

GIVE THEM VISION

**Discover the missing pieces of
the jigsaw in raising school and
college attendance**

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Introduction

Is poor attendance negatively affecting your school or college?

Is it causing frustration at work and friction between staff and parents/carers?

Is it deflating and feel like a slog to tackle?

If the answer to any of the questions above is 'yes' then you are certainly not alone. Equally you don't have to remain here.

In this e-book we will empower you with the knowledge and tools you need to dramatically increase the attendance of even your most reluctant pupils.

The truth is most of us are only tapping into a small percentage of the successful interventions available to us. A huge part of the jigsaw in our understanding of how to raise attendance is missing. In this guide we will show you what those missing pieces are and how you can make an instant impact in using them.

Our aim is to leave you feeling equipped, empowered and confident in tackling the growing attendance crisis. Rather than feeling deflated, helpless and frustrated.

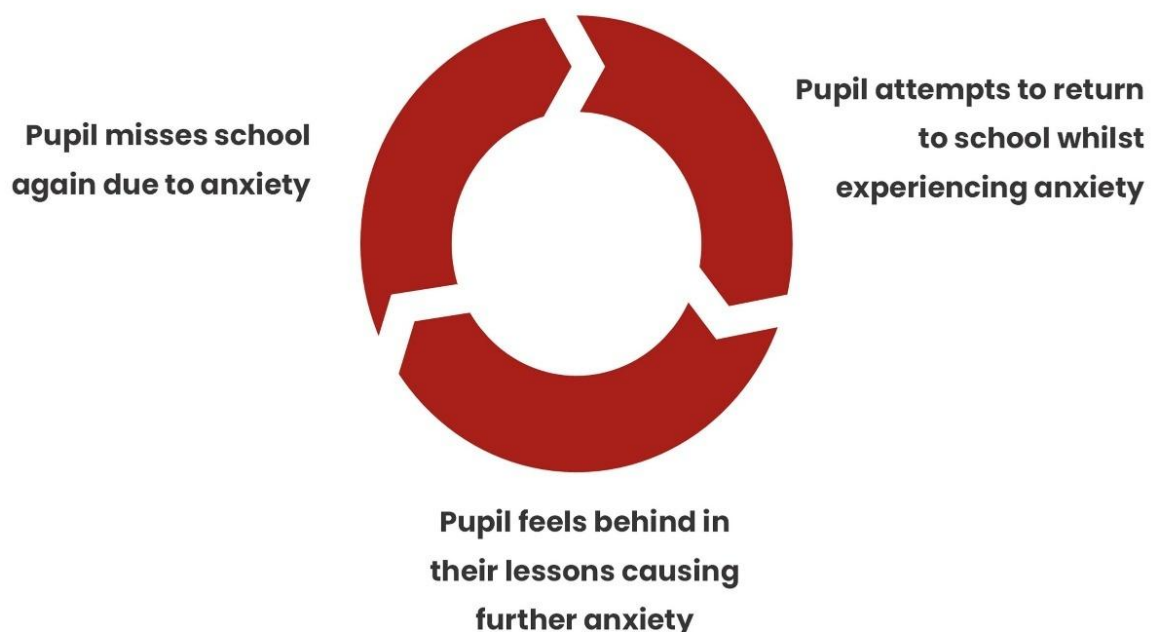
Ready? Here we go...

The problem

Poor attendance for pupils affects everything, from their academic progress to their mental and physical wellbeing. Simply put, **pupil absence has the potential to collapse momentum**. One day you think you are getting somewhere, the next day the pupil you thought you had 'cracked' is not there. Momentum suddenly vanishes and you have to start again.

Whether they are off due to ill health, anxiety, complexities at home (e.g. being a young carer), autistic burnout or any other reason it makes no difference in that returning to school the next time becomes so much more difficult.

The anxiety cycle



Poor attendance not only affects pupils but also teachers and staff

members. Teachers aim to build on knowledge lesson-by-lesson but how can you do that when a percentage of your class is absent each time you start to teach a new topic or consolidate an old one? This then causes additional stress and burnout for already tired and over-stretched staff members.

All of that stress is then compounded when we mention the 'O' word ('Ofsted') and remind ourselves (not that we need to) that attendance is one of their key measurables and drivers. All to say, it feels like an impossible task to change and yet unlike an itch that we can train ourselves to ignore, the issue of attendance cannot be dismissed.

I learned the hard way about school attendance when I moved into my first non-teaching job in education. I moved from a teaching and learning role to coordinating the care, achievement and attendance of the lower school of a large secondary school. Working alongside a newly appointed headteacher we would go on to trial a host of new initiatives to turn around a coasting school into a thriving one, but it was not easy. My time leading within the local authority in alternative provision and in a large Education Welfare Service has since followed and I have had the opportunity to work with countless schools and colleges who all have the same issues and frustrations around attendance. Most of them have been fully deflated with their predicament and understandably so when I begin to discuss their core issues with them. **The good news is I have some innovative solutions to bring that make a real difference.**

Now before I share the practical steps that you can take to transform the attendance of even your most reluctant students in your school or college, let me just give you something you need to bear in mind. An important backdrop to hold in tension, without which the whole thing risks coming undone before we get going.

The backdrop

One of the biggest difficulties that we who work in education all have is this: **we all think like teachers**. After all that's how most of us started. You might now be a head of year, deputy headteacher, school attendance coordinator or any other role within your school or college but our thoughts are often similar and aligned. It's not that we are wrong or poorly informed. It's just that to have a real impact on school attendance we need to think outside of the box. **We need to learn to think more like life-coaches than teachers**. Now go with me on this one before you consider this approach to be too Hollywood, silly or unworkable. All teachers and school/college staff are already a type of life-coach. We may be good ones or we may be less than enthusiastic ones but we are all life-coaches regardless. After all the role of a life-coach is to help people achieve goals in life. To take them from where they are to where they want to be. You can hopefully see the parallels between the job you do and a life-coach, I'm sure.

Ok, so even if we can stretch to the notion that we need to see ourselves more as life-coaches that alone won't transform attendance. And luckily for you there is more. If you are taking notes then you're going to want to write this next bit down. It's the biggest mistake schools and colleges usually make in trying to raise attendance.

Most schools and colleges make the same fatal flaw: **we concentrate on the child's present and not their future**. I'll say that again. We concentrate so much on the child's present that we fail to hold a telescope up to their future. **We put so much emphasis on trying to make their present palatable that we forget to give them a vision for their future and a reason to want to push through their current difficulties**. In doing so we unwittingly try and move barriers for them rather than give them a reason to want to push over the barriers for themselves.

Our current interventions may have some success but ultimately, most if not all of them are probably based around reducing stress, reducing anxiety and reducing barriers that cause temporary discomfort. None of this is inherently bad per se, it's just that it's only half of the jigsaw.

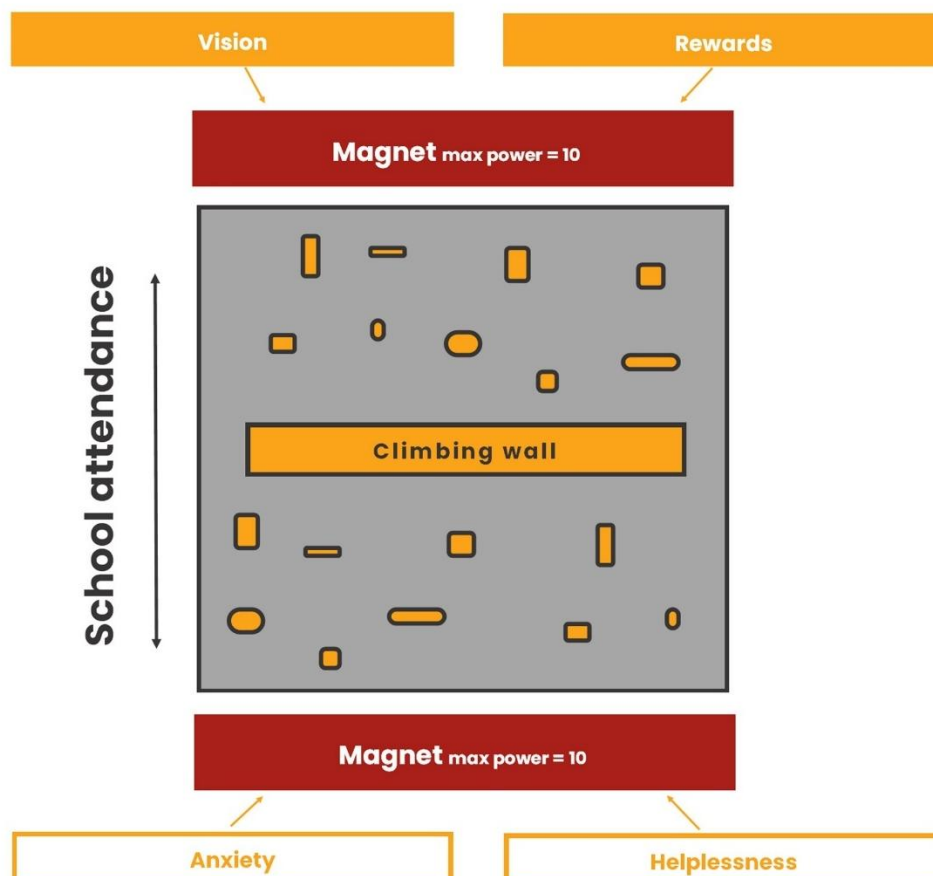
Removing discomforts causing stress and anxiety is not enough – we need to discover the power of vision for changing a pupil's mindset. After all a young person with no aspirations or no real understanding of how to achieve their **DREAM future** is an unmotivated pupil who will likely struggle with attendance and have no desire to ever really tackle this issue and change. Once we help our struggling pupils uncover a powerful and compelling vision for their lives then we need to attach the vision to some exciting rewards.



Let's unpack that further in the next few pages in more detail.

Methods and magnets

Look at the image below. School attendance could be seen as a climbing wall. Have you ever tried climbing one at your local leisure centre or on a school residential perhaps? It's hard work. It takes determination and grit to continue to climb. It is so much easier to fall than it is to get to the top. In many ways, school attendance is very similar. Many pupils have to work hard to keep going and consistently attend. It's much easier for them to fall and spiral down than to move upwards and reach the heights that they hope to achieve.



In the image above you will see at the top of the climbing wall is a magnet and at the bottom of the same climbing wall is another magnet with equal power. Let's imagine that both magnets had dials and you could dial them from 1 (weakest force) to 10 (maximum force).

For the climber on the wall (our pupils) we need the force of the magnet at the top of the wall to be greater than the magnet at the bottom of the wall. If the magnet at the top is greater than the magnet at the bottom then they will climb high and achieve. Likewise, if the magnet at the bottom is greater then they will spiral and struggle.

The magnet at the top is turned up by **rewards** and **vision** for their future – two things that usually lead to a determination to want to achieve. The magnet at the bottom of the climbing wall is turned up by **anxiety** and feelings of **helplessness**. It's fed by things such as a lack of routine, despair and a lack of resilience.

Now it's impossible for the top magnet to ever be at a 10 as that would be nirvana and we don't live in a perfect world. Likewise, it's impossible for the bottom magnet to be at a 0 as life is never ever perfect and bad stuff will always catch us out. After all most of us have worries and feelings of helplessness on a daily basis. It's what we do with these fears that transforms whether we feed these insecurities or learn to ignore them.

What we do want however, for all of our pupils, is to ensure that the top magnet is turned up as high as possible and the bottom magnet is turned as low as possible. In other words, **the positive forces that pull us up need to outweigh the negative forces that are dragging us down**. Simple enough idea.

“The positive forces that pull us up need to outweigh the negative forces that are dragging us down”

The common mistake

Most schools and colleges only ever pay attention to the bottom magnet when they are trying to improve school attendance. In other words, the interventions they use are all based on reducing feelings of anxiety and helplessness, rather than looking at vision for the future and rewards.

For example, you may have a pupil who is not attending school due to anxiety. You meet with the student and parent to look at what is causing them to worry and look to minimise the impact. You might ask what lessons are causing the most anxiety and put them on a temporary reduced timetable to avoid the ones that cause the most worry. You might allow them to leave lessons early to avoid the busy movement times, offer them to skip PE or use a different changing room if this is a barrier. You may put them on a resilience course even with other anxious pupils to help empower them that way. Hear me right, **this is not bad practice per se, it's just that it's only half of the jigsaw.** There is another magnet that is fed by vision and rewards that we have completely neglected.

Now imagine the top magnet is currently on a force of 3 out of 10 and the bottom magnet is on a force of 7 out of 10. Sadly, in this instance our student is currently spiralling down. We perhaps allow them a reduced timetable for a period of time and so the bottom magnet moves from a 7 to a 6. It's improving. We then allow them to sit next to friends in certain other subjects causing distress, allow them a safe place they can go to if they feel anxious during the day and a time out card if they feel they cannot cope in a lesson. This then turns the bottom magnet down to 5 out of 10. Again, there is progress. However, whilst offering these great interventions and ideas we have completely neglected the top magnet. The bottom magnet (things pulling the pupil down) is reduced – winner. The top magnet however remains untouched – it's still only 3 out of 10. **Therefore, despite our best efforts, our pupil is still falling down – just at a slower pace.**

Sadly at this stage things have improved a little for sure but for all of our efforts we don't feel like we are making a lot of progress. Not only that, **we have given this child all of our best intervention ideas and we don't know what to do next.** At this point everyone gets frustrated, parents wonder whether school is the right place for their child, and we don't know what to suggest.

Instead, we simply need to learn how to turn up the top magnet. That way our current interventions (which are aimed at reducing the bottom magnet's power) continue whilst simultaneously the dial on the top magnet starts to get higher. We increase the top magnet's power if you remember, by **vision** and **rewards**, so let's look at them now.



Two sides of the same coin

Just before we dive into the real practicalities behind how we use vision and rewards to unlock our pupils and increase their attendance, we need to understand the link between the two. Vision and rewards are two sides of the same coin. Yet one without the other is never as effective as both together. Let me unpack this link in a very simple way with a story from my own life.

A few years ago I was very much overweight. I had always been quite skinny as a child and young man but I had not changed my eating and exercise habits as my body had grown older and so I became borderline clinically obese. I had tried the odd diet before, and I already did some exercise (just not with any levels of frequency) and they had not worked. Then one day I decided to change it and I made a decision that would change the rest of my life. The life-changing decision wasn't necessary linked to losing weight but more linked to my understanding of vision and rewards.

I decided I would lose 5 stone (32kg) in under 12 months. Taking me from massively overweight to a healthy weight, if achieved. I set out looking at what food to eat and what exercise I could do. I won't digress with the details of how I achieved this on here but let me say that vision and rewards was an essential part of the journey in achieving this.

My **target** was to lose 5 stone (32kg) in under 12 months. I had a **plan** and a **method**. My aim (**vision**) for doing this was simple: I wanted to be able to be a great dad to my four children and still be around when they became adults. I wanted to be able to take them on hikes and carry them when they were tired, and I wanted to not get out of breath when cycling with them on our bikes. You may think with such a powerful vision of wanting to be around when they were older, no wonder I had the willpower to lose weight. In actual fact that compelling vision for my future in itself was not enough. A powerful vision helped give me a long-term target to aim at and I certainly needed this.

I quickly realised however, that I also needed smaller **rewards** throughout my journey. The vision for my future was compelling but I needed a reason to stave off the biscuits in the here and now. A more instant reward.

So, I set myself milestone targets. For example, I said when I manage to lose my first 1.5 stone (9.5kg) then I would reward myself with a pair of new trainers. And so I did. I then would set up a new target and a new reward for hitting such a target. And it worked. I lost 5 stone in 10 months and in a very sustainable way. No calorie counting or fad dieting. Just old-fashioned determination and willingness to eat less and exercise more fuelled by vision and compelled by rewards.

I have since taken this template of vision and rewards to different areas of my life and seen it work. I started to employ it with disengaged students and noticed it works just as well. After all, human nature is all the same and we all need a compelling vision for our lives and some rewards along the way if we want to achieve anything of substance.

Ok, let's get practical then and see how vision + rewards can transform even your most reluctant of pupils. You are probably more familiar with using rewards than using vision in your current school setting so let's start there.



The £10,000 conundrum

We all know that **where there's a will there's a way**. School attendance is no different. So, is there a will from your struggling pupils to attend and if not, how do you create one?

I like to use the £10,000 conundrum in determining whether a young person could return to school or college or increase their attendance to highly consistent rates. The £10,000 conundrum is this: **if you offered your pupil £10,000 to attend your school for a week and formalised it with a contract would they manage it?** The rules would be that they had to attend at any cost but that they were allowed to enter the building and be nervous, uncomfortable and they didn't have to enjoy every minute of it. They would be allowed to feel sick and struggle, but they had to attend.

Anecdotally I find that at least 2 out of 3 pupils with anxiety related barriers would manage in these circumstances, often more. And the rate is higher for those missing out on school for other reasons too. In other words, if the **reward** for attending was big enough your struggling pupils would push through the discomfort and find a way to attend.

Now of course as a school or college you don't have a spare £10,000 lying around. In fact, you probably don't even have a spare £100 lying around and so bribing pupils with money to attend is not a goer. Even if you somehow could stretch to buying them a new computer game, odds are many of your pupils may already have it and it wouldn't mean that much to them. So, we need to think about rewards that cost you as a school / college nothing but carry weight. At this stage it's a great idea to bring parent-carers into the mix and get them in on this.

If the pupil attends for X amount of consecutive days what will be their reward? Sit down with the parent/carer and agree on something that is exciting. **The best ideas often cost very little or nothing at all.**

Some ideas that have previously worked for other young people include:

- Mountain biking day in the forest with their dad.
- Sleepover for the child and their friend (inc. a midnight feast!).
- Visit to the cinema to watch a film of their choice.
- Camping trip with their grandad for a weekend.
- Cup of tea and homemade cake with their head of year in their office.
- Additional responsibility in school – e.g. helping with transition day for year 6s.

Top Tips

- **Allow the child to choose their reward from a list of ideas.**
- **Use parent-carers to fund anything that may cost money (e.g. trip to the cinema).**
- **Make the goal a stretch but achievable.**
- **When one reward has been 'earned' then decide on a new goal and a new reward for hitting the next milestone.**
- **Avoid putting expiry dates on a reward. For example, rather than saying 'if you attend every day for the next fortnight then you can have X reward'. Say 'when you attend 10 consecutive days then you will have X reward'. That way they will always have a chance to succeed, it just becomes a case of the sooner they hit their milestone the sooner they can have their reward.**

Something to be excited about

There is a proverb that states that **without vision people perish**. It's true for our struggling pupils as much as anyone else. We will all have likely worked with a pupil or two who knew exactly what they wanted from life and were determined to achieve it. We perhaps think of them as being the exception and not the rule. They probably are. But now cast your mind to a pupil or two who you remember to have transformed their behaviour and attitude on the back of a successful career's meeting or a really good chat with their head of year where they realised that they had an exciting future ahead of them. **The power of vision cannot be underestimated. Pupils who learn to DREAM big, go for more and who pursue a compelling vision for their life will have higher attendance.** When they do struggle to attend they will be more willing to push through as securing their DREAM future outweighs any discomfort that they are currently going through.

What future plans do your struggling students have and are they excited by them?

Many pupils have no idea what they want their life to look like when they are older. Those that do have ambitions often don't think they will achieve them. They see their plans as no more than a pipe dream that will never come to fruition. Therefore, since they don't fully believe they never fully engage. The power of any vision they may have quickly dissolves.

If you want to change a pupil's attendance then we need to help them DREAM big (another line to highlight there for those writing notes).

Remember...think like a life-coach here. Rewards are short-term, vision is long-term.

Our website has some helpful resources for you to this end. None more so than our innovative DREAM to DESTINATION course that takes your pupils on a thrilling journey of learning how to discover and secure their DREAM future.

In fact you can access the basic course **for free** on our website by clicking **here**. The key thing to remember is that a future job prospect in itself is not a vision. It's part of it. You need to help your pupils think bigger into life-style choices, dream holidays they would love to go on, cars they want to own, experiences they want to have. Why not watch the first few minutes of our video or even better show it your pupils themselves for you to get some ideas that work. You can access the video for free by clicking **here**. As a side note, this is a great resource to work through with your reluctant pupil on the days that they do come in on. You might even consider running a small intervention group once a week and include them in it.



Next steps

We hope that you now feel much more empowered to think differently about the situation of your more reluctant attenders.

Does this mean that in light of this new information you need to completely transform your procedures on attendance?

Do you need to include more short-term rewards and work on helping your pupils develop a long-term compelling vision for their lives?

The answer may be a big 'yes' to all of the above but please **whatever you do next you need to make it manageable**. Once you see it working for a few pupils then you'll get a confidence and a momentum to start it with the others.

So why not target a small group of pupils to start with? They may be individuals who fall under a certain attendance percentage or a group of friends with similar difficulties. Invite their parent-carers into the mix if you can and ask yourselves the following questions on the next page below (p25) for each chosen student.

Note: I have also included a neater printable version of the questions below that you can print and take into meetings for ease. This can be found on page 26.

Questions to consider for each pupil

1. What are the current intervention strategies that are working with this pupil, if any?

Odds are some things in place may be working a little so keep going with them! Make a list so you don't throw the baby out with the bath water and ignore what is currently already working to bring in the new.

2. Does this pupil have a clear and compelling vision for their future?

If not, how can you work with them to explore this?

E.g. 1-1 mentoring session, career's advisor appointment, complete our DREAM to DESTINATION course in form time.

3. What are the short-term attendance aims for this student and what rewards are in place for this pupil if they succeed?

What target could be given to them that would be achievable but a stretch? What reward would entice them and invite a willingness to change? Agree a target and a reward with them.

Give Them Vision Attendance Intervention Record

Student name	Year group	Review date

Questions to consider	Notes and next steps
What are the current intervention strategies that are working with this pupil, if any?	
Does the pupil have a clear and compelling vision for their future?	
What are the short-term attendance aims for this student and what rewards are in place for this pupil if they succeed?	

One page summary

- Poor attendance is affecting schools and colleges up and down the country. It affects pupil wellbeing, staff wellbeing, progress being made and is a key driver for Ofsted that cannot be ignored.
- Most schools and colleges employ similar techniques when tackling low attendance which is based around making the present more palatable by reducing areas of stress or worry. E.g. reduced timetables, quiet places to work or different PE changing rooms. This may have some success to some extent but when done in isolation it will only ever lead to small, often unsustainable progress.
- The area that schools overlook when tackling attendance are the long-term future goals for a young person which are fed by increasing vision and rewards.
 - i. **Vision** is the long-term game plan. It's about ensuring that every pupil has a clear and compelling vision for their life that helps them to push through their current barriers and want to improve their own attendance. Pupils without a vision for their life will often struggle to increase attendance as they do not see the reason for doing so.
 - ii. **Rewards** are the short-term celebrations for achieving smaller goals. It's about ensuring that there are clear measurables that can be rewarded when achieved in a pupil's journey of improving school attendance. Pupils who are not rewarded for the short-term progress towards achieving their overall vision can quickly become disillusioned.

For similar resources and support head to
www.futuredecided.com



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