



Friday 30 June 2023

Dear Parents and Carers

Focus on Attendance

In my extended [letter to you last week](#), I tried to set out what I described as the tailwinds and headwinds that impact on our school improvement journey or voyage. I identified attendance and social media as two major hindrances on our collective progress as a school and committed to exploring both areas in greater depth with you. In my letter today, I shall begin with that focus on attendance.

And yet before I begin, I have to acknowledge that this is a painful topic. Any suggestion that attendance is not good enough (it isn't) comes with it an implication that *your* children have too much time off school. As a parent of three, I have received similar communications and perfectly understand those initial prickles or even rancour, but then the acknowledgement that there is a bigger issue we have to solve together and cannot tiptoe around.

That said, I must acknowledge, for a relatively small number of our students, that there are particular causes of absence that we must think and talk about very differently. It is for this reason that my letter today will focus on the *majority* of students; those who are *not* affected by severe physical, social or emotional challenges - and can therefore be reasonably expected to return to normal levels of attendance and absence.

Some numbers...

It may help to share some figures with you. I have tried to help you see the difference between pre-pandemic and post-pandemic attendance / absence at CNS.

Table One: Attendance data at CNS compared, pre and post pandemic.

No. of students with...	School Year 2018-2019	This Year* 2022-2023	Comments
100% attendance	134 (14.2%)	34 (3.5%)	Perfect attendance records have always been uncommon but are now rare in the vast majority of schools and CNS.
96% to 99% attendance	372 (39.4%)	281 (28.9%)	These are students with ' excellent attendance ' and miss <i>no more than</i> one day every five weeks.
94% to 95% attendance	125 (13.3%)	180 (18.5%)	These are students with ' satisfactory attendance ' and miss as much as over two school weeks per year.
90% to 94% attendance	143 (15.2%)	176 (18.1%)	These are students with ' unsatisfactory attendance ' and miss as much as almost four school weeks per year.
Less than 90%+ attendance	169 (17.9%)	302 (31.0%)	This level of attendance is known as ' persistently absent ' and equates to <i>at least</i> one day off per fortnight.

*Up to the end of term 5



EVERYONE ACHIEVING EVERYONE BELONGING

Table one best illustrates the attendance challenges we must overcome together:

- We have fallen from over half to under one third having excellent or perfect attendance;
- Over two-thirds used to have satisfactory attendance, now it is just one half;
- Close to one in five used to be persistently absent, that figure is now more like one in three.

Every lesson missed is a GCSE mark at risk. *See more on this in the teacher testimony below.*

Table Two: Attendance data at CNS compared, by year groups.

Terms 1 to 5 in 2022-23	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12	Year 13
Attendance	92.9%	89.1%	88.6%	89.6%	93.2%	93.7%	92.1%
No. with 100% attendance	6	2	8	7	6	4	1

It is wrong to assume that attendance is uniformly strong or weak across the school. If we look at the first five terms of this academic year, we can compare the attendance of all our year groups and ask why is it that younger students at CNS are more likely to be absent than older students? Before you answer that, note that almost every student's attendance is higher in year 6 than any other subsequent year.

Whilst it is true to say that high attendance in year 11 (and 13) is ideal, we cannot escape the fact that success in year 11 (and 13) is built on the attendance in lessons that have (or have not) taken place in those earlier years.

Table Three: Attendance data at CNS (in the last four full weeks) compared, by days of the week.

Terms 1 to 5 in 2022-23	Mondays	Tuesdays	Wednesdays	Thursdays	Fridays
Average daily attendance	89.9% = 101 absent	92.4% = 76 absent	91.7% = 83 absent	91.3% = 87 absent	87.4% = 126 absent

Pre *and* post pandemic, we see the same pattern of students being significantly more likely to be absent on Fridays and, to a slightly lesser extent, Mondays. This phenomenon is sometimes known as 'rounding off' and shows that absence is more likely either side of a weekend. Why is this?

Table Four: Student progress and attendance at CNS compared.

Finally, as we turn our attention to the relationship between attendance and academic progress, we can see a predictable pattern that there is a strong and positive correlation between strong attendance and both progress *and* attainment. In other words, attendance and exam success go hand in hand.

Year 11 Class of 2022	Average Progress 8 score in 2022	Average GCSE Grade in 2022
Students with 95.0%+ attendance	+0.96 (almost one full grade higher in every subject than all other similar students)	6.7 (a high grade 6)
Students below 95% attendance	-0.03 (almost the same grade in every subject as all other similar students)	5.1 (a low grade 5)

Testimonies:

Numbers alone will only take us so far. That is why I shall share comments from colleagues about attendance and why it is a priority for school improvement and one of the greatest barriers to our future success.

Testimony of a teacher of 20+ years...

“It has certainly become much harder in recent years. In the past, the number who might be absent was quite small and manageable - meaning it was fairly easy to ‘catch up with them’ when they returned and ensure they stayed up-to-date. Nowadays, the number who are absent each lesson, and the frequency with which students might be absent, means that it becomes almost impossible to ‘keep up’. The result is that nagging fear that too many students dip in and out and feel lost. The negative effects of this are hidden for a few years but will of course show up in the end, as they approach and sit their GCSEs. I am concerned that the long-term impact of missing a day or two every fortnight is not widely understood.”

Testimony of a pastoral leader...

“The negative impact and effects of regular absence is fairly invisible at first. But then, as the days and absences mount up, we sometimes see the impact on that child’s confidence, social networks, academic progress and, finally, their self-esteem. There is always the risk of a vicious circle where absence leads to lower confidence and self-esteem- which then feeds more absence. We are conscious that when we try to challenge a student and their family to improve attendance, the reaction can be negative - and therefore risks driving a wedge between that child and the school. It’s easier to just give up and avoid upsetting students and their parents – but where will that leave the child in the years after they have left CNS?”

Joint testimony of our senior leads on attendance...

“The link between attendance and academic success is very clear. Equally, the link between absence and diminished life chances is also stark. We understand that we must support those children with acute social, emotional and physical needs very differently than most students, even with the knowledge that the longer they are missing lessons the less likely they are going to be able to ‘catch up’. However, these acute cases are relatively small in number and so the greater challenge is represented by the much larger number of students whose attendance used to be very good and now it is not. In short, if we were to get back to pre-pandemic levels then every student needs to secure three less days off next year.”

These testimonies reflect several uncomfortable assertions: Absence can lead to permanent gaps in knowledge and understanding; absence in childhood risks eroding life chances in adulthood; and absence can feed further absence within a vicious circle.

However: Improved attendance will enable teachers to spend more time and give better support to those who are more occasionally absent; improved attendance enhances life chances in adulthood; and improved attendance leads to children feeling more confident, happier and more hopeful about the future.

So, what are we going to do about this?

Our website already has a fulsome section on [‘the importance of attendance’](#). It is really good and includes a neat summary of what the school does to promote strong attendance, and what parents and carers can do as well. Please do take another look at this page.

It is worth remembering that the reason I am focussing on attendance with you is that it has been identified as one of the two headwinds that slows down or even diverts the journey of the school’s improvement. Great schools have great attendance, it is that simple. Whilst we may be above local and national averages, such comparisons are flawed if we aim to be a great school – we have to compare upwards not sideways; and there are many great schools with better attendance than CNS.

- Next term you will see **a greater focus on attendance at whole school and personal levels**. Whilst I am unlikely to write about attendance each week, I will be sharing the most recent week’s attendance data to keep the topic alive in all our minds. The table opposite gives you an impression of the kind of thing I shall adopt.
- **Every student will be set a personal attendance target at the Meet the Tutor Evening in October** – based on the simple goal that every child reduces their absences by three days and that their end of year attendance will be at least 90%. This would be a giant leap.
- **New school rewards** will be in place to celebrate high attenders, but also reward students for attendance streaks – meaning that if they are off, they can return the next day and start a new streak that is longer than the last.
- **Positive reinforcement at home** – whilst punishing absence is utterly futile, we must acknowledge resilience, praise attendance streaks and reward breakthroughs. For some, a breakthrough is a full week, fortnight or month without absence; for others it is a whole term or year without a day off.
- Above all, we have to **share a collective determination to encourage high attendance**, know when to expect greater resilience from our children, and act with greater urgency when a child has missed just one day of learning. This has to translate into **parents and carers taking greater ownership to ensure their child has caught up on their lost learning**.

WB: Mon 11 Sep 2023	
Whole school	?%
Year 7	?%
Year 8	?%
Year 9	?%
Year 10	?%
Year 11	?%
Year 12	?%
Year 13	?%
% 100% this week	?%
% 100% all year	?%

Just before school reopens in September, Mrs Whyte (or attendance officer) and Mrs Armistead (assistant headteacher) will write to you and set out our plans to boost attendance in greater depth.

Next week I shall turn our attention to the negative impact of social media, and how it affects students’ wellbeing. Until then, have a lovely weekend and I hope my letter has been acceptably and appropriately uncomfortable, but with added joint determination to ‘go again’ in September and do something special. On the one hand, one might ask what a school can really do to increase the likelihood of children getting out of bed in the morning for school, or children being more carefully monitored in how they use social media late at night. On the other hand, the very best schools find those ways and means by building partnerships where we speak frankly, share the burden, and then jointly enjoy the benefits.

Yours faithfully



Barry Doherty, Headteacher