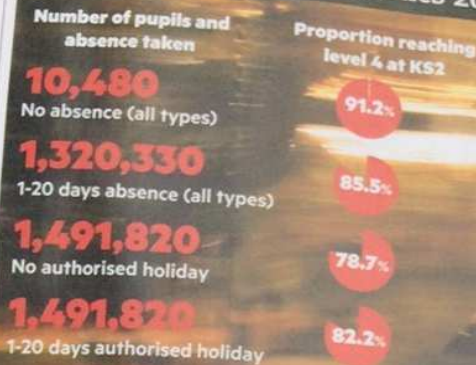


Key stage 2 absence statistics 2009-14



**7.6%**  
One in 13 pupils missed at least half a day after being taken on unauthorised holidays in the autumn and spring terms of 2015-16

Source: Dr Becky Smith, based on raw DfE data

Source: DfE

ATTENDANCE

# Can term-time absences really affect attainment?

*DfE data shows authorised absences don't lower test scores – and may even improve them, argue academics*

CHARLOTTE SANTRY

AUTHORISED TERM-TIME holidays have little impact on primary pupils' attainment and may even be linked to better performance in tests, according to findings seen by TES.

Academics who have scrutinised Department for Education data say that the figures undermine the government's "mind-boggling" clampdown on term-time holidays, which is currently being contested in the courts.

The DfE has repeatedly claimed that each day missed from school can harm pupils' attainment. Since September 2013, heads have been allowed to authorise term-time absences only in "exceptional circumstances", which do not usually include holidays.

Earlier this year, the DfE published key stage 2 and KS4 data, which schools minister Nick Gibb said provided "further evidence that missing school for even a day can mean a child is less likely to achieve good grades, which can have a damaging effect on their life chances."

However, two scientists have separated the figures for authorised term-time holidays from the broader dataset used by the government, which includes other absences such as those related to illness or exclusion.

They have concluded, independently, that authorised holiday absences are not linked to poorer attainment at KS2 (see graphic, above).

In addition, the data shows that pupils who take no authorised holiday absence at all are less likely to reach level 4 at KS2 than those who take at least one day off for a family trip during term-time.

## 'Mind-boggling' claims

The analysis was carried out by Becky Smith, a theoretical physicist with two primary-aged children who are educated partly at school and partly at home. She said that her research threw doubt on to the government's "mind-boggling" claims about the effects of school absences.

Dr Smith focused on KS2 because her children were at that stage. "I thought it was particularly unbelievable that taking them out of school for one day to go to a museum could have any effect at all," she explained.

Restricting absences was "unfair" for pupils whose parents worked during weekends and holidays, she added. In addition, siblings who attended schools in different counties – such as those who lived near borders – might break up for the holidays on different dates.

Alan Barr, a physicist involved with the ATLAS experiment at the Large Hadron Collider, has been looking at school absence data in his own time. He agreed that Dr Smith's analysis showed that "overall reduced attainment at KS2 is correlated strongly with illness but not with agreed holidays".

# WHAT ARE YOU DOING FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OR SO?

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Pupils who take no authorised holiday absence at all "are likely to do worse than those who do take at least one day", he added. Professor Barr is engaged in a long-running Freedom of Information battle with the DfE, to obtain evidence for the government's claim that a single day's absence affects pupils' GCSE results. The DfE's responses have failed to prove that absence from school actually causes lower attainment, he said.

The FOI request stemmed from Professor Barr's interest in how evidence is used to form government policy. The DfE insisted that its own research, unlike the scientists' findings, took into account prior attainment and other "pupil characteristics" and showed unequivocally that every extra day missed was associated with a lower attainment outcome. However, a detailed report attached to this same research also pointed out that

**'It's unbelievable that one day out to go to a museum could have any effect'**

"agreed family holiday absence has no statistically significant effect at KS2."

John Coe, information officer at the National Association for Primary Education, said that missing days from school in Year 6 could be problematic because of the government's "obsession" with assessments.

"It would leave an enormous hole in their knowledge when they come to sit the tests," he added. "But, for general growth and enrichment, a holiday is likely to be very helpful." More leeway for schools to permit term-time holidays would be widely welcomed, he said. However, Russell Hobby, general secretary of the NAHT headteachers' union, said the best way to ensure children were learning and progressing was for them to attend school during term-time.

"It is true that the problems associated with repeated absences like truancy and occasional absences like holidays have become conflated," he added. "But schools have to treat children and families fairly; they cannot have one rule for some and another for others."

"It is not possible for school leaders to guarantee that absences requested by parents will actually result in educational experiences."

The Supreme Court is due to announce imminently whether it will hear the case of parent Jon Platt, who is fighting Isle of Wight Council after being fined for taking his daughter out of school for a family trip to Florida.

The council, backed by the DfE, plans to appeal a High Court ruling that found in favour of Mr Platt not paying the penalty fee.

A DfE spokesman said: "The evidence shows that every extra day of school missed can affect a pupil's chances of achieving good GCSEs, which has a lasting effect on their life chances – vindicating our strong stance on attendance."

"A child who is absent also impacts teachers, whose planning of lessons is disrupted by children missing large portions of teaching."

@CharlotteSantry

DAVID CARTER

## Want to raise standards? Then focus on the teacher

FOR ME, one of the strongest impressions that multi-academy trusts (MATs) make is the focus that they place on retaining and developing their best teachers. For new trusts, this is to plan the career progression of their staff in a strategic manner. One of the principle motivations for setting up a MAT in the first place is to improve the way in which schools are run and their improvement strategy. A relentless focus on teacher leadership development and CPD models that I see around personalised professional leadership programmes being offered, and more structured conversations about accountability, coaching techniques, and curriculum modelling than was the case even two years ago.

Professional development, at its best, has three components. First, it should be deployed almost exclusively to benefit children and young people.

Second, the training should be peer-to-peer support, helping to build understanding of the role of the teacher. Third, there is a need to test the teaching capability of an individual in a different setting of "teacher exchange" where colleagues do not effectively swap schools. This broadens the range of teaching and learning contexts, and is a great CPD in a school.

Much good work is done to promote effective teachers, such as the National Institute for Research in Education's professional development programme. It is earlier this year that I developed by headteachers' academies, chief executive

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