

## School context:



St Mary's Catholic Academy is a large school for 11-18 year-olds in Blackpool, serving 1200 students from across the Fylde Coast. Just over 30% of students are eligible for Pupil Premium funding. Blackpool is currently home to eight of the ten most deprived neighbourhoods in England (MHCLG English Indices of Deprivation, 2019).

## 1 What problem were you looking to solve?



Our attendance data showed that a small group of students in our school community were persistently absent. On closer inspection, it became clear that a lack of parental engagement was a common issue for each of these students.

We found the Harvard study 'Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents' Misbeliefs' (subsequently referenced in the EEF's 'Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning' guidance report) to be very useful in guiding our thinking about how to address this issue.

On the basis of this evidence, we decided to improve communication with these particular students' parents and carers by sending personalised absence letters. Our intention was to emphasise to parents/carers what an important role they can play in supporting their child's learning. The research also highlighted the importance of making our communications with these parents accessible.

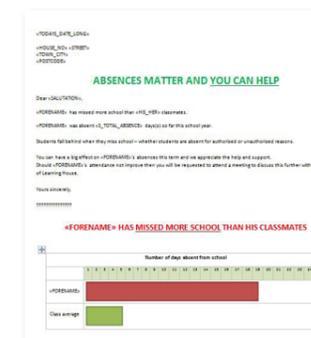
## 2 What were the anticipated barriers/challenges?



Initially, there were technical challenges in producing the letters, in particular, the bar charts showing the number of school days the child had missed. With the support of our ICT technicians, we created a simple template which would then be filled in by the school office staff, using data provided by an assistant headteacher.

This helped to reduce the time taken to write each individual letter. The office also kept a central record of letters sent home, to ensure that families were not sent multiple letters in a short space of time.

This was also referenced against lists of pupils with medical needs or recent bereavements to ensure that families did not receive incorrect or untimely letters.



## 3 What did you do?



The attendance letters sent were only 50 words long, so that parents with lower literacy, or with English as an additional language, would be more likely to be able to read and understand them. The letter aimed to send a message of shared responsibility, to communicate that we need to work together to fix this.

The bar chart was a particularly important feature, as it drew a visual comparison between the number of absences of the child and their year group's average – the red and green colour scheme reinforcing this message. It also addressed the misconception that 90% attendance is 'good'.

The letters were then sent out to families using a staged approach, from Pastoral Managers (stage 1), Heads of House (stage 2), Senior Head of House (stage 3), and Deputy Headteacher (stage 4).

## 4 How do you monitor/evaluate that the intervention is working?



Our attendance data indicates that this approach has been a success so far, and that students whose attendance was previously below 85% particularly benefited from this more bespoke approach.

This strategy has also helped us to consider the accessibility of all the letters we send home. Where a longer letter is necessary, we ensure that the key points are contained within a first short paragraph, which uses the clearest possible language.

We have also trialled extending this approach, using text messages to contact students directly and alert parents or carers about attendance.

## Additional:

### Suggested reading:

- *Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning guidance report:* [eef.li/supporting-parents/](https://eef.li/supporting-parents/)
- *Communicating Effectively with Families: Guide for Schools:* [eef.li/covid-cefg/](https://eef.li/covid-cefg/)
- *Other Covid-19 resources for parents:* [eef.li/school-closures/](https://eef.li/school-closures/)
- *The EEF Guide to Supporting School Planning – A Tiered Approach to 2021* [eef.li/school-planning/](https://eef.li/school-planning/)



## Reflection questions



- How effective are your ongoing communications with families and how do you know?
- How targeted and specialised are your ongoing communications and how can you best utilise funding to enhance them further? e.g. effective technology to support remote communications.