

Schools allowing children to attend part time

Sir Martyn Oliver raises concerns that full-time education is being considered optional in wake of pandemic

Schools are allowing tens of thousands of children to attend part time in flexi learn-from-home arrangements, the head of Ofsted has warned.

Sir Martyn Oliver has raised concerns that “old family routines have been loosened” in the wake of the pandemic and full-time schooling is now considered optional in his first annual report as Ofsted’s chief inspector. He said that a growing number of schools now allow “flexi-schooling”, meaning parents are given the green light to home-educate their children for part of the week.

The schools watchdog said it was unsure exactly how many children this applies to since schools record the phenomenon as authorised absence, but that at least 34,000 children are thought to be on “part-time timetables”.

These children attend school for some days each week but are allowed to remain at home for the rest of the time, when they are supposed to receive schooling from their parents.

Although part-time timetables have previously been used as a tactic to help children back into school after illness or a “period of school refusal”, Sir Martyn warned “they are becoming more readily used, which cannot be good”.

He told The Telegraph that Ofsted had no way of ensuring children were actually receiving an education on the days where they were supposedly being “flexi-schooled”, because inspection powers were limited “to the school site”.

“[Part-time timetables] are not a long-term solution. Having children missing education and [that being] sanctioned by the headteacher, and with no end in sight... is something we want to call out and say is unacceptable practice. I’m really concerned.”

The chief inspector said he would also press ministers to introduce a new absence code to keep track of children being “flexi-schooled”.

A further 47,000 children are regularly educated off-site and 92,000 are registered as being home-schooled, according to Ofsted.

Meanwhile, a mixture of online and in-person schooling is “increasingly being used for” children with special educational needs or behaviour issues, the watchdog said.

Sir Martyn warned in his inaugural report: “Along with a growth in home-schooling and an unknown number of children attending unregistered schools, this means a very significant number are experiencing unorthodox patterns of education.”

He said it followed a “shift in attitudes since the pandemic lockdowns” that means “the expectations of school attendance are now viewed more casually”.

“With working from home now firmly established for many parents, the old family routines have been loosened. It’s perhaps unsurprising that the absentee rates for Fridays outstrip the other days of the week,” the chief inspector added.

Sir Martyn called on the Government to deliver on its promise to introduce a register of children missing from classrooms, as he issued a stark warning that “there is no comprehensive national data about the number of children not in school full-time and how they are being educated”.

He also raised concerns over soaring absence rates among pupils across “every part of England”, which have almost doubled since the pandemic.

More than 19 per cent of pupils were classed as “persistently absent” in the autumn and spring term last year, meaning they missed at least one day of school each fortnight. The figure was 11 per cent in the year before the pandemic.

A further 158,000 were classed as “severely absent”, meaning they missed at least half the school year.

The Ofsted chief, who took over from Amanda Spielman in January, said it signalled “a broader disruption and fragmentation of education for too many children” that was a “huge concern for the country”.

“No matter how good teachers are, if children are not in class with them, they will not benefit,” Sir Martyn warned.

He confirmed Ofsted will measure absence levels as part of its new inspection framework from next year, when a Government overhaul of the schools watchdog kicks in.

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