team Around Family meetings, to tackle root causes effectively.

3. Celebrating success and networking

- **Key Point**: Celebrating attendance improvements and networking with other schools enhances engagement and innovation.
- **Practical Suggestion**: Introduce rewards for improved attendance (e.g., "movie night packs") and facilitate peer networking to share and adopt successful practices across schools.

Discussion topic 5: Thinking about the case study and approach presented by the Virtual School how does this make us think we could work together to reduce the risks for young people to become persistently or severely absent?

How to foster collaboration and reduce risks of persistent absence through relational, creative, and multi-agency efforts.

1. Listening to and understanding the young person

- **Key Point**: Listening to the child's voice and understanding their specific triggers (e.g., anxiety, loneliness) is essential for tailored support.
- **Practical Suggestion**: Create individualised support plans based on direct input from young people to address their specific needs and build trust.

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2. Early intervention and collaborative working

- **Key Point**: Early, multi-agency intervention is key to preventing persistent absence by addressing issues before they escalate.
- **Practical Suggestion**: Establish multi-agency partnerships and "vulnerable learners meetings" to regularly review attendance, emotional wellbeing, and progress collaboratively.

3. Building positive relationships through tailored communication

- **Key Point**: Standardised communication from schools can harm relationships, especially when families have shared their circumstances.

- **Practical Suggestion**: Use personalised and empathetic communication strategies to address attendance issues, focusing on solutions rather than blame.

4. Creative and flexible solutions

- **Key Point**: Flexible, creative approaches tailored to the young person's needs (e.g., addressing friendships or transitions) are more effective.

- **Practical Suggestion**: Implement "outside-the-box" interventions like mentorship programs, friendship-building activities, and transition support to reduce barriers to attendance.

5. Shared responsibility and focus on transitions

- **Key Point**: Attendance should be seen as a shared responsibility across school staff and external partners, with special attention to transitions (e.g., primary to secondary or childcare to adult care).

- **Practical Suggestion**: Ensure coordinated support during key transitions, leveraging resources like Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and Virtual School support to prevent gaps in care.

Discussion topic 6: What are the opportunities for all of us to develop our relational practice (inc. trauma informed, attachment aware and other evidence based practice amongst ourselves and our workforce) with each child, young person & family when seeking to support good attendance?

1. Enhancing staff training and awareness

- **Key Point**: Providing training in trauma-informed, attachment-aware, and evidence-based practices is essential for equipping staff to support children effectively.

- **Practical Suggestion**: Offer regular professional development opportunities, including trauma-informed training and certifications, to create a skilled and empathetic workforce.

2. Fostering collaboration and networking

- **Key Point**: Networking events and sharing good practices allow schools and agencies to learn from one another and adopt innovative approaches.

- **Practical Suggestion**: Host regular networking opportunities for educators and practitioners to exchange ideas, showcase successful practices, and build professional relationships.

3. Using Positive and Creative Engagement Strategies

- **Key Point**: Positive interactions, tailored communication (e.g., WhatsApp), and creative initiatives (e.g., art awards) build trust and engagement with children and families.

- **Practical Suggestion**: Incorporate creative, child-centered approaches such as recognition programs, accessible communication tools, and positive reinforcement to maintain connections and improve attendance.

Want to get more involved?

Interested in joining – or co-leading - one of our new MAEB 'solutions groups' in 2025?

Got questions?

Want to connect with particular people, organisations or some of the practical ideas in these notes?

Please contact:

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