

Why Students Hide

Hiding in York Schools

Introduction

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Introduction

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) captures a range of behaviours reflecting a young person’s reduced or non-attendance at school. EBSA reflects the fact that many young people do not want to attend school or lessons, and this is often due to a range of mental health, well-being, or emotional issues (Anna Freud Centre, n.d). EBSA does not only capture young people who do not attend school completely but also those who are not going into classrooms, are not staying in classrooms,

are not attending some lessons, or are avoiding particular places or settings in school (Anna Freud Centre, n.d).

This behaviour reflects a range of hiding and avoidance behaviours, which, for this report, we refer to as *internal truancy*. Once a young person has started engaging in internal truancy, it becomes harder to re-engage them with education. Therefore, understanding the reasons for this behaviour and what support young people need is fundamental to developing appropriate interventions to re-engage young people with education.

Some useful resources

- The Anna Freud Centre: [Addressing Emotionally Based School Avoidance](#)
- [Centre for Mental Health: Not in School](#)

The aims of this project

We examined young people's perceptions of why students engage in internal truancy and gathered perspectives from school staff to explore if their perceptions differ from those of young people. Specifically, we aimed to address the following research questions:

1. How and why do adolescents find entering and staying in the classroom challenging?
2. What are the perceived benefits of hiding in school?
3. What barriers and facilitators are associated with avoidant coping in secondary school?

The purpose of this work was to better understand the nature of internal truancy in York schools from both staff and students' perspectives.

What Did We Do?

We spoke to young people and school staff about internal truancy to gather multiple perspectives on why some young people struggle to go into and stay in the classroom. We spoke to young people in York and teaching staff in York and across the UK.

We worked with young people in focus groups to explore their experiences of finding it difficult to enter and stay in the classroom. Focus groups included activities to support young people in discussing their opinions and experiences, including a persona activity and a best and worst ideas board. Young people also completed a quick survey that allowed them to tell us why they thought some young people struggled and what they thought would help those young people go into and stay in the classroom.

School staff from across York and the UK completed an anonymous online survey to explore why they think young people struggle with internal truancy and what factors they believe contribute to this.

What Young People Said

Why we hide

We spoke with 25 young people (YP) (aged between 13 and 16) across schools in York about the reasons why some students choose to leave lessons.

A smaller number of students also hid for no key reason. These YP spoke of hiding because being chased by SLT was 'funny', and they enjoyed not being caught.

Just because

Boredom

Lesson delivery and staffing were a key concern, with the majority of students reporting being bored with lessons. Many mentioned how lessons that weren't engaging and those that involved a lot of working in silence were challenging, resulting in young people not attending the lesson or leaving part way through. Lots of YP spoke about being tired, how this worsened in the afternoon, making engaging with lessons more difficult, and how hiding was a way of coping with these challenges.

For a smaller number of students, finding the subject difficult was their main reason for missing class. These students spoke about feeling criticised for producing 'poor work', which manifested in feelings of anxiety, in turn leading them to avoid specific lessons. Others had difficulties with particular members of staff, as opposed to lesson content. For these YP, they felt that they were not being listened to by these staff members and that there was no mutual respect, which led to a relationship break down.

Difficulty

Stress and Autonomy

Stress and feelings of being overwhelmed were mentioned frequently. Young people spoke of a lack of autonomy, especially surrounding being able to take time out or access toilet facilities which less feelings of upset and stress. A smaller number of students expressed that the time between lessons was very short, so going to the toilet between lessons or even getting to the next lesson on time could be tricky. This was then amplified by feeling distrusted by staff, who wouldn't believe they were late for genuine reasons. Similarly, some were scared of being blamed for things they didn't do. Feelings of being overwhelmed led to the want for quiet and for privacy, which was seen as a key reason for hiding. Many reported being overwhelmed by people, both other pupils and staff, and hiding relieved these anxieties. A small number of students spoke of how the introduction of cameras in school made them feel unsafe, and hiding reduced this fear.

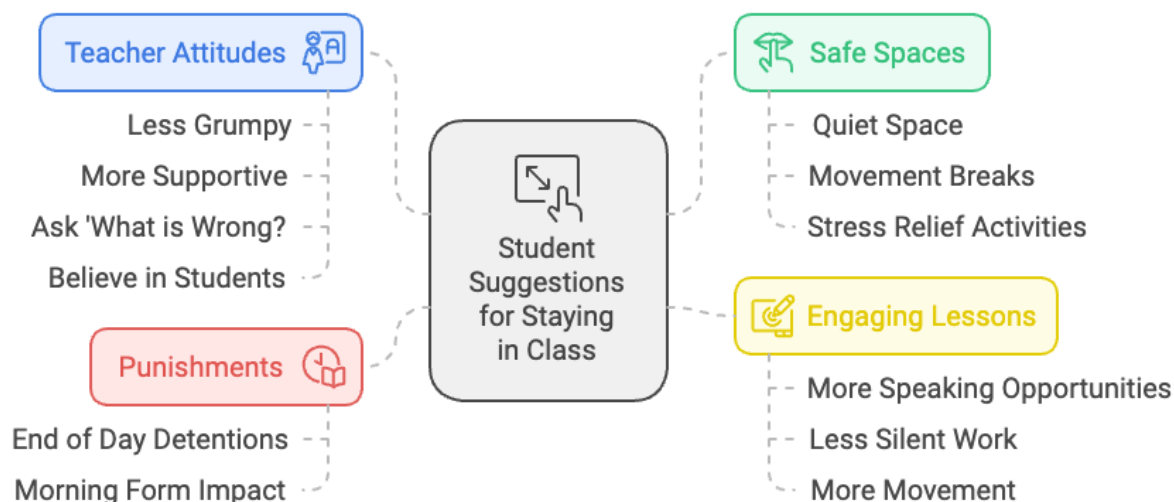
"It's so draining, if they just let us speak it would be much more enjoyable"

"If there were more group tasks it would be less boring!"

What we would like you to do

We asked young people what solutions they thought would help them and others like them stay in class.

Figure 1: Student suggestions for helping students stay in class



Safe Spaces

Most commonly mentioned was the need for a safe space that they could visit. Some wanted this in the form of a quiet space that they could go to 'without permission' to cool off or to have the opportunity for movement breaks, especially in lessons they found hard. Others wanted a space for '**stress relief**', including suggestions of boxing club or other spaces where they could be with their peers, which was facilitated by school.

Finally, students felt that lessons needed to be more engaging to reduce boredom and the want to leave/not attend. Students wanted lessons with more opportunities to speak and move around and less silent, independent work.

Teaching Style

Think about Timing

On the subject of punishments and sanctions, there was also a suggestion that if students were to be given detentions, these should be given at the end of the day, as informing students during morning form 'ruins the day', leading to them engaging in hiding even more.

Many also spoke about teacher attitudes needing to change, especially a want for them to be 'less grumpy'. They believed that teachers are a good source of support, along with home and friends, but many were not approachable and needed to be 'on the same level' as their students. Specifically, there was a call for teachers to take the time to ask 'what was wrong' or to ask 'why' they were out of lessons, as opposed to jumping straight to punishments. One student called for teachers "*who believe in you, who give you a chance*".

Teacher Attitudes

What Teachers Said

We conducted an online survey with teachers in York and nationally to examine their experience of witnessing and managing students who are hiding in schools.

Participants

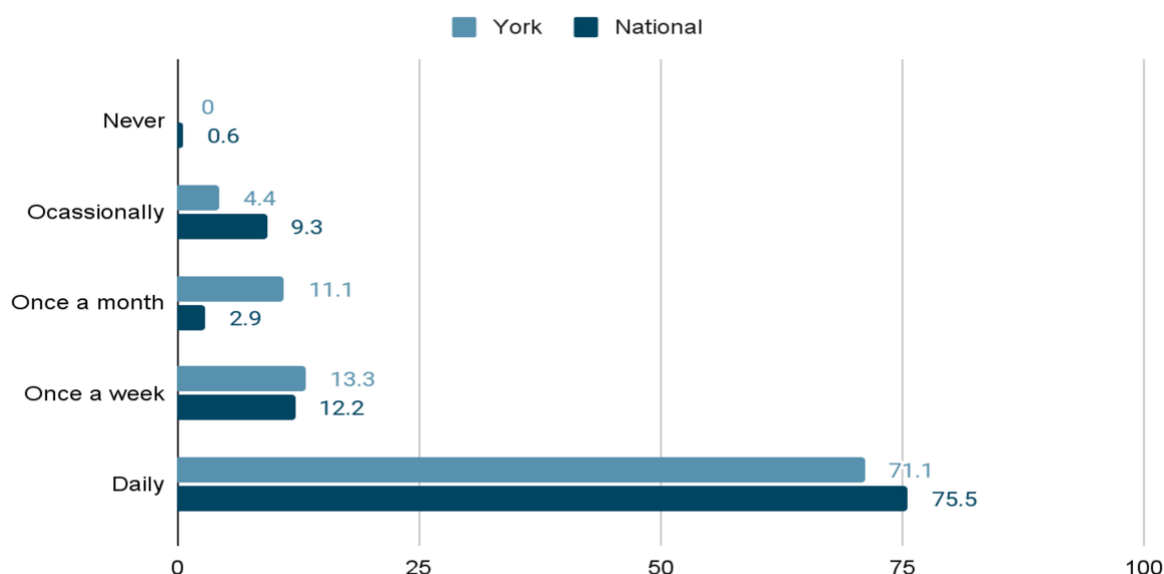
Participants were 219 teachers, 47 (21.5%) teachers were from York. Regarding the participants from York, 40 (85.1%) were female, and 7 (14.9%) were male, with a range of experience ranging from 1 to 33 years ($M=14.34$, $sd = 8.48$). Most respondents reported working in a Mainstream Secondary School (97.9%, $N=46$), and one teacher (2.1%) reported working in a Secondary Special School.

The prevalence of witnessing internal truancy

Staff members were asked to report the frequency they witnessed internal truancy in their school since the beginning of the academic year 22/23, see Figure 1. Most staff (71.1%, $N=32$) in York reported witnessing this behaviour daily, consistent with data from the national sample (75%, $N=129$).

Figure 1:

The prevalence of witnessing internal truancy in school



Who hides in school?

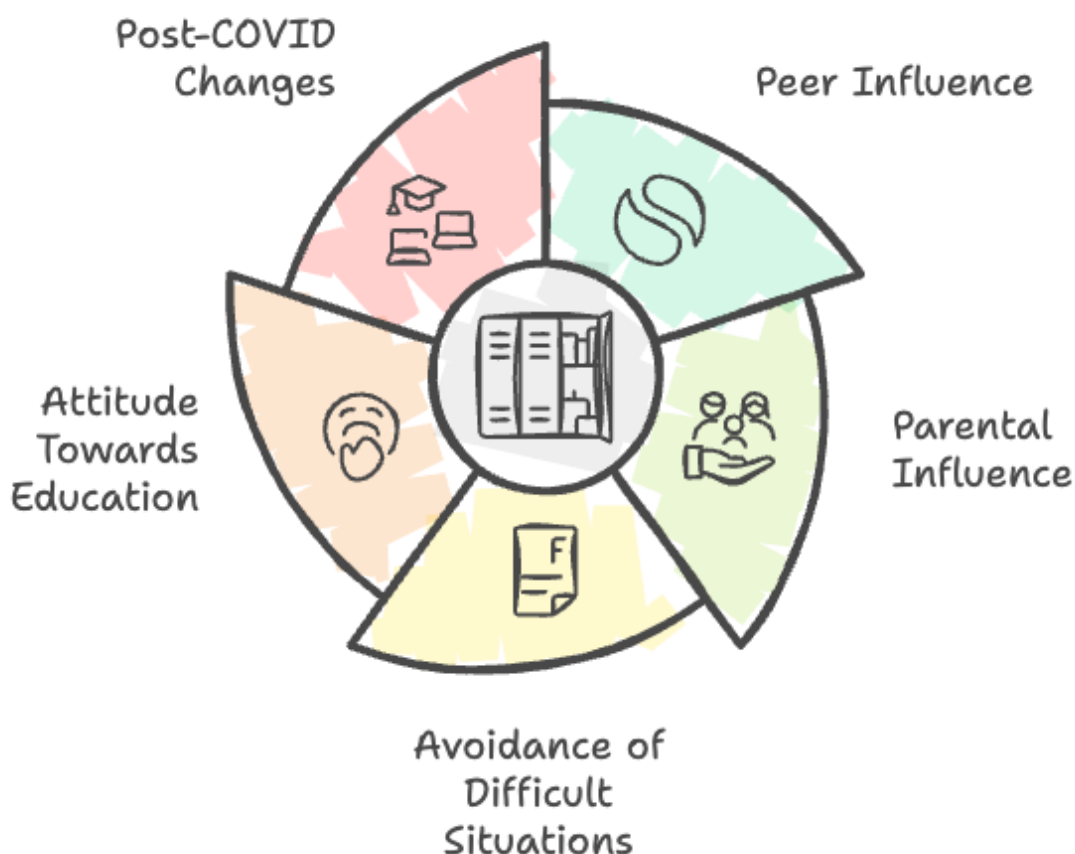
Teachers were provided with the opportunity to explain who they felt commonly engaged in this behaviour in school. Teachers tended to suggest that the behaviour was common in both male and female students, with no clear gender difference reported in engaging in internal truancy. However, one teacher suggested that the way boys and girls skip lessons differs: *"Girls will tend to hide in toilets in groups, whereas boys will walk around the site to avoid the lesson."* In terms of age group, several teachers reported that the behaviour was evident in all age groups, but the most common response was that the behaviour tended to be seen more in older year groups, particularly from year 9 onwards.

Some teachers also highlighted that particular groups of children may be at greater risk of internal truancy, including vulnerable students, for example, *"those with ADHD, anxiety, poor home life, past trauma, weak parents etc., usually from a disadvantaged background or those vulnerable to peer pressure"* and those who were disengaged with school, for example those who were *"struggling to engage with school, high frequency of behaviour incidents"* and *"who are not succeeding academically."*

Why hide in school?

Teachers were also provided with the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences on why young people hide in school. Teachers reported a range of factors which may cause young people to hide in school, including influence from their peers or parents, wanting to avoid challenging or difficult topics or environments, or a general attitude of not valuing education and not respecting school rules and requirements. A summary of teachers thoughts on why students hide in school is provided in Figure 2, and expanded upon below.

Figure 2: Teachers suggestions for students hide in school.



Several teachers highlighted the **influence of peers** on truancy, suggesting that peer pressure may predict the behaviour *“because their friends do it and they fear being left out or viewed differently”* and that truancy in school provides another opportunity to socialise with peers *“an opportunity to meet up with friends outside of their lessons, vaping in toilets and to use their mobile phone”*. The behaviour may also provide young people with the opportunity to gain more social status in the peer group *“some are influenced by peer pressure and will truant to impress a more 'powerful' member of their social group.”*

Teachers also highlighted **the influence of parents**, suggesting that parental attitudes towards education and a lack of support from some parents in reinforcing school rules encourage some young people to truant in school, as one teacher stated: *“All of this is compounded by parental behaviour and attitudes. They’re not hard/ firm enough and therefore they don’t support us, and students think they can “call parents” to get it fixed.”*

Many teachers, however, highlighted that young people engage in this behaviour to **avoid situations**, environments, and/or lessons they find

difficult. This included teachers who suggested that young people may find some lessons particularly difficult, and so rather than work hard and engage with the content, young people would prefer to avoid the session: *"They see lesson avoidance as the easier route - once they get to a lesson they will have to work hard, may get into trouble for not having homework or equipment"*.

Other teachers suggested that some young people do not want to follow the usual norms and rules of the classroom and this leads them to skip particular lessons *"They find the work in lessons too difficult so they avoid it. They find the expectations of a classroom that are required for good work to happen i.e. quiet and sustained focus, so they find classrooms unpleasant places to be"* and:

A number of reasons - they can't access the work, they are anxious, they are pushing the boundaries, they feel like they are failing so what's the point, they struggle with behaviour and feel like they are picked on/ just get told off

Some teachers suggested that this avoidance of more challenging lessons points to a lack of resilience in some young people and a lack of willingness to engage with difficult topics and "give them a go". Further, some teachers suggested that not being able to sit with their friends or having challenging previous experiences with the teacher may be further factors that include truanting behaviour, as one teacher stated:

I think they do not want to be in the lessons for a number of reasons, sometimes they are not keen on the subject or they find it difficult. Other times I think they are less keen to be in lessons where they don't sit with friends or there is more behavioural rigour or it is seen as 'hard work'

The most frequent response from teachers, however, suggested that internal truancy reflected young peoples' attitudes towards school and a sense that young people did not value school, saw it as an optional experience, and had no respect for school rules or for teachers: *"Bored, don't see the point, too hard, not engaging enough, don't like the teacher, don't feel they are*

progressing in the subject, don't like the subject”.

In some of the responses, there was a sense that this was worse after the COVID pandemic and homeschooling: *“I believe from talking to other colleagues that there is a bit of an opt out culture since covid, as a number of students didn't do work set or attend online learning”* and:

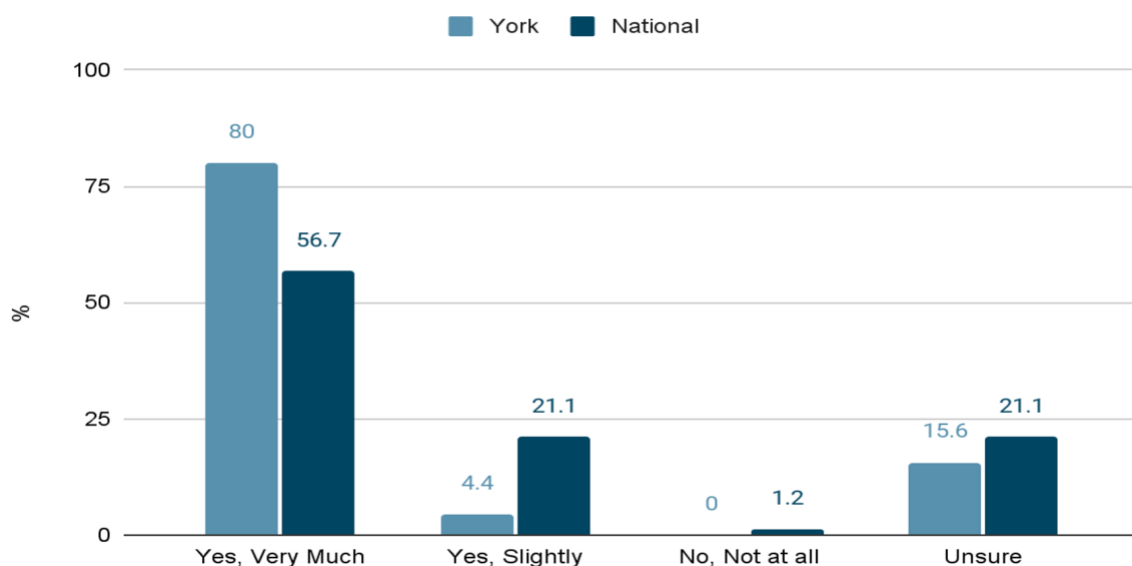
They have come to see school and particular subjects as optional since COVID. There is a real lack of resilience or acceptance that school rules have to be followed. We have made it far too easy for students to opt out and not tackle challenges in any form by providing a 'safe space' which they take themselves to without prior permission and then they are allowed to stay. I have students this year who are participating fully in week long residential trips and school performances but say they cannot be in a room for a one hour lesson

The impact of COVID

Teachers were asked whether they thought internal truancy had increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in Figure 3, most teachers (80%, N=36) from York reported feeling like the issue of internal truancy in school had increased following the COVID-19 pandemic. This was higher than the national sample of teachers (56.7%, N=97).

Figure 3:

The prevalence of witnessing internal truancy in school post-pandemic



When asked to expand on the impact of COVID, a large proportion of teaching staff believed that an “opt-out” culture had developed due to remote learning, which was proving hard to break: *“The idea of opting out has really changed. In COVID no-one insisted that they had to work and many of them see school as an extension of that”*. This was thought to be amplified by some students who were able to manage their own workload in COVID, not understanding the importance of returning to the classroom: *“They feel like because they have come out “ok” after having so much time away from school during the pandemic that they’ll be ok if they continue to stay away”*.

Other staff spoke of COVID “de-valuing” school and concerns over how this will impact students' outcomes later in life: *“They see no value in the work, cannot grasp the bigger picture of the importance of school and have no sense of how these patterns of behaviours will affect their futures”*. Most teachers agreed that this impact had been caused by changes in routine that were proving hard to break:

It is only now that we see that the rigour and routine of schools 39 weeks a year helps stem the lack of any of it in some homes. When faced with months at home where there were no internal routines, they are out of that habit. Hard for us to try and get that back. It’s a minority but a significant one. I hadn’t realised the effect school routines had on children until now.

These changes in routine had resulted in increased reports of anxiety in young people, which was negatively impacting on their ability to enter and stay in the classroom: *“We also seem to have many more students who are struggling with issues such as anxiety so more students see other students being allowed to not be in lessons”*.

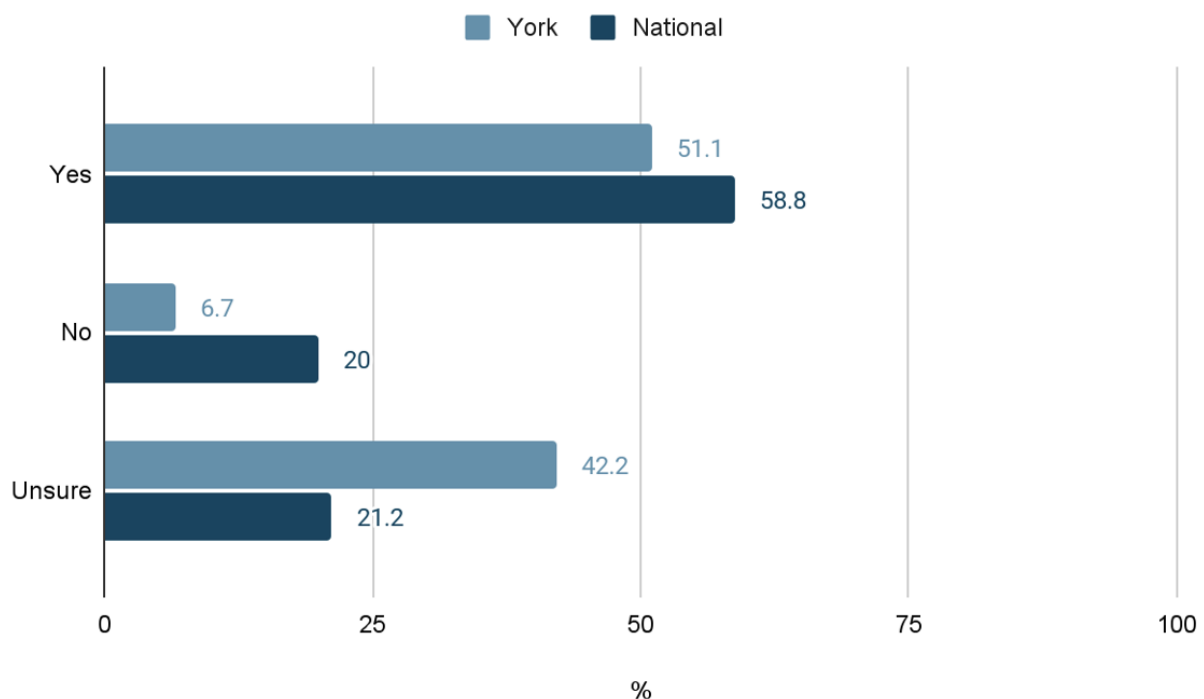
Finally, staff reported that COVID had changed the way some parents viewed school, and that attitudes had worsened and this was filtering down to children: *“ Parents don't seem to be as supportive towards school and give up too easily”; “Sometimes this correlates with family attitudes - more parents now don't seem to side with the school or understand the value of rules like punctuality, effort and uniform codes (which might not have been instilled in them during lockdown)”*.

School Policies

The survey also asked teachers about their awareness of whether or not their school has a policy that outlines how to manage internal truancy. As shown in Figure 4, and consistent with the national data, approximately half (51.1%, N=23) of the sample in York reported that their school had a policy. However, a higher proportion of teachers in York (42.2%, N=19) compared to the national sample reported being unsure.

Figure 4:

Awareness of school internal truancy policies



The majority of school staff reported that their school used a sanction-based system, including the use of isolation/reflection time and after-school detentions to make up the time missed from lessons. On-call systems, using members of SLT or pastoral staff, was also common across schools, with many teachers reporting a 'missing from lesson' button to alert others to absent students. For those placed into isolation or with heads of years, often work from the lesson was sent so that students did not miss out on lesson content:

SLT, teaching assistants and other staff in the HUB pick up these students and liaise with the classroom teacher by email to get the work to give them in the library. Often this does work and the lesson is completed by the student

However, many staff who reported a sanction-based approach expressed that this was often used inconsistently, resulting in some students having no repercussions for being out of class and seeing isolation or time with heads of years as a way of opting out of lessons: *"Library now a Hub area - a lot think they can opt out of lessons and go there instead"*. This was then observed by other students who then pushed back if sanctions, such as stamps or detentions, were issued to them, making behaviour management challenging for many.

Others reported using more personalised support, with pastoral teams working with young people to explore the reasons behind their internal truancy and what support they would like to return to the classroom. For some, this was in the form of being escorted to lessons by a teaching assistant a few moments before or after the bell. For others, timetables had been colour-coded to allow staff to see which areas of school the student may struggle with. Those schools using a personalised approach reported that this took up a lot of pastoral, head of year, and SLT time.

Finally, a smaller number of teachers reported that in addition to their school behaviour policies, they were working at a classroom level to reduce absenteeism. Some were trying to make their teaching materials more engaging to encourage attendance, and others were working on building relationships with students to make each individual feel valued.

Barriers to managing behaviour

Many staff members reported that students' attitudes towards school were one of the main barriers to managing behaviour. For some, students' poor behaviour and outright defiance were their main concern, with many reporting that young people would refuse to engage or follow any type of instruction. For those who did manage to overcome refusal and convince

students to re-enter the classroom, there were concerns of disruptive behaviour being used as a way of being removed from the class:

It's very difficult to persuade students who don't want to attend lessons to go. If they do [go to class] then they can disrupt the lessons as a way of getting out of them again. They could go somewhere else like the library but that still means they have a way of getting out of lessons.

And lots of students showed an unwillingness to engage with school, which was proving to be a barrier for many staff:

Students who have no motivation and a can't be bothered attitude, and no matter what you say or how much intervention you try, nothing works as they are set in their mindset and behaviours.

A smaller group of staff were concerned that students could not articulate why they could not go to or stay in the classroom, meaning that putting appropriate support in place was a challenge.

Alongside student attitudes, parental attitudes were also seen as a barrier, with many speaking of how the lack of parental support was impacting their students: *"Parents aren't always supportive which can make it harder to address"*.

Differing attitudes were also seen amongst school staff, which was thought to be a major barrier to supporting behaviour. Many staff spoke of how their school behaviour policy was implemented inconsistently across staff members therefore, many students did not take sanctions seriously:

Apparent lack of coordination between student support areas of the school (HUB for those with special needs) and mainstream teaching areas - it sometimes seems to be up to the children where they want to go (and so cracks can be discovered and exploited by students wishing to avoid lessons and learning).

Finally, time was seen as the biggest barrier to supporting students. Staff members spoke of how current procedures were time-consuming, especially for classroom teachers who were balancing the paperwork of recording absenteeism with teaching the rest of their class. This was especially the case for teachers who worked in larger schools: *"Students often hide and we have a very big campus. This is impacting greatly on staff trying to find these*

students". Time was also seen to be a challenge for those using a more personalised approach, especially for those whose students had additional needs alongside an unwillingness to enter the classroom.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Key points from young people

- Many young people wanted more engaging lessons and acknowledged that being tired, coupled with less engaging classes, resulted in a want to avoid difficult or challenging subjects.
- Some were worried about receiving criticism from teachers, which led to anxiety and feeling overwhelmed. This often resulted in avoidance of that specific teacher/subject.
- Lack of autonomy – Young people felt as if staff did not trust them and that they weren't being listened to.
- Call for safe spaces in school that young people could visit – a quiet space or cool-off space. Also, there was a call for movement breaks and some young people called for clubs that would help with stress, such as a boxing club.
- Many felt that they avoided lessons because of a breakdown in relationships with staff, and many wanted a change in teacher attitudes – young people believed staff were a good source of support but felt like staff were not approachable or that they didn't ask 'why' and jumped straight to sanctions.
- Many did understand why sanctions were needed in schools but said that informing students of these sanctions at the end of the school day would mean they were less disruptive.

Key points from teachers

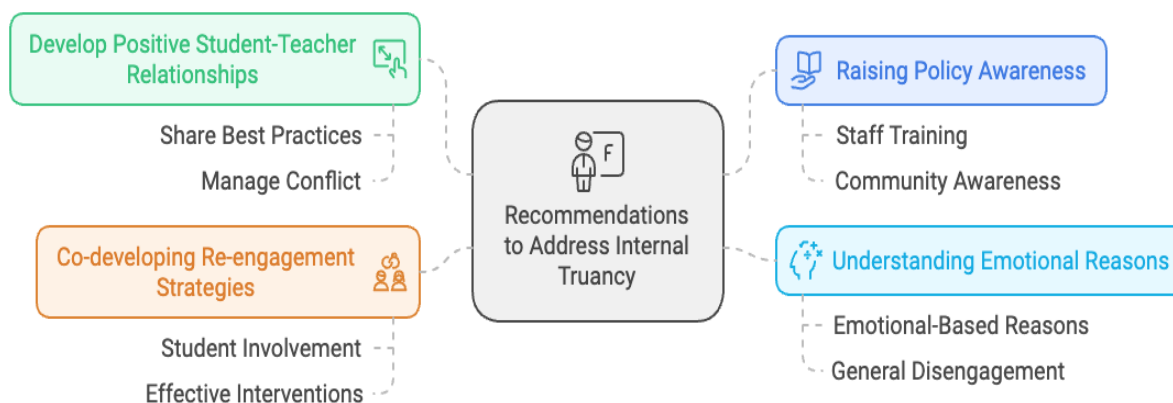
- The majority of teachers had witnessed internal truancy daily.
- Teachers reported that young people in all year groups engage in the behaviour, but it is more common in those in Years 9 and above.

- There does not appear to be a gender difference in internal truancy.
- Factors that influence internal truancy include a sense that young people cannot manage the challenge of some topics and find it difficult to remain in a space they find difficult (i.e. struggle to understand, so they would rather not attend). Some teachers suggest this points to low resilience, and others suggest that it reflects a culture post COVID where young people do not give things a go and persevere with challenging topics.
- Teachers suggest that those who engage in internal truancy do so because they have negative attitudes toward school and education, no respect for school rules, and a sense that school/ education is voluntary. At times, parents reinforce this attitude.
- Most teachers in York suggest that internal truancy is worse post-COVID, and this was higher than the national average, suggesting that the pandemic and associated lockdowns led to a sense that education was devalued and was something students could opt-in/ opt-out of.
- Approximately half the teachers reported having a policy on internal truancy, but a higher than national average proportion of teachers reported being unsure of the policy.
- Sanction-based approaches were commonly reported, with some schools including a personalised approach to support – but some teachers were working on trying to use different methods to engage students with their material and to build better teacher-pupil relationships
- Challenges identified by teachers were: pupil defiance, lack of willingness to engage, and inconsistencies in managing the behaviour, with the biggest challenge being **time**.
-

Next steps/recommendations

Based on these key findings, we suggest a series of recommendations, summarised in Figure 5, and expanded upon below.

Figure 5: Recommendations for tackling hiding in school in York



1. Both the student and teacher data highlight how student-teacher relationships can be an influential factor associated with internal truancy. Therefore, further work is required to consider how to best develop positive student-teacher relationships. The opportunity to share best practices across the City on relationship development and managing conflict may be helpful in supporting this work.
2. Most staff were uncertain about the policy approach to tackling internal truancy. Raising awareness of a school's policy on this issue and strategies for managing the behaviour is crucial for raising awareness across the community (staff, students, and parents), so the seriousness of the behaviour is highlighted.
3. Raise awareness of why some young people are hiding in school for emotional based reasons, not just because of a general disengagement with education.
4. Further work with young people is needed to co-develop strategies to support young people to re-engage with education. The focus of this report was on better understanding the factors that underpin a young person's motivation to hide in school. A crucial next step will be to work with young people to develop approaches/ interventions to tackle the behaviour.

CONTACT US

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