



working on behalf of children with school
attendance difficulties & their families

3 April 2020

Dear sir/madam

A growing number of children experience extreme school-based anxiety which prevents them from attending full-time. Their inability to cope may be a result of a variety of issues – undiagnosed or unsupported Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND), bullying or unresolved trauma. These children are commonly known as school 'refusers', but they're not refusing to attend; they simply cannot cope without appropriate provision and support. School 'refusal' and challenging behaviour are two sides of the same coin, and can both be extreme responses to unmet needs.

School-based anxiety is not new (first acknowledged in clinical research in the 1930s), but it has grown rapidly in recent years, partly as a consequence of budget pressures in education, SEND and associated services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). It has also been exacerbated by an overly academic curriculum, increased testing, zero-tolerance behaviour policies and the pressure on schools to improve attendance figures.

These children cannot maintain the required levels of school attendance, and their problems quickly escalate. In many cases the underlying causes go unresolved and their mental health deteriorates. Rather than being offered support, parents/carers feel judged, suffer financial hardship, face potential fines and/or prosecution and are often subjected to safeguarding investigations (solely as a result of the low attendance). Off-rolling is a well-documented issue and some parents are turning to home education as a last resort, rather than an elective choice.

The new Government must work to address this issue as a matter of urgency, working with all stakeholders.

Signed by

Emma Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, Young Minds

Sarb Bajwa, Chief Executive, British Psychological Society

Caroline Stevens, Chief Executive, National Autistic Society

Andrew Radford, Chief Executive, BEAT Eating Disorders

Anna Feuchtwang, Chief Executive, National Children's Bureau

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Dr Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary, National Education Union

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