

School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening

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About the Education Policy Institute

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Education can have a transformative effect on the life chances of young people, enabling them to fulfil their potential, have successful careers, and grasp opportunities. As well as having a positive impact on the individual, good quality education and child wellbeing also promotes economic productivity and a cohesive society.

Through our research, we provide insight, commentary, and a constructive critique of education policy in England – shedding light on what is working and where further progress needs to be made. Our research and analysis spans a young person's journey from the early years through to entry to the labour market.

Our experienced and dedicated team works closely with academics, think tanks, and other research foundations and charities to shape the policy agenda.

About the Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social wellbeing. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

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School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening

Pupils across the UK have now returned to school on a full-time basis for about two months. Getting as many pupils back to school full-time is crucial to allow them to catch-up with any losses in learning over the period of lockdown. However, there are numerous challenges and barriers to getting attendance rates back to normal. This includes rising infection rates since early September, parental confidence in safety measures and the very difficult decisions facing pupils with health conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus.

This article provides an update to our [work](#) comparing education policy responses across the UK, supported by the Nuffield Foundation. We show how school attendance rates have varied over time since full reopening across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We also analyse the extent to which attendance varies across local areas and different groups of pupils (where data allows), before then detailing the implications for policy and the support needed by different groups of pupils.

Overall levels of school attendance

Starting in mid-August 2020, pupils in [Scotland](#) were the first to return in full. As shown in Figure 1, attendance rates started relatively high at 94 per cent in the week starting August 17th. Attendance rates then dipped slightly, before remaining just over 90 per cent for most of September and October (most local authorities had holidays for the week starting October 12th). According to the data, only about 2 per cent of pupils, on average, were absent for COVID-related reasons on any given day since full reopening in mid-August, though this reached about 3 per cent for the week starting October 19th.

Pupils in Northern Ireland were the next to return from the last week of August 2020. Similar to Scotland, attendance rates started relatively high at 95 per cent and have remained at between 90 and 95 per cent over the past two months. Just before schools closed for two weeks in late October (as part of a wider set of [restrictions](#) for across Northern Ireland), attendance rates were about 93 per cent. This is only about 1.5 per cent below normal school attendance rates, which suggests that the share of pupils absent for COVID-related reasons has been low and similar to Scotland for the past two months.

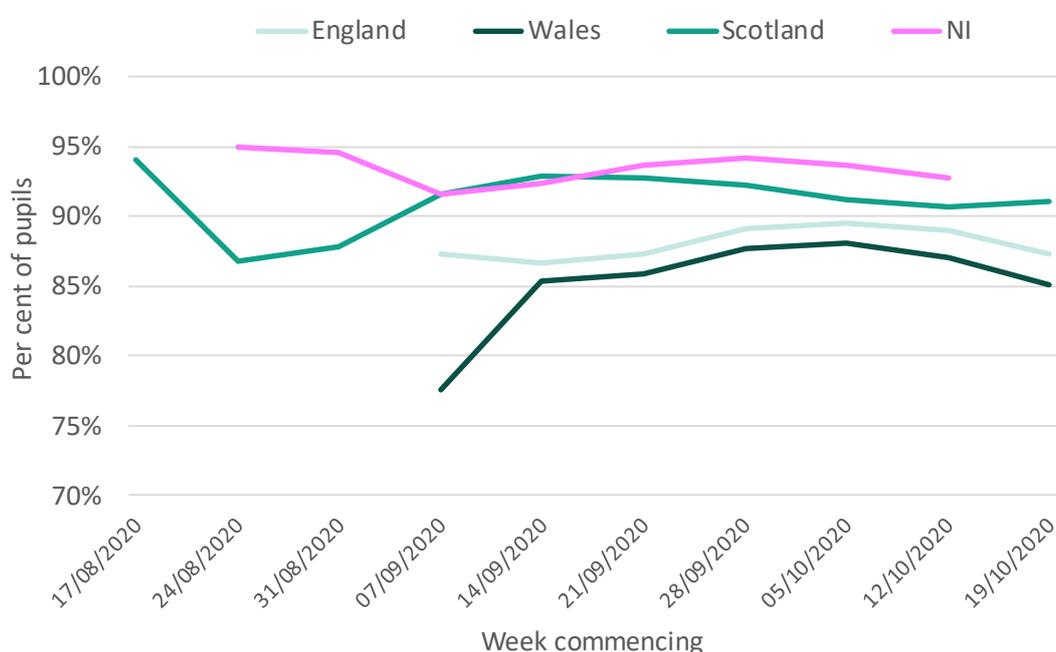
Pupils in England and Wales began to return in full from September 1st, though this was staged in many cases. In England, attendance rates started off at about 87 per cent in the week commencing September 7th, before growing to about 89 per cent in mid-October. Attendance rates then fell to 87 per cent for the last week before half-term (excluding schools that were already on half-term) These attendance rates are clearly below those seen in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Indeed, further data suggests that about 4-5 per cent of pupils in England were absent from school for COVID-related reasons during [October](#), rising to 6-7 per cent in the week before half-term (for most of England).

Whilst most schools in Wales started back in the first week of September, the first day all pupils in Wales were expected to be back in school was September 14th. As a result, attendance rates clearly took longer to pick up. From mid-September, attendance rates were still slightly below those seen in England and peaked at 88 per cent at the end of September. Since then, attendance rates have gradually dropped off, falling to 85 per cent in the last week before half-term. Whilst data is not available on reasons for absence, attendance rates are clearly lower in Wales than in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This suggests that COVID-related absences are likely to be highest in Wales. Data for Wales does include pupils in maintained nurseries, whilst childcare and nurseries are excluded for

other countries. This is likely to be playing a small role in driving lower attendance rates in Wales given low infection rates amongst younger children.

In summary, attendance rates have been highest in Scotland and Northern Ireland, with attendance rates close to that seen in a normal year and relatively low COVID-related absences. Attendance rates are lower in England, with a larger share of COVID-related absences. However, attendance rates have been lowest in Wales. Whilst it is not possible to establish the precise reasons for these cross-country differences, it is notable that both Northern Ireland and Scotland did not reopen schools more widely in June or July, and thus had longest to plan for a full reopening. They also reopened at a time when infection rates were close to a low point in August 2020. Some of the differences will undoubtedly also reflect different infection rates and trends across local areas. Given the data available, this is something we can explore further within England, Wales and Scotland.

Figure 1: School attendance since reopening in August/September 2020



Notes and sources for England: Covers all pupils in state-funded schools (except maintained nurseries) and averaged over each week (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2020-week-43>). **Notes and sources for Wales:** Figures covers all pupils in maintained settings (including maintained nurseries) (<https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools-7-september-23-october-2020>). **Notes and sources for Scotland:** Figures are averaged across each week in all local authority settings, excluding childcare settings (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-daily-data-for-scotland/>). **Notes and sources for Northern Ireland:** Covers all primary and post-primary schools (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/management-information-attendance-pupils-and-workforce-schools>)

Differences by area and pupil characteristics

Partly reflecting differing rates of infection, there are significant differences in attendance rates within countries for different areas, types of school and by the age of pupil. The analysis that is possible

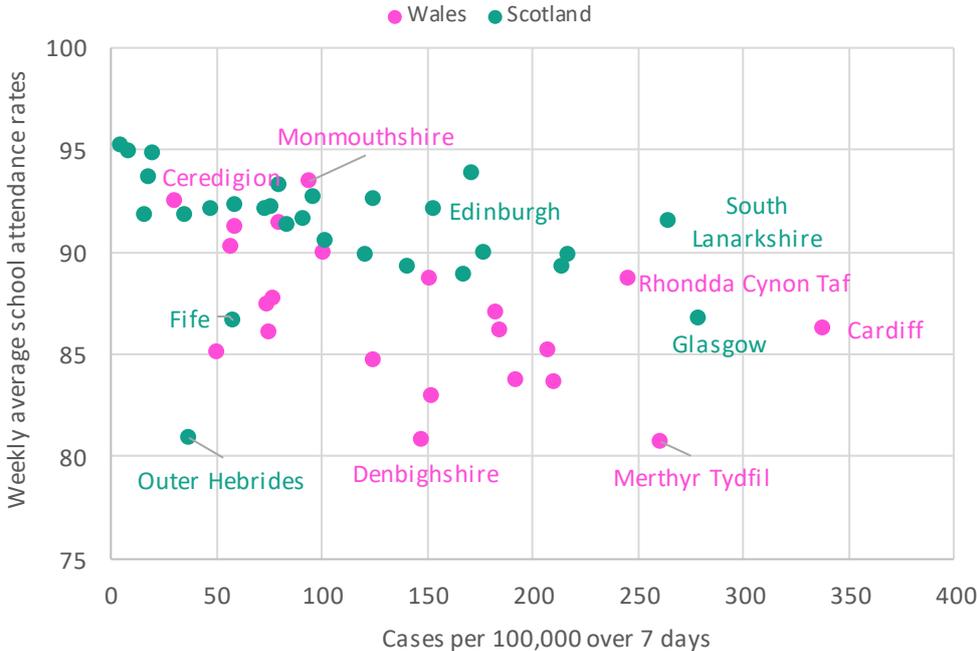
differs by country, given the data available, but such differences are still revealing about the factors driving attendance.

Within Wales and Scotland, we can observe differences in attendance rates across local authorities. Within Scotland, these vary from 87 to 95 per cent (excluding 81 per cent for the Outer Hebrides), but from 81 to 94 per cent in Wales. Figure 2 shows how these attendance rates by local authority correlate with confirmed cases (confirmed positive cases per 100,000 over a 7-day time horizon). This is shown for the week ending October 9th in Scotland (the last full week before the October holiday) and for the week ending October 16th in Wales (the last full week of complete and reliable data).

Figure 2 illustrates a number of key points. First, attendance rates are generally lower in areas with higher infection rates, as one would naturally expect. For example, attendance rates are 93 per cent in Ceredigion and 94 per cent in Monmouthshire, where case numbers (i.e. infection rates) are still relatively low, but only 81 per cent in Merthyr Tydfil where case numbers are much higher. Second, attendance rates generally appear higher in Scotland than in Wales for areas with similar infection rates. For example, attendance rates are 87 per cent in Glasgow compared with 81 per cent in Merthyr Tydfil, despite higher case rates in Glasgow. This suggests there is much to be learnt from Scotland's overall approach to school attendance.

Third, there is not a perfect relationship between case numbers and school attendance. Some of this will be due to infections occurring in other parts of the population. For example, the relatively high case numbers in student populations in Cardiff and Edinburgh are likely driving the high overall population infection rates in these areas, with school attendance rates able to stay relatively high. However, there are also cases with low attendance rates and low infection rates, such as Denbighshire and Fife, and areas with high infection rates and high attendance rates, such as Rhondda Cynon Taf and South Lanarkshire. Again, it is possible that such differences could be driven by the age-profile of infection rates. Policymakers within government with access to more granular data should be investigating these local area differences in more detail to find the best ways to encourage school attendance.

Figure 2: Attendance rates and overall infection rates across local authorities in Wales and Scotland

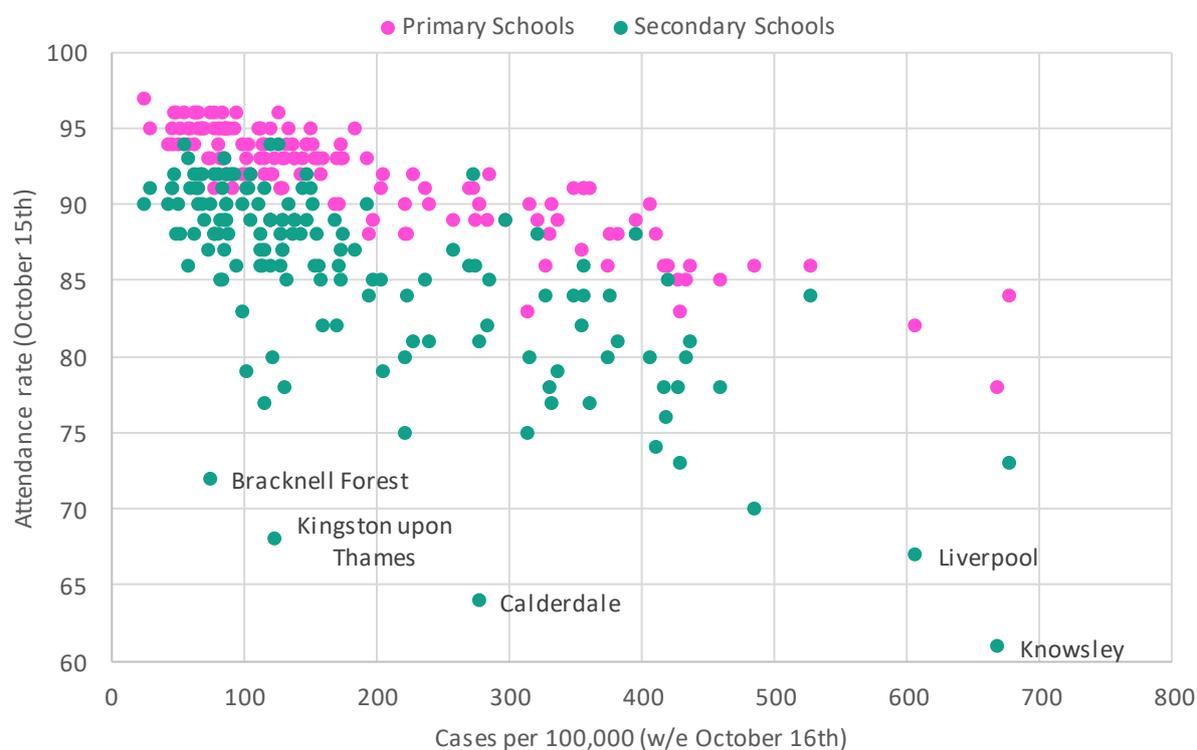


Notes and sources for Wales: Attendance rates cover all pupils in maintained settings (including maintained nurseries) in the week commencing October 12th; (<https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools-7-september-23-october-2020>); case rates relate to the number of confirmed positive cases over 7 days per 100,000 of the population in each local authority in the week ending October 16th (downloaded on October 27th, <https://public.tableau.com/profile/public.health.wales.health.protection#!/vizhome/RapidCOVID-19virology-Public/Headlinesummary>). **Notes and sources for Scotland:** Figures are averaged across each week in all local authority settings, excluding childcare settings (<https://public.tableau.com/profile/sg.eas.learninganalysis#!/vizhome/COVID19-SchoolsandChildcareInformation/Introduction>). Case rates relate to the number of confirmed positive cases over 7 days per 100,000 of the population in each council area in the week ending October 9th (downloaded on October 27th, <https://www.opendata.nhs.scot/dataset/covid-19-in-scotland>).

Figure 3 shows the equivalent set of figures for primary and secondary school attendance rates in England (as recorded on October 15th and reported in answer to a recent written parliamentary question). A number of key points emerge. First, attendance rates are clearly lower in secondary schools than in primary schools for given infection rates. Indeed, overall attendance rates for secondary schools in England (82 per cent) are lower than for primary schools (90 per cent). This fits with ONS [evidence](#) showing higher infection rates for older children. Absence rates are [normally](#) higher in secondary schools than primary schools, though the difference is typically small. For the last five years, the overall absence rate in primary schools has been about 4 per cent and about 5-5.5 per cent in secondary schools.

Second, as with Wales and Scotland, there is a great deal of variation across local authorities. In the case of England, there is a much clearer negative relationship between case numbers and school attendance rates, particularly at secondary school level. There are also many local authorities in England with much higher case numbers than Wales and Scotland, which is almost certainly acting to reduce overall attendance rates in England. For example, Liverpool and Knowsley saw case numbers of over 600 per 100,000 in this week in October and secondary school attendance rates well below 70 per cent (67 per cent for Liverpool and 61 per cent for Knowsley). However, there are several local authorities with lower overall case rates, but also quite low secondary attendance rates: e.g. Bracknell Forest (72 per cent); Kingston upon Thames (68 per cent); and, Calderdale (64 per cent). Such differences might reflect the age distribution of cases across areas or potential data limitations. Nevertheless, it would be highly desirable for the Department for Education to produce these kind of local area comparisons *every week* in order to allow for debate and scrutiny of the factors driving school attendance levels across the country.

Figure 3: Attendance rates in primary and secondary schools and infection rates across local authorities in England



Notes and sources for England: Attendance rates as recorded in October 15th (<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-16/104751>); case rates relate to the number of confirmed positive cases over 7 days per 100,000 of the population in each local authority in the week ending October 16th (downloaded on October 27th, <https://coronavirus-staging.data.gov.uk/details/about-data#legacy-csv-downloads>).

Across the UK, the schools with the lowest attendance rates are special schools, with attendance rates of 91 per cent in Scotland, 88 per cent in Northern Ireland and 78 per cent in England (at the most recent data point in each case). Some of this will reflect rational decisions not to attend school, given that pupils at special schools are more likely to suffer from medical conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus. However, it also highlights the importance of providing extra support to pupils, particularly given the additional problems many pupils with special educational needs and disabilities faced during [lockdown](#).

Lastly, within Scotland we see that the latest attendance rates are lowest in the most deprived areas (89 per cent) and highest in the least deprived areas (95 per cent). This is a major source of concern given that [evidence](#) suggests disadvantaged pupils are likely to have lost greater learning time during lockdown right across the UK. This is also highly unlikely to be a uniquely Scottish phenomenon, with evidence of similar problems emerging for [England](#). Indeed, credit should be given to the Scottish Government for publishing such detailed information about levels and differences in school attendance rates by area and pupil characteristics. This is a necessary step towards understanding the

effects of this stage of the pandemic on pupils' educational progress.

Implications for policy and support

In summary, school attendance rates have clearly been highest since full reopening in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Policymakers in England and Wales should be looking to see what they can learn here. There are also potential lessons from differences within country, where there are large differences in attendance rates, even for similar infection rates. Governments across the UK should be providing more regular, detailed data on how school attendance is changing across local areas to enable greater scrutiny and understanding.

Such differences also highlight the importance of providing the necessary support for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. Attendance rates appear lower for more disadvantaged areas and pupils, and lower attendance rates can also be seen for pupils in special schools. This is on top of a likely greater loss of learning time for disadvantaged pupils during [lockdown](#), and, as we documented in our recent [report](#), major difficulties in providing support to pupils with special and additional learning needs right across the UK. Where such pupils cannot attend school for COVID-related reasons, it is crucial that local and national policymakers provide appropriate support. This is in terms of access to necessary digital equipment and remote learning materials, but also replacements for free school meals.

Pupils absent from school will also be missing out on significant learning time, with big differences across pupils and areas. This has particularly strong implications for pupils in exam years, who are more likely to be absent from school through being older. Coming on top of variable losses in learning time during lockdown, continuing COVID-related absences are going to make it incredibly hard to implement a fair exam process anything like that in a normal year. Policymakers designing assessment process for 2021 will need to recognise and account for the huge variations in lost learning time, and the continuing unpredictability of lost learning time and its actual impact on pupils.