Counting empty desks

The government hopes its new AI targets will improve attendance, but algorithms can't detect the root causes of persistent absence, maintains **Dr Anneke Schmidt**

There's a girl in Y9 who attends every day. Her record is perfect. She arrives on time, sits in class and opens her book. The algorithm tracking her attendance will be pleased.

What it won't see is that she eats lunch alone, because the canteen feels too loud and unpredictable. Or that she stopped speaking in lessons six months ago, and describes going to school as like '*Holding my breath underwater until 3pm*'. She's present, but she's drowning.

Invisible causes

In November last year, the government announced that every school in England would receive an AI-generated attendance target. Schools will be benchmarked by deprivation, location and pupil need, and then given a number to achieve.

The thinking seems to be that better data collection drives better outcomes, but while algorithms can track absence, they can't see what drives it – the fractured belonging, eroded trust and slow collapse of a child's sense that school is a safe place.

AI *excels* at finding patterns. Feed it attendance data and it will duly identify trends, predict risk and compare schools. Those abilities fall short, however, when the problem in question isn't a technical one. Union leaders have warned that many causes of absence are '*Beyond schools' control*' – and those same causes can also sit far beyond what's visible to algorithms.

A category mistake

When Newcastle University researchers examined school attendance problems in 2023, they found that emotional distress lay at the root of 94% of cases. Defiance barely featured. Instead, degrees of anxiety appeared in nearly all instances, often linked to unmet needs among neurodivergent pupils for whom school environments proved overwhelming.

This matters, because you can't code your way out of a crisis rooted in how children feel. The fracturing of friendships, accumulations of sensory overload, determining that staying home is safer than going to school – *these* are what determine whether a child shows up, yet none of them appear in datasets.

"You can't code your way out of a crisis rooted in how children feel"

In this sense, AI attendance targets can be seen as a category mistake – a quantitative solution to a qualitative problem.

Absent while present

In 2025, UCL researchers examined rates of emotional engagement in education settings, and identified some concerning patterns among girls in English secondary schools. In 2019, 43% of Y9 girls strongly agreed that they felt safe at school; by 2023, that figure had fallen to just 21%, nearly double the rate of decline seen among boys. England's decline as a whole was among the steepest internationally.

Timing matters, too. Emotional engagement plummets from Y7 to Y9, just as persistent absence starts to spike. We now know that for many secondary pupils, 'attending school' amounts to sitting in a classroom while feeling fundamentally unsafe. They're physically there, but *emotionally absent*, experiencing what researchers describe as a withdrawal that can precede non-attendance by months, or even years.

Data systems track empty desks. What they miss are the children who shrink into their seats all day, and the internal collapse that can make school attendance feel like an act of endurance.

Belonging, not benchmarks

Emotional safety is the ground on which learning is built. Children don't skip school because they've failed to meet a target; they stay away because trust has been broken, their safety has been compromised and their sense of belonging has been lost.

Despite striking rates of mental distress among secondary pupils, meaningful support remains scarce. The interventions that actually work are all relational, aimed at strengthening connections between students and staff, and towards rebuilding the peer relationships that anchor a young person's sense of security.

Teachers are already shouldering too much of this burden alone. Building a sense of belonging requires institutional design, and schools where trust and cohesion are deeply embedded at all levels.

The government has invested substantial resources in systems that measure attendance and generate targets, but where's the equivalent investment in making children *want* to attend? Where is the relational infrastructure – the support, time and resources – that attendance data can't capture, but which absence always reflects?

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