

**To:** Catherine McKinnell MP, Minister for School Standards, DfE

**Cc:** The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education; Janet Daby MP, Minister for Children and Families; The Rt Hon Annelise Dodds MP, Minister for Women and Equalities; Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary; Justin Russell, Director General for Families Group; Juliet Chua, Director General for Schools Group; Alison Ismail (Senior Responsible Officer for SEN)

**OPEN LETTER PUBLISHED ON [www.voiceforlearners.online](http://www.voiceforlearners.online)**

**DfE Accredited Online Schools: A readily available solution to help persistently absent pupils back to education, protect young people's mental health and save public funds**

We are a parent action group advocating for accredited online schools and are writing to champion them as an existing solution to help the increasing number of children missing school because of emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). **We are calling on the DfE to establish an efficient pathway that offers families a DfE accredited online school of their choice if their child's needs cannot be met in mainstream school.**

Our children are no longer able to attend school in-person because their social, emotional, and mental health needs are not met within the mainstream system. EBSA prevents them attending school for reasons connected to their neurodiversity and/or mental health difficulties, such as anxiety and depression - which all fall within the definition of special education needs in the SEND Code of Practice<sup>1</sup>. Thankfully, we have managed to find an alternative solution in the form of DfE accredited online schools, which have transformed our children's experiences of education and their wellbeing. Accessing this effective provision was much more difficult than it needed to be, highlighting to us that online education is simply not being used to its full potential to help address EBSA and persistent absence.

We believe that online education provides a viable solution for many and that it could enable thousands more pupils to return to education, improving their long-term employment prospects and mental health. The recent National Audit Office report highlights the perilous state of SEND funding. Using a DfE accredited online school in appropriate cases, at the point of need, could provide a more affordable and sustainable solution compared to specialist placements and assessments, also saving the long-term costs of thousands of children facing minimal educational and employment opportunities and potential ongoing mental health issues<sup>2</sup>. We also shared this solution through our evidence submission to the Public Accounts Committee in November 2024<sup>3</sup>.

This issue has a devastating effect on families. We spend years fighting to get effective support for our children within an obscure system that seems designed not to put children's interests first. This puts families under enormous stress, disrupting work, impacting family finances, putting strain on relationships, and leading to physical and mental health problems in parents and caregivers.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(21\)00367-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(21)00367-9/fulltext), a 2021 study of young people in Wales, concluded that "Exclusion and persistent absence are potential indicators of current or future poor mental health". A US research review noted an increased risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation in school absentees (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7116080/>).

<sup>3</sup> Our evidence to the recent Public Accounts Committee "Support for children and young people with special educational needs" was published 28 November 2024 and is published here:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8582/support-for-children-and-young-people-with-special-educational-needs/publications/>

Our stories are the reality behind the government statistics<sup>4</sup> and headlines about school absence. Our children are not lazy truants; we are not unsupportive, disengaged parents. For our children, attendance at mainstream school is an impossibility - it is a hostile place, unable to meet their SEND needs or support their mental health<sup>5</sup>. Support, if offered at all, is often completely inadequate. Children are left at home with little or no access to work, or put in "student support" and "SEN hubs" where they do worksheets and receive no teaching - far from accessing the broad curriculum available to their peers. Yet our children are capable of and willing to learn. Learning online allows them to engage in full-time education again, working towards GCSEs and A-levels, enabling them to thrive, meet their full potential and be an asset to the future workforce.

DfE accredited online schools present an effective solution that works for many such children, and it is available now. By using proven innovations in educational practice and technology to take their education to them while they cannot access mainstream school, online learning restores their wellbeing and future prospects.

However, the current pathway to this form of education is long and difficult. Current DfE guidance discourages remote education (except in very temporary circumstances), even when your own accreditation scheme has judged the provider to meet the requisite teaching and safeguarding standards. This makes head teachers reluctant to authorise or fund it, and discourages local authorities from granting it under EHCPs or EOTAS packages. Therefore, although demand for DfE accredited online schools is growing, it is still only an option for those who happen to have forward-thinking professionals on their side and/or the means to fund it themselves. This is manifestly unfair, creating an unnecessary barrier to education and putting these already vulnerable children at further disadvantage.

The good news is that the ingredients for making online education more widely available are already in place:

- your online education accreditation scheme (OEAS), which ensures teaching standards and safeguarding;
- the demand and need for accredited online education provision, and the capability of accredited providers to scale up;
- the legal duty on Local Authorities to secure suitable, full-time education that meets the needs and capabilities of each child<sup>6</sup>;
- the economic case to ensure value for money, with the cost of accredited online school (typically between £7,000-9,000 per annum) being similar to that of supporting a SEND student in mainstream school, as well as comparing favourably to the specialist settings (typically between £20,000 and £100,000);
- a track record of GCSE and A-level results comparable to mainstream school<sup>7</sup>; and

<sup>4</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>

<sup>5</sup> A recent study found that 92% of EBSA children were neurodivergent (83% were autistic). Irrespective of neurotype, 94% experienced significant emotional distress, including anxiety, depression and self-harm - Connolly, S. E., Constable, H. L., & Mullally, S. L. (2023). School distress and the school attendance crisis: a story dominated by neurodivergence and unmet need. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 14, 1237052.

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1237052/full>

<sup>6</sup> s 42 Children and Families Act 2014; s 19 Education Act 1996

<sup>7</sup> For example, see the 2024 results for Minerva's Virtual Academy:

<https://www.minervavirtual.com/blog/gcse-results---academic-year-2023-4>

- the stories of success like ours that illustrate how online learning can work for many children locked out of education<sup>8</sup>.

There is an urgent need to ensure the education system is truly inclusive of the full range of students' needs and to encourage more children back into education. A system that prioritises attendance in mainstream school over access to education cannot also meet the needs of all children. DfE accredited online schools are a viable and immediately available solution, as part of a sustainable SEND system, that could provide thousands more absent pupils with access to a suitable full-time education that meets their needs and capabilities - as is their right.

**We are calling on the DfE to establish an efficient pathway that offers families a DfE accredited online school of their choice if their child's needs cannot be met in mainstream school.** This would enable local authorities to meet their legal duty to provide a suitable education for the many children like ours.

We believe this could be implemented quickly by **adapting relevant DfE guidance to recognise the legitimacy of accredited online education providers** as a readily available solution to help get more persistently absent children, with unmet social, emotional, and mental health needs, back into education.

We encourage you to consult with the young people and their families affected by EBSA and discover the positive difference that learning at a DfE accredited online school has made to many.

Yours sincerely,

A group of affected parents leading an associated campaign via [www.voiceforlearners.online](http://www.voiceforlearners.online).

<sup>8</sup> More detail can be found at our website: [www.voiceforlearners.online](http://www.voiceforlearners.online) including an associated petition on change.org