

BRIEFING | APRIL 2025

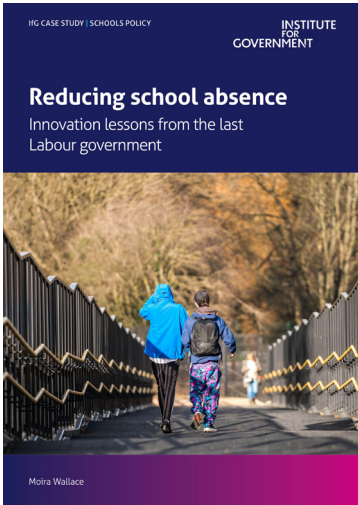
Reducing school absence

Innovation lessons from the last Labour government

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School absence rates are at crisis level

- Nearly 1.5 million pupils were 'persistently absent' in 2023–24
- 43% of secondary pupils eligible for free school meals missed at least 10% of school

The last Labour government tackled the issue effectively

- Secondary school absence fell by 42% between 2000–01 and 2013–14

The Starmer government should learn from that approach

- Be ambitious about reducing absence – and set a clear public goal for improvement
- Bring partners together to tackle the causes of absence – including adolescent health, special needs, school disengagement, family stress, bullying and crime

How to reduce school absence now

1. **Understand the cost of absence.** Commission a comprehensive estimate of the costs of absence, which will run to billions.
2. **Identify and communicate the root causes of absence.** These will include adolescent health, special needs, school disengagement, family stress, bullying and crime.
3. **Bring key partners on board in a comprehensive strategy.** Mobilise effort across government and with the frontline in a long-term strategy on absence and missing school, covering prevention, response and recovery.
4. **Put attendance at the heart of schools policy.** Understand the importance of well-resourced schools, special needs support, curriculum reform and attractive post-16 progression routes.
5. **Support the front line with good practice.** Develop good practice support to focus more on severe absence, disadvantaged groups, reintegration of absentees, remote education and best use of new technology.
6. **Rebuild the relationship with parents.** Seek to strengthen parents' ability to support their children, and build trusting home-school relationships.
7. **Ensure health services play a bigger role in tackling absence.** Take a public health approach to school absence: illness is the biggest single cause of absence.
8. **Draw on the resources of policing and crime prevention.** Connect absence into the safer streets mission: ensure neighbourhood policing teams contribute to safety around schools and on home-to-school routes.
9. **Encourage and drive local partnerships.** Invite local authorities to the table alongside schools and trusts to share good practice and promote joined-up working on prevention.
10. **Make the strategy outcome-focused.** Set a target for cutting absence, aiming to match past success: reduce persistent absence rates by 45% and severe absence by 50% over seven years.
11. **Jump-start action through funded 'whole system' pilots.**
Create a catalyst for joined-up local action on absence. Include absence in the 'Test and Learn' programme, or create a modern equivalent to the local programmes of the Blair government.
12. **Watch the data like a hawk, evaluate and adapt.** Evaluate what works and use data to track progress. Alter the approach if needed.



The full report can be read and downloaded at:
[www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/
reducing-school-absence-lessons](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/reducing-school-absence-lessons) or by scanning the QR code.



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