The Bell Foundation

July 2024

Addressing School Absences Among Pupils with English as an Additional Language

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Addressing School Absences Among Pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL)

The Bell Foundation gave evidence to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#) which reported in September 2023.

- Language and ethnicity are key risk factors relating to school absence.
- Data shows that primary school pupils who use EAL are more likely to be persistently absent (absent for 10% or more of lessons) than their non-EAL counterparts.
- Recent years have also seen an increase in the use of "withdrawal" practices, whereby EAL pupils are removed from mainstream classes, contrary to good practice and the law.
- Key policy changes are needed, including guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) on integrating EAL learners into the mainstream and effective training for teachers.

What the data tells us about absence for pupils who speak English as an Additional Language

Language and ethnicity are key risk factors relating to school absence. According to data available through the [Pupil Absence in Schools in England](#), primary school pupils who use EAL are more likely to be persistently absent for 10% or more of lessons than pupils who speak English as their first language (19.2% versus 15.3% in 2022/23). This has been the case since the beginning of the available dataset in 2012/13. In secondary school, pupils who speak EAL are less likely to be persistently absent[1] or severely absent[2] than their non-EAL counterparts (23.3% versus 27.2%, and 1.7% versus 3.8% respectively).

The data also indicates that certain EAL pupils are at greater risk: EAL learners who are from White Traveller, White Gypsy/Roma, White Irish, White Other, and Other Ethnic Group are in the top ten ethnicities who use EAL and are absent persistently[3] and severely[4] in both primary and secondary school. However, EAL is only a risk factor in one of the top ten secondary pupils groups at risk of severe absence (White Other). Broadly, this means that school absenteeism in EAL pupils is more pronounced in primary education than secondary.

A DfE report in 2010 noted that while Gypsy/Roma pupils who use EAL at primary school are less likely than English-speaking Gypsy/Roma pupils to get a short temporary exclusion (five days or less), they are more likely to get a longer exclusion (six days or more). Gypsy/Roma pupils who use EAL are nearly twice as likely to have an exclusion lasting 20 days or more than their English-speaking Gypsy/Roma counterparts (DfE, 2010). A similar pattern was seen in secondary school exclusions, where a Gypsy/Roma pupil who uses EAL was less likely to have a shorter exclusion (seven days or under) than an English-speaking Gypsy/Roma pupil, more likely to have a longer exclusion (eight days or more), and significantly more likely to have an exclusion of 20 or more days. Evidence demonstrates that language is a significant risk factor for Gypsy/Roma pupils in terms of achievement and risk of exclusion.

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[1] The DfE defines persistent absence as a pupil missing 10% or more lessons.
[2] The DfE defines severe absence as a pupil missing 50% or more lessons.
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Recommendation: Because of the heterogeneity of the EAL cohort (as it can include both a multilingual child from a highly educated and privileged background, and a child who is a refugee with limited prior education or literacy in their home language) breaking down absence data by EAL status alone is not particularly useful and can be misleading. To have an accurate picture, absence and attendance data needs to be analysed by EAL status, first language, ethnicity, and time of arrival in the English school system.

What schools told us about absence among pupils who speak EAL

The Bell Foundation carried out a survey with 52 established partners across the country to find out their observations, experiences, and learning about the causes of persistent and/or severe absence for learners using EAL. Respondents were practitioners/senior leaders from primary (11) and secondary (29) schools, as well as local authority services (12) from across the country, including regions where the numbers of EAL learners are well above the national average, such as London, Bristol, and Birmingham. Of those surveyed, 65% had noticed patterns with persistent and/or severe absence among learners using EAL.

Engagement with parents

Of those schools and local authority services surveyed, 74.5% told us that they had experienced challenges with communicating with families/caregivers of EAL learners when managing persistent and/or severe absence. These included common patterns around language as a barrier to involvement, as well as parents and caregivers lack of understanding of the school system and requirements around school attendance.

The latest census data shows that more than one million adults cannot speak English well or at all. Many of them are parents of EAL children who need to deal with school information not being available in a format or language that they understand, and a new and unfamiliar education system and expectations for pupils.

Schools also told us what helped (see below) and this was principally about communication with families.

Reduction in specialist support

Following the removal of the ring-fenced Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant funding in 2011, local authority EMTAS (Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service) teams have disappeared meaning this specialist support is no longer available to schools in many areas.

Withdrawal practices

Through our work with teaching partners, training, and the survey, the Foundation has observed that elements of out-of-class or "withdrawal" practices are creeping back in, particularly as schools cater for increased number of refugee arrivals or those seeking asylum. Amongst teacher respondents to the survey, 73% were aware of practices where learners using EAL are withdrawn from mainstream lessons to attend out-of-class language interventions. These withdrawal practices range from some schools removing children from the majority of curriculum lessons, to the creation of separate provision for newly-arrived EAL children – with no direct link to curriculum learning and no obvious plans to integrate them into mainstream lessons. Learners with EAL have a dual task at school: to learn English (language) and to learn *through* English. For this reason, EAL teaching should aim to teach English using the mainstream curriculum as the context.

The use of "withdrawal" practices was outlawed in the 1980s, after it was recognised that they went against an inclusive classroom, reinforcing an awareness of "difference", and

restricting access to important educational opportunities (Commission for Racial Equality, 1986).

Mid-year refugee arrivals and mid-year dispersals

Refugee status and dispersal policies are also factors in children's absence, which includes not being given a school place or not being able to access the mainstream curriculum. Mid-year arrivals (pupils enrolling after the end of October) are reported as a barrier to entry for schools, as they do not receive allocated funding for these pupils. This particularly affects EAL children from a refugee or asylum-seeking background, who do not have control over the timing of their arrival.

Practitioners have described how this can significantly affect schools' willingness and ability to accept students into their classrooms, particularly if the pupil requires wrap-around support with English as an Additional Language, mental health and trauma, and in-class 1:1 support. The impact of dispersal policies on a child's education is only considered if the child is in their final year of school or college and preparing for GCSE, AS or A-Level exams. The Home Office policy states that all other requests for a preference for location of accommodation on the basis of educational needs should normally be refused. The experience of arriving later into the school system, and being subject to short-notice dispersals hinders school attendance for this group.

What helped, according to schools

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"Improved home-school communication. Parent's feeling more welcome to ask questions and better informed about school life/rules/expectations in general. Building relationships with families and making sure key school information about the education system and expectations are communicated clearly to EAL parents."

"Meeting with parents; where practices and procedures are explained in a non-threatening and relaxed, supportive environment; having translation facilities to explain school expectations and legal requirements (translation buttons on websites are particularly helpful to parents). Explanation booklets (either visually supported or in home languages) detailing the school expectations are also helpful."

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Over 70% of those responding to the survey said that one of the most successful approaches to improving absences was developing meaningful relationships and communication with families. Effective strategies mentioned included:

- Use of interpreters and translated information.
- Finding school staff who share the same home language to help communicate key information.
- Spending time to develop relationships and trust.
- Meeting parents prior to induction to communicate expectations.
- Regular face-to-face meetings.
- Ensuring parents have a point of contact.
- Use of community cohesion officers (ideally someone who shares the same home language as the family).
- Staff training.

Other examples given either in the survey or of which we are aware include:

- **Recruitment of family liaison officers who share the same first language** and background as the parents. These officers visit homes and speak to families about ensuring children attend school. This works well with Roma families (Slovakia, Romania, Czech Republic). Officers built trust with the families and this improved attendance of the children and overall involvement of the families.
- **Appointment of parent ambassadors** who are able to communicate in a more informal/non-threatening way with other parents than was possible by school staff.
- **The Bilingual Parental Support Advisor**, a model that has been trialled in some areas in which parents from the communities help schools accommodate language needs of other parents but also work to understand where there may be cultural differences that need supporting.

Recommendation: The DfE should revise the non-statutory DfE guidance to include language accessibility earlier in the process (i.e., in drafting the attendance policy and building strong relationships) and not just once absence is a problem and attendance contracts are being drawn up. The DfE should also issue guidance to schools on effective communication with parents and caregivers who use EAL, including the use of translated materials and simple English to enable understanding of school expectations and systems.

Policy recommendations in full

There has been a vacuum of policy from the DfE on integrating EAL learners, who make up 20% of the school population. This vacuum has been accompanied by a removal of systems and support previously available, leaving an expertise gap. Additionally, the need to inspect EAL provision in the Ofsted framework has been removed, there is no reference to EAL in the Initial Teacher Training Framework nor the Early Career Framework. This is despite a high number of EAL learners in the school system and new arrivals from refugee communities in recent years.

The DfE should issue guidance to schools on:
- Integration into the mainstream for EAL pupils and avoidance of withdrawal practices.
- The importance of assessing EAL pupils' proficiency in English, given that this has the strongest relationship with attainment (i.e., it can explain 22% of the variation in EAL pupils' achievement compared to the typical 3-4% that can be statistically explained using gender, free school meal status, and ethnicity combined, Strand, 2018).
- Effective communication with parents and caregivers who use EAL, including the use of translated materials and simple English to enable understanding of school expectations and systems.
- The non-statutory DfE guidance should be revised to include language accessibility earlier in the process (i.e., in drafting the attendance policy and building strong relationships) and not just once absence is a problem and attendance contracts are being drawn up.

Assessment:
- Statutory assessment of English language proficiency should be reintroduced in England. Regular assessment of EAL pupils is standard in many English-speaking countries, including Canada, Australia, and the United States of America, and reporting is statutory in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Hutchinson, 2018) (Strand, 2018). Research notes the effectiveness of policy in the United States which requires "rigorous annual targets for Limited English Proficiency

(LEP) students to reach proficiency, and testing and reporting requirements to support this" (Strand, 2020).

Improved data should monitor need, identify trends, and follow outcomes:
- Attendance and absence data should be routinely analysed by time of arrival in the English school system for those with EAL status, first language spoken and ethnicity.
- A category on EAL status should be introduced in the Alternative Provision Census.

Focus is needed on EAL pupils with high needs who arrive in Key Stage 4, including:
- A system that provides advance notice to local authorities so that they can enable schools to secure places ahead of dispersing refugee and asylum-seeking families.
- The development of provision in schools and/or colleges that enables these EAL pupils to access a wide curriculum of GCSEs, so they have the option of continuing onto higher education or professional-level employment as applicable.
- An alternative approach to lagged funding by the Department for Education, to ensure schools receive appropriate resources for children who arrive after the school census date.

Training:
- CPD for teachers (from initial teacher training through to early career training and onwards) in supporting multilingual pupils in the classroom is ultimately necessary to get pupils into effective mainstream school rather than them being taught separately. As Leung and Creese (2010) warn, "[i]nclusive pedagogies, unless properly resourced with appropriate teacher expertise and knowledge, may fail the very learners they set out to support". Therefore, successful integration is largely dependent on the classroom teacher being adequately equipped to confidently meet the language needs of the pupils who use EAL.