Why are so many kids not going to school? Education needs a reset

– a practitioners' view

Preamble

This is our third opinion piece and a companion to our previous publications, **'Education needs a re-set'** and **'AI confirms Education needs a re-set'**.[1]

The central thread of all three is that Education needs to be reimagined and re-booted and that the curriculum, what we ask students to do, and the metrics we use to value learners are seriously out of kilter with the demands of the post-COVID world.

The intention of these papers is to stimulate discussion, with a focus on the issues raised at the end of each publication and, we hope, to challenge the stale orthodoxy of provision in England.

In this opinion piece we reference published evidence; offer some informed observations from talking to current school leaders and parents; extrapolate on some ideas and speculate on some of their implications.

We do not seek agreement for these views: we seek only interest.

These papers are 'pebbles in the pond' but we believe they strengthen the view that Education in England needs a re-set.

In England it is incontrovertible that school absence has risen since COVID and more families are choosing to educate their children at home. The policy response has been to double down, increasing centralisation and demanding ever-stricter disciplines in schools, when the truth is that a new social compact between government, educators, parents, learners and community partnerships is essential.

However, as we try to show, school attendance figures in England are but a post-COVID symptom of a wider loss of societal trust in authority and agency, different manifestations of which are clearly seen in the USA, France and Germany, and more widely in Europe as a whole.

International Perspectives

In the UK, but also in the USA, Ireland, Sweden, and Belgium, rates of school absence have increased dramatically since COVID. In the UK more than a quarter of all secondary pupils are now defined as persistent absentees, missing at least 10 per cent of school sessions. Primary numbers are not much less alarming.

School absenteeism is a pervasive problem in educational systems worldwide and has attracted much attention among researchers, media and policymakers. When considering the determinants of school attendance, there is robust evidence suggesting an association between children's socioeconomic background and school absenteeism (socioeconomic circumstances may even be more detrimental to boys, in terms of influencing absenteeism). Adolescents from

more deprived areas, living in socially rented housing, coming from households with lower levels of parental education and social class, and registered for FSM were more frequently absent from school than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. The correlation of high absence with high levels of youth crime, safeguarding, substance abuse and county line risk, is well-documented but **increased absence features across all socio-economic groups**.[2]

Some Geopolitical considerations post-COVID

- The situation in the Ukraine, the Middle East and elsewhere has had a profound impact on the **cost of living**, for which 'the government' is blamed

- Many believe that Western Democracies are losing confidence and self-belief in the face of the autocracies of China, Russia and the Middle East. This loss of confidence is fuelled by the sometimes malign noise of the 24/7 Main Stream Media and the poison of social media

- There is a real loss of trust in authority and in politicians in particular – the blame culture is very popular – 'it's the government's fault' everywhere, and belief in a return to a pre-COVID normality has vanished

- In Western democracies, in particular, we worship the 'gods' of celebrity, and the gods of plenty and excess, whose festivals of Black Friday and Cyber Monday and Boxing Day sales we faithfully observe[3]

We want it all and we want it now, we are 'entitled' and the more we are disappointed the more we assume we have no agency and look for who to blame.

Other societal issues in the UK post-COVID

- The mood of the nation is troubled and senses a broken Britain

- The country is more divided by generation, by gender, by ethnicity and by politics

- There has been a profound culture shift in peoples' attitude towards the role of the State, the value of community, the rights of the individual and the tick-box views of focus group-led politicians of all parties

- Repaying the near £400 billion debt from the 'furlough' scheme has exacerbated the 'cost of living crisis', in addition to the impact of the Russian Campaign in the Ukraine and now the Middle East

- There is a loss of trust in the 'cherished institutions' of society – the Church, Parliament, the Police (for example the Sarah Everard case in London, or in Greater Manchester where the police overlooked the sexual grooming of young girls); the NHS (in relation to GP appointments, waiting lists and striking doctors); or the legal processes which for over 20 years screened a conspiratorial cover-up of the wrongful prosecution of Post Masters and Mistresses)

These things bleed into the same loss of societal trust in Schools.

The idea that in schools 'every day matters' was undermined by the fact that for most children schools were closed for 7 months during COVID, followed by teacher strikes, grade inflation, universities lecturers' strikes and the tolerance of children absenting themselves from school to support teacher strikes and Middle East politics. Despite teachers remaining in the top ten of trusted professionals, parents are less convinced of the need for full-time school attendance.

The view of the previous HMCI that the 'social contract'[4] between schools and parents has been broken is reflected in a widespread belief amongst parents that individual days are not important. One school in Wigan, Cansfield High School, has worked hard to maintain attendance and has succeeded with an above-national-average percentage attendance, and the most vulnerable groups also attending well, but it's at a cost. In five months 540 home visits each taking about an hour have taken place. Over a 6 week period at Trentham Academy in Stoke 2143 phone calls were made to students' homes and 174 home visits were made. Some parents keep children at home fearing illness and note that the number of days taken off for illness by school staff has risen, as has the use of 'supply teachers'. Then there's also the risk-aversion culture leading to school closures for bad weather or the *possibility* of bad weather.

In addition, some parents cite end-of-term games and Christmas Parties, along with the use of teacher INSET days, as reasons not to send their children to school close to school holidays.

> *So, why not take advantage of term-time cheap holidays abroad – 'what's to miss on any one or two of these days. Every day doesn't matter?'*

Flexible WFH is very attractive to many working families. Some people don't necessarily need or want to go to work 5 days a week so does school need to be an exception? (Despite more than 12 months of train strikes over the recent holiday period at Christmas very few trains ran in Scotland because many rail workers didn't turn up for work as planned. Other public and private services can't operate fully because they can't recruit staff).

For some the view is that home is a safer place than school and for others it's a place where children are not being told off for failing to conform to increasingly petty rules. Others would surely argue that absentees roaming the streets in groups or gangs is not exactly safe.

Lack of school attendance is but one of many social sequellae that have been accruing over time and which coalesced, erupting through the veneer of social stability as a result of the pandemic.

The impetus for mass education in the UK began in the second half of the 19th century and in the Mandela Act of 1880 it was determined that no child could be absent from school under any circumstances without a certificate of educational attainment.[5]

In the 1890s many parents were also reluctant to think every day at school mattered. Some depended on their children's labour, for instance gathering in the harvests, others resented the state telling them what to do. And then, as now, illness was a problem. Over time, many schools encouraged attendance by establishing links with charities that provided free meals, clothing and medical care but also embraced more sanctions in the form of increased fines. Local 'school boards' employed a small army of school visitors (often ex-policemen or military men) who gathered details on all the families in an area and ensured that children attended school. They were nicknamed "kid-coppers" and often met with insults and lies. Parents could be fined, taken to court and even sent to prison if their children kept missing school. In 1876, one blind and ill father, John Speer, was fined 2s6d because one of his three children did not attend school. He was unable to pay and was sentenced to five days in prison.

Present-day 'solutions' echo much of the same institutional control and conformity, but today parents see sanctions as antagonistic and irrelevant.

Just before COVID, attendance was at about 95 per cent, and now it's down at 92.5 per cent. But the more significant post-COVID shift is not in overall absence, but in the number of persistent absentees, whose numbers have almost doubled, and the startling growth of 'inside truancy' where students hide in the buildings, grounds and toilets to skip lessons.

Government statistics show that 24.2% of pupils were persistently absent over the autumn term of 2022 to 2023, meaning they missed at least 10% of lessons. Pre-pandemic levels of absence were only around half of this. Over the same period, the number of children who missed 50% or more possible education sessions was almost double pre-pandemic – 110,000 or 1.7% of students. In parts of the Midlands persistent absence in secondary schools is of the order of 37% and this is before you factor in 'in-school truancy', where students disappear inside school during the day.

The Government is considering funding school attendance support officers, initially for one year, and employing 'mentors' to be trained to work with "pupils and families" on a one-to-one basis, with the intention of better understanding barriers to the child's attendance and support. In 2023 HMCI warned that school closures amid the pandemic had broken the structure and routine of getting children up in the morning to attend school. In March 2023 she told Headteachers that COVID disruption had fractured the social contract around education and the importance of attendance.

The Pandemic gave rise to a litany of societal consequences; 'ghost children' being absent or 'disappeared' from the system; 'Influencers' who had unrestricted access through social networking to millions of children and young people; and online educational materials creating the impression of elective home education being simple. The conflation of all this has thrown up barriers to re-establishing previous norms.

Meanwhile too many schools appear to be behind the curve by demanding ever-more strict and less flexible approaches to ensure good behaviour and attendance. Why is it imagined that young people will comply with more rigid discipline (like silent classrooms and corridors or the banning of mobile phones, when for two years of their lives student use of mobile phones was encouraged?). What will happen to these students when they go from over-regulated schools to unregulated Universities?

Harriet Sergeant in *The Spectator* (25 March 2023) quotes the findings of the report 'Lost and Not Found' from the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) when she writes that *On 8 March 2021, when schools re opened, everyone expected that it would be business as usual. They assumed children would skip back into class and resume their education. This did not happen. Instead, the CSJ report claims children are turning their backs on education 'at an alarming rate'. Increasing numbers of families are choosing to home educate. The Association of Directors of Children's Service' in a report estimated a 34% increase in 2021 on the 2019/20 figure. The impact of the lost years through COVID disproportionally impacted the developmental years of the very young as well as its impact on the elderly.*

There is a need for a paradigm shift in thinking

"Yet hardly a whisper of blame is directed at schools or at the nature and content of their teaching. While primary schools have made real efforts over recent years to research and update their work, secondary schools have gone backwards. They have plunged ever deeper into a world of academic rote-learning, examination and "performance", based on centralised measurement. Schools have been inflicted with fatuous Ofsted adjectives.

It is reasonable to conclude that children avoid school because they find it hostile, disturbing and largely pointless. From the age of 11 – by when they should have acquired essential literacy and numeracy – they are afflicted with what is at root an archaic academic traditionalism. They must devote fixed blocs of time to memorising material of minimal future use, and on which they are constantly tested – as if data digitisation and computing had never been invented.

It is almost unbelievable that the secondary curriculum and teaching methods have changed little since Charles Dickens' Hard Times. Educational research now stresses the need to prepare young people in creativity and teamwork, in physical and mental fitness, and in skills relevant to the modern world of work – and play."
Simon Jenkins[6]

We urgently need to reconsider how we value students as people and how we measure success – the metrics we currently use undervalue learners and their learning.

Traditional relationships between teacher and learner should shift to one of empowering learners and supporting different ways of learning.

Yet despite the latest inspection framework referencing schools curriculum decisions which reflect the needs of the locality, the centralising tendency has continued. Organisations are receiving large amounts of government money producing 'off the shelf' lessons which further embed distance learning, and create the notion of a national educational delivery franchise, replacing any localness.

Adults tend to propose the 'we know best' arguments to deal with the challenge.

Professor Stuart Russell asserts that 'ChatGPT could lead to every child in the world receiving customised curricula 24/7'[7] or, as Bill Clinton might have paraphrased it 'it's the curriculum stupid'. One size does not fit all. If children were asked why they didn't go to school they might say.

- A boring curriculum

- Rigid compliance and conformity

- Inflexible start and finish times

- Travel problems, particularly in London, not helped by months of strike action and unreliable public transport generally which can lead to students being punished for being late to school

- Inflexible uniform requirements

- Peer-group pressure and bullying to stay away from school

- Dislike for some teachers

- Dislike for some subjects

- The attraction of part-time attendance

- A demand for more unsupervised more imaginative recreational spaces and activities

- More flexible and diverse food and snack options

Things to consider

- What has led many schools to believe that making behaviour and uniform requirements more demanding would encourage attendance post-COVID?

- How can schools incentivise attendance without compromising standards and expectations?

- How might alternative approaches to the system be explored in the public sector, such as the independent Duke's education group introducing hybrid schooling for reluctant pupils?

Duke's Education schools expect students to come in for at least one day a week for practical subjects, and to take part in sporting and social activities. For the rest of the week, it will offer four live lessons and two independent study sessions a day.

A growing number of parents are 'flexi-schooling'. Part of the week children attend school as normal, and for the rest they are schooled from home. Currently, 51 schools in the UK are officially listed as actively supporting flexi-schooling, including 14 secondary schools. Rachel Gourley, headteacher at the Huxley CE Primary School above near Chester, says there's been unprecedented demand for places since the school adopted flexi-schooling in July 2021.
The Guardian

We have a rolling curriculum, so flexi-schoolers don't miss the same lessons every week.
Huxley Primary School website

- Why wouldn't parents welcome schools being at the heart of public services, with data-sharing protocols processed through shared admin hubs – with access for all professionals enabled by, but stopping the over-reliance on, the school system to provide social control? '*Many school buildings which are too small or simply no longer fit for purpose could be linked virtually. Some retained or new buildings could become local and regional state of the art hubs for science and technology, sport, the arts, social interaction and development, open all day every day complementing the standard school provision*' Clark, August.

- Why wouldn't parents welcome schools providing food for all, physical health checks, mental health support, library access, exercise clubs and longer opening hours? The co-location of other relevant public services would return schools to the heart of communities (*In 2002, OECD foresaw today's crisis in Education) and described 'scenarios' with this vision 'Schools as Core Social Centers'*.[8]

- What makes the Government believe that investing meagre amounts of money into previous initiatives which have failed, such as for there to be a 'mental health counsellor' in every school, the Labour Party's plans for supervised 'brushing of teeth' of 5 and 6 year-old children at school, really gets to the heart of the matter?

- When is the relevance of the curriculum for the post pandemic, mid-21st century going to be addressed? Shouldn't education models adapt to prepare young people for personal growth, life and work in a global society by radically reconsidering its purpose, culture and operation?

- *'Shouldn't we widen the metrics by which we value young people beyond SATs, GCSE and 'A' level, recognising that changing the metrics changes the curriculum and ways of learning and that resourcefulness, independence of thought, communication skills, initiative and global citizenship should be valued?'* Clark, August

- Is there now an appetite to discuss and agree on **who** public education is for – free at the point of delivery – and **what** it should be for current school pupils who will have to live, work and rule in 2040?

Tom Clark, CBE, FRSA, Vice-Chair Academy Transformation Trust, was formerly CEO of George Spencer Foundation School and Technology College and Associate Director of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. His work internationally has included helping to develop school networks in Australia, the USA and Hong Kong. Having chaired FASNA and the Govnet Advisory Board, he now advises a number of multi-academy trusts and the Association of Education Advisers.

Dame Kathryn (Kathy) August has spent 45 years working in and for public education. She had three secondary headships and has also been a Director of Education in two LEAs, worked as a senior adviser in the DfE, been a visiting professor at Salford Business School and worked as an interim CEO. She became a Dame in the 2014 New Years honours list. Her book *Becoming an Academy School in the UK: With Principal* (Cambridge Scholastic publications) was published in June 2022.

(Please note we invite a bi-partisan approach. We want the core of good education policy to be jointly owned by Government, the profession, the stakeholders and the public – a cause for the common good).

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References

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3   Archbishop of York Christmas homily 2023
4   Amanda Spielman former HMCI
5   Daisy Christodoulou writing as Founder of 'No More Marking'
6   Simon Jenkins writing in The Guardian 08/01/24
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8   OECD Report 2002 'Schools as core social centres'
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