

Evidence from: WISERD Education Multi-Cohort Study. Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISERD), Cardiff University. Project Team: Dr Rhian Barrance (Director), Dr Mark Connolly, Dr Laura Arman, Prof. Chris Taylor.

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor y Blynyddoedd Cynnar, Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Early Years, Children, Young People and Education Committee

Blaenoriaethau Pwyllgor y Blynyddoedd Cynnar, Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Priorities for the Early Years, Children, Young People and Education Committee

What do you consider to be the main priorities or issues that the Committee should consider during the Seventh Senedd, and why?

This submission draws on evidence from the WISERD Education Multi-Cohort Study (WMCS), a research study at the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISERD), at Cardiff University. The WMCS is a national longitudinal study funded by Welsh Government, that annually surveys three cohorts of secondary school students across Wales about their experiences of growing up in Wales. It is currently in its 15th year and it is a unique source of data on young people's experiences. A key strength of the project is that it enables policy-makers to understand the issues that are important to children and young people themselves, in line with the Welsh Government's commitment to children's rights and participation.

We have identified three core areas of focus for the new committee.

1. The impact of Generative AI in schools.
2. Equity and non-discrimination at School
3. School absences

The impact of Generative AI in schools

We urge the committee to launch an inquiry into the impact of Generative AI (Gen AI) on children's educational experiences. Gen AI is a disruptive technology, with wide-ranging implications for children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Since 2021 and the advent of ChatGPT, Gen AI has become increasingly popular amongst children (Hashem et al. 2025; Picton et al. 2025). Concerns about young people's uses of Gen AI at school mainly relate to difficulties authenticating children's work and the potential impact on learning for children who become overdependent on Gen AI (Bastani et al., 2025). This poses a fundamental

challenge for the education system – while early studies have shown learning gains from educational Gen AI programmes, these have not been replicated in more rigorous longer-term studies (Weidlich et al. 2025; Lodge and Loble 2026; Deng et al. 2025). Recent research has found that while performance on coursework tends to improve amongst Gen AI users, results on exams tend to decline over time (Stromberg et al. 2026). This has been attributed to a phenomenon called the ‘performance paradox’, whereby educational attainment is initially improved, before declining in the long term, as users fail to exercise their cognitive capacities (Lodge and Loble 2026). There is some evidence for learning gains from interaction with specialised education chatbots, but the success of these rests on how well they are integrated into the broader educational system (Bastani et al. 2025). This highlights the importance of an investigation into how children and schools are using Gen AI, and how they can be supported to do so.

There are also fears that Gen AI may worsen existing inequalities in educational attainment, with previous studies demonstrating that children from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to use Gen AI (Hashem et al. 2025; Picton et al. 2025). However, our emerging research shows a more nuanced pattern. We asked numerous questions about children’s uses of Gen AI in our 2025 survey and found that while there was no difference in usage of Gen AI overall by socioeconomic background, children from more disadvantaged backgrounds (eligible for FSM) were in fact **more** likely to use it for particular purposes, such as using for solving Maths problems and for writing an entire essay.

Our research found that in addition to socio-economic background, student confidence in subjects, the school environment and relationships with teachers appear to be important in mediating students’ uses of Gen AI. The pupils who used Gen AI were most likely to say that they did not have the support they needed when they found something difficult, and that their teachers do not listen to them and take them seriously. This suggests that that some pupils are using Gen AI because they do not feel they are able to ask teachers for help. We found a very similar pattern for pupils who had asked Gen AI for help with a personal problem – those most likely to say they had used it for this purpose were least likely to say they felt they had someone who could help them with personal problems at school.

This suggests that the typical responses to addressing concerns about AI – e.g. teaching AI literacy (Landesman et al. 2026; Levine et al. 2025; Nazir and Nazir 2025) – may be insufficient. We need to consider more holistic approaches that take into account children’s motivations for using Gen AI and the broader school environment.

Further, we found troubling implications for Welsh language education: for example, pupils from bilingual and Welsh-medium schools more likely to express suspicion and fear about Gen AI, and to say that they are less likely to believe that it will have a positive impact on their futures, when compared with those from English medium schools.

Limited research has taken place in Wales currently. Estyn's (2025) review identified some benefits to Gen AI for schools, particularly around a reduction in administrative tasks for teachers. Further advantages were related to personalised learning, particularly for pupils with additional learning needs and those with English as a second language. However, it also noted a lack of guidance for schools and issues around data protection legislation. Given the disruptive nature of the technology, and the fast-paced changes in this field, it is important that an inquiry considers the benefits and challenges for children and young people in relation to Gen AI.

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2. Racism and sexual harassment at school

In 2022 the Welsh Government launched its Anti Racist Action plan, requiring all schools to develop plans to tackle institutional racism. Since then, we have asked a series of questions in our annual survey to assess the ways that schools are meeting these obligations. Our research has looked at the extent to which schools are engaging children with issues of race and racism. The new curriculum for Wales mandates teaching about race and racism in schools. However, in our research we find that just over half of pupils report having learned about racism at school (59% 22-23; 59% 23-24; 64% 24-25).

We also ask whether pupils believe their schools are taking reports of racism seriously. We have consistently found differences between the responses of white pupils and those from minority ethnic backgrounds, with the latter less likely to say that schools are dealing adequately with racist incidents. We also find large differences by school. For example, in our 2022 data the lowest school only 44% of pupils responded that their schools took racism seriously, while in the highest 92% of schools did so. This suggests inconsistencies in the extent to which schools are responding to racism.

In 2023-24, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds were three times more likely to disagree that that their school values and respects pupils of all ethnic backgrounds (4% white pupils v 12% Black and minority ethnic).

Table 1: Levels of agreement with 'My school values and respects pupils of all ethnic backgrounds'

		Black and minority ethnic pupils	White pupils
Agree	2021-22	63%	86%
	2023-24	67%	89%

This resonates with previous research by the Children’s Commissioner for Wales (2024), which identified widespread racism in schools in Wales, and inertia from teachers as one of the main reasons pupils do not report racism.

In 2024 the Welsh Government launched a Peer-on-Peer Sexual Harassment Plan, together with NSPCC. This was developed in response to the Everyone’s Invited (2022) campaign, which revealed widespread sexual harassment and abuse in schools in Wales. Our research has looked at young people’s experiences of sexual harassment in school and asked whether or not they believe their schools are taking it seriously. We find similar patterns to those found in relation to race and ethnicity. While overall the proportions who agree with the statement are high, there is a marked difference by gender. Girls and pupils who prefer to self-describe their gender less likely to agree that their school takes reports of sexual harassment seriously.

Table 2: Levels of agreement with ‘My school takes reports of sexual harassment seriously’.

		Boys	Girls	Prefer to self-describe
Agree	2021-22	82%	69%	
	2023-24	90%	80%	67%

Given the findings from our study and from others, we believe that an inquiry is needed into children’s experiences of racism and sexual harassment at school, that builds upon the work of previous Senedd inquiries and considers further recommendations for action.

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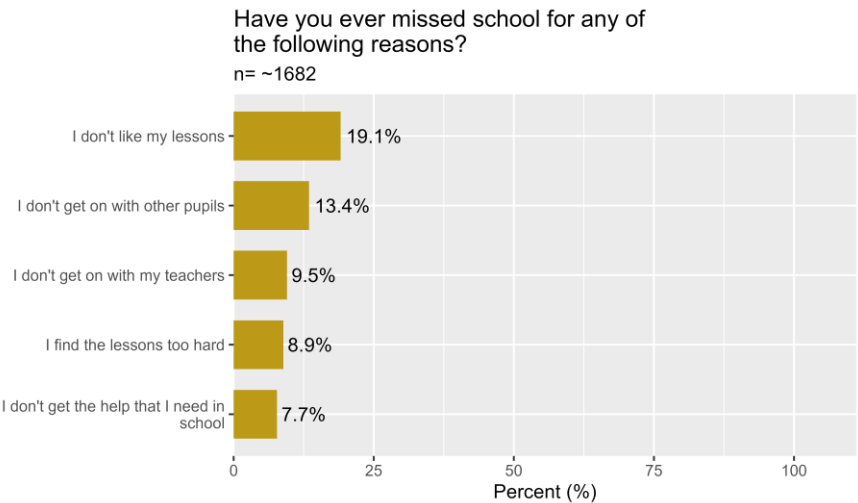
School absences

School absences are a persistent problem in Welsh schools. While recent figures have shown a slight improvement in attendance in the last academic year (Welsh Gov 2025), Wales has shown a troubling trend over the last five years since the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. This is particularly true among secondary school students (Estyn 2025), with attendance rates lower than any other UK nation. This is a key area of concern given the well-evidenced impact of non-attendance on educational attainment (Aucejo 2016; Dräger et al. 2024; Klein et al. 2022), as well as mental and emotional wellbeing (Diogu et al. 2025). The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2026) has recently expressed concern about the persistent issue of school absence in Wales, and has highlighted important new evidence about interventions to improve student attendance (Streilitz et al. 2026). Further, Estyn (2025) has made a number of recommendations for the Welsh Government, following its review into school attendance. We believe an inquiry is needed to investigate further responses to school absences in the light of this new evidence and research.

Such an inquiry would also benefit from our recent research on reasons for poor attendance. In our 24-25 survey we found that 19% of pupils in our study reported missing school due to anxiety or mental health issues. A further 20% missed school because they didn't want to attend, and 33% missed school due to a family vacation.

Pupils in our 24-25 survey also indicated that they'd missed school for the following reasons

Chart 1: Reasons for missing school (multiple choice question) 2024-25



This indicates that relationships with teachers and peers are an important factor in school attendance. Further research is needed to understand how pupils' relationships with teachers and peers influence their attendance and attitudes towards schooling. This should be a key factor in a future inquiry focusing on school attendance and absences.

Citations

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