

Tackling attendance: From special measures to good

*When **Cathy Leicester** took up the post of headteacher at Dorothy Barley Junior Academy, she knew she had a challenge ahead. Here, she tells us how she and her team tackled one of the key issues at the school: attendance.*



Summary

- + Attendance was high on the agenda when Cathy Leicester took up headship at Dorothy Barley Junior Academy.
- + One of the first tasks was to set up an attendance team.
- + Systematic monitoring was a key feature of their approach.
- + A new behaviour system was created.

There were many significant challenges when we arrived at the school, as it was in special measures and had been three times in an eight-year period. Attendance was certainly high on our agenda. The attendance of our white British children was of particular concern, as were other vulnerable groups, such as those with special needs and those eligible for pupil premium funding.

At the end of the academic year 2015/2016, attendance was 95.40% and persistent absence was 9.95%. Over the course of this year, through a range of new initiatives, we have reduced it from 11.5% at the start of the year to 5.8%. By the end of Summer 1, our overall attendance for the year was 96.75%.

How did we achieve this progress?

Our team

We began by setting up an attendance team, comprising of a senior leader, a pupil welfare officer and an attendance officer. As the headteacher, I meet with the team to:

- review the end of term attendance data
- look at key groups, trends and improvements
- consider the specific actions taken to improve the attendance of groups and individuals.

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We have action plans linked to key children and groups which report on actions taken, improvements and impact. We are a large four-form entry school, so within the attendance team, we allocate keyworkers to each year group. We also introduced attendance panel meetings for poor attenders which are led by members of the attendance team and include school governor representation.

In future, where appropriate, we are keen to host meetings together with our neighbouring infant school so that we can tackle attendance issues within families that attend both schools.

Our approach

The main driver of improvements in attendance has been taking a team approach and being utterly rigorous on systematic monitoring. We now view attendance methodically and analyse attendance data across the school, across cohorts and across key groups.

We have introduced new incentives to motivate children and parents and to encourage good attendance, such as:

- 99-ers wristbands
- attendance reward trips
- attendance assemblies

- an attendance mascot
- attendance displays
- messages to the school community in the *Barley Bulletin*
- letters which congratulate parents and children on significant and sustained improvements in attendance.

These have helped to raise awareness around attendance and its importance for the school.

Behaviour and exclusions

The number of exclusions had been an issue at the previous inspection and we knew how important it was to address behavioural issues. We began by introducing a new behaviour system which we co-created with the children and staff.

This included rewards and sanctions which were clear, consistent and constantly re-enforced. We took a hard-line approach on inappropriate behaviour, particularly in the first year, as many children had got into some very bad habits. Pupils were not respectful, responsive or reflective and they did not accept responsibility for their actions. The contrast with how our children behave today could not be more stark.

We have maintained these new systems, raised expectations with regards to rewards and introduced new support systems for children with challenging behaviour. Last year, we set up an inclusion team which again involves myself as headteacher, other senior leaders, pupil welfare, a learning mentor and where possible, our in-school counsellor.

Meeting fortnightly, this team looks at the needs of the child, their families and community factors. In addition, we have seconded a highly-skilled teaching assistant to the position of Learning Mentor. We aim to further develop this role next year and are introducing 'Restorative Justice', 'Thrive' and 'More than Mentors' to support children with challenging behaviour.

We anticipate that these initiatives will encourage an even greater level of responsibility and self-regulation in our children.

For the future

Attendance will continue to be high on our agenda. As we move forward, we will be examining the 'real' impact of poor attendance on the attainment and progress of individual children and we will be communicating this clearly to parents. We will continue to tackle unauthorised holidays and issues around punctuality. We will further embed and analyse the impact of our newly established teams and we aim to work even more effectively with parents to promote good attendance.

Dorothy Barley has already come a long way from the days of regularly being in special measures. Local children deserve far



more than this, and I am proud to say that, with the changes we have made and are making, we are now providing them with a good education. What's more, everyone at Dorothy Barley is 100% committed to building on this success and improving further so that every child in our care has an exceptional education throughout their time with us.



Toolkit

Use the following items in the Toolkit to help you put the ideas in this article into practice:

- Form – Attendance letter: Less than 96% whole school (Stage 1) (page 18)
- Form – Attendance letter: 90-95% attendance (Stage 2) (page 19)
- Form – Attendance letter: Less than 85% not improving (Stage 3) (page 20)
- Form – Attendance letter: Less than 80% (Stage 4) (page 21)
- Form – Attendance letter: Attendance panel invitation (Stage 5) (page 22)
- Form – Attendance letter: Improvement in attendance/punctuality (page 23)
- Form – Attendance meeting record (page 24)

What Ofsted has to say

'Rates of attendance have markedly improved this year to above the national average for primary schools. There has been a sharp decline in exclusions. These are now rare.'

(Summary of key findings for parents and pupils)

'Historically, attendance has been below average and persistent absence above average, particularly for some groups. Leaders have worked closely with parents and external agencies this year to raise the attendance rates of all groups of pupils. Their efforts have been highly successful. Since the start of this academic year, the attendance rate has increased to above the 2016 national average for primary schools. There has been a sharp fall in the rates of persistent absence for all groups.'

'Equally, as current leaders have worked to improve all aspects of pupils' behaviour, there has been a noteworthy reduction in exclusions. In 2015, there were 76 days of exclusions. In the current academic year, this has reduced to 3.'

(Behaviour)



Cathy Leicester became headteacher of Dorothy Barley Junior Academy in Dagenham

after it had been in special measures three times in eight years. It converted to academy status with REAch2 Academy Trust and Cathy became its headteacher shortly after in 2014. Now the school is 'good' overall as a result of the introduction of robust systems and a focus on teamwork.