Senedd Cymru	Welsh Parliament
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg	Children, Young People and Education Committee
Absenoldeb Disgyblion	**Pupil absence**
Ymateb gan Cymdeithas Arweinwyr Ysgolion a Cholegau	Evidence from Association of School and College Leaders

Record your views against the inquiry's terms of reference, which have been grouped into 5 themes.

1. Reasons

• Mental health issues exacerbated through the pandemic. Loneliness and a sense of isolation resulting in relationships not formed with peers or teachers making reintegration into school more difficult.

• Habits learnt within the pandemic that cannot be accommodated in schools and a lack of respect for schooling from the hardest to reach.

• The pandemic and the changes within the system have enabled those with a predisposition to poor attendance to move further in this direction than in previous years.

• There has been a significant drop in parental concern regarding the importance of attendance. Many consider as we place lesson resources routinely on Google Classroom then it is ok for their child to go on holiday, accompany parents whilst they work abroad etc.

• Within the student body, again, there is a perception that attendance is not important. If learners feel you are feeling a bit ill, they will sometimes work on line. We all know accessing resources is not the same as face to face teaching.

• Two years of lack of routine and structure has resulted in young people who simply cannot cope with the day to day routines within a school and who are struggling with their own resilience.

• Many parents will have struggled to manage youngsters through the pandemic, due in part to their own mental health issues which for many have escalated considerably.

Whether and, if so, why, non-covid related absenteeism is higher than prior to the COVID 19 pandemic

• This is clearly the case looking at the weekly data out-turns from Stats Wales. In 2018/19 primary school persistent absenteeism was 5.4% and at secondary level, 6.2%. National attendance rates for the end of May 2022 stand at 88.8% (p) but are not broken down by age. However, for secondary aged pupils only Y7 is above 90% and for primary the highest year group attendance is 91.9% for Ys 3 and 4. In total 134,190 pupils were absent for between 20.5 and 40.5+ days. These figures are clearly a serious concern.

• Fridays are a particular low point in weekly absence patterns.

• What we are now seeing are a group of students predominantly in years 7 – 9, from disadvantaged backgrounds who have significant gaps in their social and emotional intelligence. They are really struggling in schools as they are finding rules, boundaries, attending lessons a challenge following a long time when they had no boundaries set at home. Often these behaviours are evident

in the community out of school as well. When talking to these students they did not engage with any on line learning and state they 'went out' during lockdowns to play with their mates.   Many also have spent

long periods accessing violent/inappropriate social media/games.   For those that are struggling with re-engaging in our school society they are very disaffected and then choose either not to come or truant.   If relationships break down due to poor social skills, again some will stop coming to school.

•	Pupils entitled to free school meals have been less likely to attend school, with the gap being an average of 5.3 percentage points between 16 to 20 May. This gap has been a recurring one.

•	Loneliness and isolation is more prevalent with older aged learners (Children's Commissioner Coronavirus and Me Results) With 54% of secondary aged learners reporting that they were worried that that there were falling behind, this is its own right could dissuade learners from attending school and feeling that they were already failing. 52% of learners were worried about exam results post Covid and again, the potential effect may be disengagement.

•	Those who already were persistent absentees are more difficult to reach now.

2. Risks and consequences

•	The short term and longer-term risks and consequences for learners for example in terms of mental health and well-being- skill regression, emotional regression and maturity regression.

•	Engaging in criminality and anti-social behaviour in the community. Increased youth violence. "Low academic achievement and aspirations and poor commitment and engagement with school is associated with violence."(Violence Prevention S. Wales)

•	Unemployment

•	Children who have suffered trauma remain disappeared and out of reach of help.

3. Impact

•	Estimations on the effects of the pandemic on attainment are already well-rehearsed. Where learners continue to remain disengaged from schools or attend only in part, this will clearly compound an already difficult situation.

•	The impact will be on pupils' learning and attainment with skill regression, emotional regression and maturity regression.

•	The risk of criminal and sexual exploitation increase as the school loses the opportunity to impact on relationships.

•	Increased mental health issues.

•	Decreased resilience

4. Effectiveness of policies

•	Extra funding is welcomed to provide engagement officers.

•	Further funding is needed for a range of support workers to help reintegration and repair.

•   Schools are currently swimming upstream against a tide of continued disruption in schools including staff absence; difficulty with funding settlements; the huge range of reforms piling onto an already tired workforce and being pulled in all directions.

•   Schools which traditionally had high and stable attendance report a significant drop.

•   The bar to trigger LA interventions into persistent non-attenders has in some cases been lowered as cited in one case, where learners need 10 or more consecutive days' absence before intervention. A learner under this radar, can attend just two days per week and have neither support nor consequence. A national approach is needed for the purposes of defining the point at which interventions should take place.

•   The backlog for support services and being able to access mental health support means that schools are struggling to cope to support the young people - all in a mix of exhausted teachers and SLT, many still recovering from the after-effects of COVID.

5. Other

N/A