

7003 Assignment Part B - How a School Develops One Aspect of its' SDP: a Report that Critically Reflects on the Actions, Impact and Evidence Base.

By Thomas Cullen

I. Introduction	3
II. Literature Review	3
i. The Problem	3
ii. Causes of Chronic Absenteeism	3
iii. Impact of Chronic Absenteeism	4
iv. Intervention Strategies	5
III. Developing an Action Point	5
i. Overview of the SDP	5
ii. Self-evaluation and Data Analysis	6
iii. Stakeholder Involvement	6
iv. Strategic Planning and Continuous Improvement	6
IV. Reflection and Evaluation	7
V. Conclusion	7
VI. References	7

I. Introduction

This report critically analyses a project that forms part of the School Development Plan (SDP) at an educational institution that has requested to remain anonymous. To protect the confidentiality of the school and its staff, identifying details have been omitted, and the school will be referred to using the pseudonym "School X." The SDP project under evaluation aims to promote positive attitudes towards learning, encourage pupil attendance, and foster resilient and capable learners. The following criteria will measure the success of this project:

1. the average school-wide attendance rate increased from 86.3% to over 90%.
2. A reduction in the number of fixed-term exclusions issued for aggressive and disrespectful behaviour.

The project intends to meet these goals by 16th February 2024 by implementing various strategies and activities, with a budget of £2,000. This report will critically evaluate the project's activities, strategy, and effectiveness.

School X is an English-speaking secondary school located in the South Wales region. Its pupil population includes 25.3% eligible for free school meals (FSM), 20.8% identified as having additional learning needs (ALN), and 11.5% identified as speaking English as an additional language (EAL).

II. Literature Review

i. The Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 severely disrupted education systems worldwide, leading to a concerning rise in student absenteeism that many educational institutes are still reeling from (Dee, 2024). Data published by the UK government shows that the absence rate across England spiked from 4% in the Autumn/Spring term of 2019/20 to 7.4% in the following year and has since only dropped to 7.3% in 2023, despite the government lifting the majority of COVID-19 restrictions and recording zero sessions as not being attended due to COVID-19 related circumstances (UK.GOV, 2023, educationhub.blog.gov.uk, 2023). These statistics only appear direr when examining those chronically absent pupils, a term used to describe a pupil whose total absences exceeds 10% of the total number of days during a school year. The percentage of chronically absent students in the UK increased from 10.5% in 2019/2020 to 21.2% by 2022/23 (Gottfried, 2015; UK.GOV, 2023). The main contributors to this increase are recorded as illness (4.1%) and unauthorised other (1.6%), both of which have approximately doubled since pre-COVID times (UK.GOV, 2023). These rates are alarming as many studies have linked student academic achievement with attendance, showing that chronically absent pupils typically perform worse in standardised tests across numeracy and literacy and are more likely to drop out of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). In Wales, the situation is no different, with rates of chronic absenteeism almost tripling after the pandemic (www.gov.wales, 2023). There are tentative links between this drastic increase in chronic absenteeism and Wales's lower socioeconomic background relative to England. In 2010, studies showed that children living in poverty were 25% more likely to miss three or more school days per month (Ready, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic only exasperated the issues preventing children's attendance, with them having less access to material resources, digital resources and family/tutor support (Mooney et al., 2022). Overall, it is clear that chronic absenteeism has become an epidemic in its own right and will require immediate action to mitigate any long-term damage.

ii. Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

Patnode et al. (2018) categorise the root causes of chronic absenteeism into the following three groups:

1. **Barriers** - circumstances that physically prevent pupils from attending school. Barriers include health problems, family responsibilities, lack of transportation, and homelessness (Chang et al., 2018; Hofferth et al., 2001).

2. **Aversions** - factors that make students reluctant to attend school. Aversions include feeling unsafe due to violence/bullying, discrimination, and a sense of not belonging within the school (Patnode et al., 2018).
3. **Disengagement** - stems from a lack of interest, and disengagement is rooted in boredom rather than fear. Disengagement includes poor connection with course material, classroom activities, school environment, peer relationships, and teacher relationships (Ravet, 2007).

Illness is the most inflated statistic regarding chronic absenteeism with acute conditions, such as flu and strep throat, and chronic conditions, such as diabetes, asthma and gastrointestinal disorders, accounting for a substantial amount of absences (Brundage et al., 2017). However, these rates should be consistent with pre-COVID levels. Studies indicate that a long-term rise in mental health issues since the pandemic may also be contributing to the rate of absences among young people (Joseph, 2020). The disruption to routines, social isolation, and general stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic has taken a toll on the mental well-being of students (Meherali et al., 2021). Addressing these underlying mental health concerns through counselling and support services and fostering a positive school climate could be vital in improving attendance rates and academic outcomes.

Poor mental health can lead to aversions, where specific anxieties like social or separation anxiety affect attendance due to a fear of interacting with peers or leaving the comfort of a dependent or carer (Kearney, 2008). Anxiety is likely to be underrepresented in the data concerning absenteeism as many young people often divulge somatic symptoms such as a headache or stomachache rather than identifying the root cause (Kearney, 2008).

Pupils who need more connection in school may disengage, choosing to remain absent or truant in specific lessons. Patnode et al. (2018) have identified three critical school factors influencing engagement.

1. Level of reported trust between pupil and teacher.
2. Level of documented personal support from their teacher.
3. The extent to which pupils perceived the school's emphasis on success for all pupils, not just the high achievers.

Increased family-school communication can further support attendance. By being well-informed of their children's attendance, parents can support the school by asking simple probing questions regarding their daily activities and encouraging them to complete homework and extracurricular activities (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). This acknowledgement can also open a dialogue between parents and children, further helping identify any barriers to attendance, such as anxiety.

iii. Impact of Chronic Absenteeism

Foundational theories such as Faucet theory contend that educational gains are a direct function of exposure and dosage to academic resources (Entwisle et al., 2001). In other words, a child's academic progress is proportional to their attendance (Ansari & Pianta, 2019). Research shows stark evidence of what happens when the "faucet" of education is turned off - the phenomenon known as summer learning loss refers to pupils' loss of ability to recall knowledge and activate complex thinking after the long summer holidays not accessing learning resources, this effect is typically worse for those from a low socioeconomic background where access to literacy and digital resources is more limited (Aumaugher, 2014). Additional studies have demonstrated how compounded absences from school can impact a pupil's ability across literacy, numeracy and social-emotional development, with children as young as four exhibiting a marked decrease across foundational competencies as rates of absenteeism increase, regardless of control measures for incoming ability and socioeconomic background (Ehrlich et al., 2014). Chronically absent pupils also have higher rates of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression than those who regularly attend school, with some studies speculating that this stems from a self-sufficient cycle where pupils with anxiety or depression miss school due to poor mental health and subsequently become more anxious or depressed due to stress over missed workloads, unsatisfactory peer/teacher relationships and feelings of isolation (Gallé-Tessonneau et al., 2019).

iv. Intervention Strategies

Eklund et al. (2020) categorise intervention strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism into four distinct types: behavioural, academic, family-school partnerships, and policy interventions. Behavioural interventions manipulate contingencies within the school environment and employ learning programmes to shape positive attendance behaviours. A common approach involves implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes targeting pupils exhibiting disciplinary issues like bullying, fighting, or peer victimisation. The goal is to cultivate a safer school climate, reduce truancy rates, and improve attendance (Moore McBride et al., 2016).

On the other hand, academic interventions focus on raising pupil engagement, achievement, and investment in the learning process. Strategies include personalised learning plans, tutoring/educational support, enrichment opportunities, and project-based learning models (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). The underlying premise is that by tailoring instruction to individual needs, providing supplemental assistance, and making learning more relevant and hands-on, these interventions can re-engage chronically absent pupils and motivate consistent attendance.

Family-school partnership interventions aim to increase collaboration and shared accountability between schools, families, and communities. Examples range from attendance monitoring systems and parent-teacher communication strategies to home visits and attendance incentives/celebrations (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Strengthening these partnerships and leveraging community resources can help identify and address the causes of pupils' chronic absenteeism.

Finally, policy interventions operate at institutional levels, revising or implementing new policies related to attendance tracking, definitions, expectations, and accountability measures. Policy interventions include revising absence policies, hiring attendance support staff, and enacting policies that reduce barriers like lack of health services or discrimination (Gottfried, 2017).

III. Developing an Action Point

i. Overview of the SDP

School X's SDP implements a multifaceted approach to tackle the decline in average attendance rates and increased emotional, social, and behavioural difficulties (ESBD) among pupils in the post-COVID era. With a significant portion of the student body now considered chronically absent, the SDP aims to promote positive attitudes toward learning by raising overall attendance levels and reducing fixed-term exclusions for disruptive behaviours.

The strategies outlined in the SDP draw from behavioural, policy, and family-school partnership interventions, aligning with the evidence-based practices highlighted in the literature review. Behaviourally, the plan includes further professional development on the school's 'graduated response' policy for promoting positive behaviour. This systematic approach to ensuring consistent implementation across all staff members resonates with the literature's emphasis on behavioural interventions that shape desired outcomes through clear expectations and reinforcement (Macsuga-Gage et al., 2012).

Complementing this behavioural focus, the SDP also prioritises clear communication of the school's rewards approach to pupils, parents, staff, and governors. As discussed in the literature, involving all stakeholders and fostering a shared understanding of incentive systems is crucial for building buy-in and maximising the effectiveness of such interventions (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Regarding policy interventions, the SDP outlines a review of the Reflection Room and Internal Exclusion processes, including evaluating staffing, capacity, and location. Reviewing policies like this aligns with the literature's recommendation to regularly assess disciplinary mechanisms for effectiveness and fit, ensuring they remain responsive to the school's evolving needs (Gottfried, 2017). Notably, the plan also incorporates a rewards process review, with an equity-based approach to ensure fair access to incentives, such as a proposed rewards shop. This commitment to equitable access aligns with best practices for promoting inclusive and culturally responsive practices (Singer-Freeman et al., 2020).

Finally, the SDP emphasises the importance of closely monitoring attendance data and acting swiftly to address issues that align with established attendance strategies. This commitment to prompt intervention aligns with the literature's emphasis on the critical role of early identification and targeted support in mitigating chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Chang et al., 2018).

School X's SDP demonstrates a comprehensive and research-informed approach to tackling absenteeism, disruptive behaviour, and negative attitudes toward learning. By integrating behavioural, policy, and family-school partnership interventions, the plan provides a solid foundation for addressing the multifaceted nature of these challenges.

ii. Self-evaluation and Data Analysis

School X's SDP development demonstrates a data-driven self-evaluation process, using attendance records and rates of fixed-term exclusions as critical data sources. The decision to prioritise attendance was likely influenced by an analysis revealing a concerning decline in average attendance rates and the prevalence of chronic absenteeism following the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the increasing exclusions for disruptive behaviours highlighted increased emotional, social, and behavioural difficulties (ESBD), underscoring the connection between attendance, behaviour, and attitudes toward learning. While utilising multiple data sources is commendable for providing a comprehensive understanding, the school could further strengthen its self-evaluation by incorporating qualitative data from student/parent surveys, observations, and focus groups. This would enable a deeper exploration of stakeholder perspectives and root causes behind absenteeism and behavioural issues, informing more targeted and culturally responsive interventions within the SDP.

iii. Stakeholder Involvement

While the SDP outlines communicating the rewards approach to pupils, parents, staff, and governors - an essential first step, meaningful stakeholder engagement requires actively seeking diverse perspectives during the planning and development stages. The school should consider conducting surveys, focus groups, or workshops to gather insights from students, parents, teachers, and staff. Particularly critical is incorporating student voice by forming advisory committees or soliciting feedback on proposed interventions, as fostering student engagement addresses factors contributing to disengagement. Stakeholder involvement should extend beyond planning, with ongoing collaboration through regular updates, feedback channels, and problem-solving sessions throughout implementation. By actively engaging stakeholders, the school can gain valuable insights, build ownership and commitment, identify potential barriers early, and promote transparency - ultimately enhancing the SDP's effectiveness and sustainability.

iv. Strategic Planning and Continuous Improvement

School X's SDP exhibits a comprehensive strategy, seamlessly integrating strategic planning, goal setting, and continuous improvement. The plan's execution strategy incorporates clear time frames, milestones, and review points, fostering accountability and enabling effective progress tracking across various interventions, from staff development to reviewing disciplinary mechanisms. The plan's adaptability is noteworthy, exemplified through regular review points that support an iterative process responsive to emerging needs.

A pivotal aspect of the SDP is its commitment to continuous data monitoring, particularly regarding attendance. Real-time data analysis enables School X to promptly identify and address issues, aligning with best practices emphasising the critical role of early intervention. Additionally, the plan incorporates stakeholder feedback loops, cultivating a collaborative and shared responsibility culture.

In measuring impact and facilitating continuous improvement, School X employs a meticulous approach. The plan relies on clearly defined outcome metrics and benchmarks to assess improvements in attendance rates, behavioural changes, and attitudes toward learning. A cornerstone of the continuous improvement framework is the iterative approach, utilising regular review points and ongoing data analysis to identify successful interventions and areas for enhancement. This dynamic process ensures that the SDP remains responsive to evolving challenges and reflective of the ever-changing needs of the school community. In summary,

School X's integrated approach positions the SDP as a dynamic and resilient framework dedicated to continuous improvement and enhancing the academic experience.

IV. Reflection and Evaluation

This reflection delves into the intricacies of School X's SDP, a multifaceted initiative designed to counteract the adverse effects of chronic absenteeism and promote positive attitudes toward learning. The project's explicit goals of increasing the school-wide attendance rate and reducing fixed-term exclusions for disruptive behaviour serve as tangible benchmarks for evaluation.

The decision to prioritise attendance in the SDP stems from a well-founded analysis that identified a concerning decline in average attendance rates and an alarming prevalence of chronic absenteeism post-COVID-19. Acknowledging the connection between attendance, behaviour, and attitudes toward learning underscores the project's relevance in addressing these intertwined challenges. However, while the SDP utilises crucial quantitative data sources, such as attendance records and fixed-term exclusion rates, qualitative data could enrich the evaluation. Including student and parent surveys, observations, and focus groups would provide a more nuanced understanding of stakeholder perspectives and uncover root causes, leading to more targeted and culturally responsive interventions.

Stakeholder involvement, a fundamental aspect of any successful initiative, is acknowledged in the SDP, yet the report highlights the need for more proactive engagement during the planning and development stages. Implementing surveys, focus groups, and workshops could capture diverse perspectives, especially from students, parents, teachers, and staff. The report rightly emphasises the importance of ongoing collaboration and problem-solving sessions, promoting transparency and building a collective commitment that can enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of the SDP.

School X's SDP is commended for its strategic planning and continuous improvement framework. The structured execution strategy, encompassing time frames, milestones, and review points, instils accountability and allows for effective progress tracking. The plan's adaptability, mainly through real-time data monitoring and stakeholder feedback loops, positions it as a dynamic and practical framework. The commitment to ongoing professional development further fortifies the school's adaptability, fostering a culture of innovation within the educational environment.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, School X's SDP is a commendable effort to tackle chronic absenteeism, disruptive behaviour, and negative attitudes toward learning. The reflection emphasises the need for a more nuanced evaluation through qualitative data and proactive stakeholder engagement. Nevertheless, the integrated approach, including strategic planning, continuous improvement, and stakeholder involvement, positions the SDP as a dynamic and resilient framework that enhances the academic experience. As a student teacher, I will use these insights to adopt a holistic perspective, incorporate qualitative assessments, engage stakeholders proactively, and foster a continuous improvement mindset to enhance my effectiveness in education.

VI. References

1. Dee, T.S. (2024). Higher chronic absenteeism threatens academic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(3). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2312249121>.
2. GOV.UK (2023). Pupil absence in schools in England, Academic Year 2020/21. [online] explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk. Available at: [https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-england](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england)
3. educationhub.blog.gov.uk. (2023). *What are the latest rules around COVID-19 in schools, colleges, nurseries and other education settings?* - The Education Hub. [online] Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/10/11/what-are-the-latest-rules-around-covid-19-in-schools-colleges-nurseries-and-other-education-settings/>.

4. Gottfried, M.A. (2015). Chronic Absenteeism in the Classroom Context: Effects on Achievement. *Urban Education*, [online] 54(1), pp.3–34. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915618709>.
5. Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.
6. www.gov.wales. (2023). *Absenteeism from secondary schools: September 2022 to August 2023 (revised)* | GOV.WALES. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/absenteeism-secondary-schools-september-2022-august-2023-revised-html#:~:text=Persistent%20absence%20by%20year%20group> [Accessed 5 Mar. 2024].
7. Ready, D.D. (2010). Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development. *Sociology of Education*, 83(4), pp.271–286. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040710383520>.
8. Mooney, A., Redmond, G. and Kaambwa, B. (2022). Does socioeconomic status impact the relationship between school absence and outcomes? *The Australian Educational Researcher*. Doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00535-2>.
9. Humm Patnode, A., Gibbons, K., & Edmunds, R. R. (2018). Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism: Literature Review. Saint Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, College of Education and Human Development, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement.
10. Chang, H. N., Bauer, L., & Byrnes, V. (2018). Data Matters: Using Chronic Absence to Accelerate Action for Student Success. Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center.
11. Hofferth, S.L., Reid, L. and Mott, F.L. (2001). The Effects of Early Childbearing on Schooling over Time. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 33(6), p.259. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/3030193>.
12. Ravet, J. (2007). Making sense of disengagement in the primary classroom: a study of pupil, teacher and parent perceptions. *Research Papers in Education*, 22(3), pp.333–362. doi <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520701497589>.
13. Brundage, A.H., Castillo, J.M. and Batsche, G.M., 2017. Reasons for chronic absenteeism among Florida secondary students. *Tampa, FL: Problem Solving and Response Intervention Project*.
14. Joseph, S., 2020. Isolation and mental health: The psychological impact of COVID-19 lockdown on children. *Mukt Shabd Journal*, 9(8), pp.399–405.
15. Meherali, S., Punjani, N., Louie-Poon, S., Abdul Rahim, K., Das, J.K., Salam, R.A. and Lassi, Z.S. (2021). Mental Health of Children and Adolescents Amidst COVID-19 and Past Pandemics: A Rapid Systematic Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, [online] 18(7), p.3432. doi <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073432>.
16. Kearney, C.A. (2008). An Interdisciplinary Model of School Absenteeism in Youth to Inform Professional Practice and Public Policy. *Educational Psychology Review*, 20(3), pp.257–282. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-008-9078-3>.
17. Sheldon, Steven & Epstein, Joyce. (2004). Getting students to school: Using family and community involvement to reduce chronic absenteeism. *School Community Journal*. 14.
18. Entwisle, D.R., Alexander, K.L. and Linda Steffel Olson (2001). Keep the Faucet Flowing: Summer Learning and Home Environment—the *American Educator*, 25(3), p.10.1.
19. Ansari, A. and Pianta, R.C. (2019). School absenteeism in the first decade of education and outcomes in adolescence. *Journal of School Psychology*, [online] 76, pp.48–61. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2019.07.010>.
20. Aumaugher, A.J., 2014. Effects of summer school on academic achievement: Reducing summer learning loss in middle school. 1.
21. Ehrlich, S.B., Gwynne, J.A. and Amber Stitzel Pareja (2014). *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools*. Consortium on Chicago School Research.

22. Gallé-Tessonneau, M., Bach Johnsen, D. and Keppens, G. (2019). The relationship between mental health and school absenteeism in a community sample of French secondary school students: four profiles derived from cluster analysis. *European Journal of Education and Psychology*, 12(1), p.77. doi:<https://doi.org/10.30552/ejep.v12i1.242>.
23. Moore McBride, A., Chung, S. and Robertson, A. (2016). Preventing Academic Disengagement Through a Middle School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Program. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 39(4), pp.370–385. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825916668901>.
24. Kearney, C.A. and Graczyk, P. (2013). A Response to Intervention Model to Promote School Attendance and Decrease School Absenteeism. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 43(1), pp.1–25. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-013-9222-1>.
25. Epstein, J.L. and Sheldon, S.B. (2002). Present and Accounted for: Improving Student Attendance Through Family and Community Involvement. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 95(5), pp.308–318. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220670209596604>.
26. Gottfried, M.A. (2017). Linking Getting to School With Going to School. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(4), pp.571–592. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373717699472>.
27. Macsuga-Gage, A.S., Simonsen, B. and Briere, D.E. (2012). Effective Teaching Practices: Effective Teaching Practices that Promote a Positive Classroom Environment. *Beyond Behavior*, 22(1), pp.14–22. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/107429561202200104>.
28. Singer-Freeman, K., Robinson, C. and Bastone, L. (2020). Balancing the Freedom to Teach with the Freedom to Learn: The Critical Role of Assessment Professionals in Ensuring Educational Equity. *Innovations in higher education teaching and learning*, pp.39–51. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/s2055-364120200000034005>.