

## Our approach- Fiona Lightwood, CLF Attendance Manager

School attendance has been mandatory since the 1880s<sup>1</sup>. The focus on attendance is nothing new.

However, in a time when many children and families are facing multiple adversities and perhaps mental health challenges for children and young people have never been more prevalent, the focus on attendance appears greater than ever before.

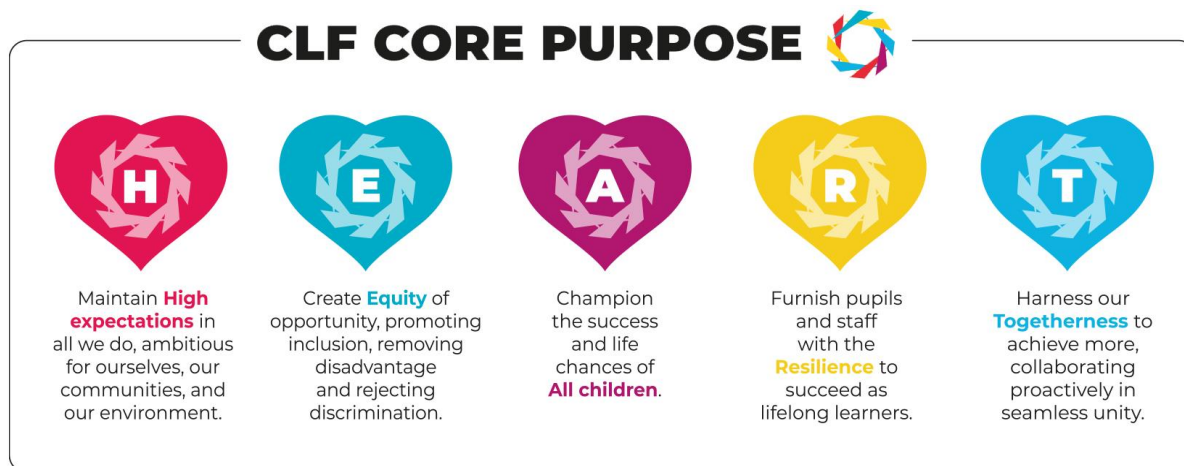
So, what does that mean for schools? And what does that mean for our children and their families?

School attendance statistics are published, schools are compared. And yet behind all these statistics are individual children, each child's situation - their home environment, school setup, social circumstance and character, personality, and agency - all unique in make up. Challenges are faced by each one, but for some those challenges are more frequent and/or more impactful.

For school leaders, faced with low attendance data as one of the many challenges at present, it is easy to see why the temptation may be to come up with a robust and rapid improvement strategy, and implement it consistently. Often approaches like these are proposed as a hopeful resolution: "We will send letters to everyone whose attendance is under X%. We'll give them four weeks to 'improve' and if they have any more absence, we will call them to a meeting, and request fines as a consequence".

And there we have found ourselves, four weeks, 83 letters and 32 complaint phone calls later – reviewing those 83 children's attendance – trying to see the wood for the trees... wondering, is there a better way?

When searching for a better way, we returned to our HEART values and some research and reading that had been signposted to us - that of complex and complicated problems.



It's a joy to be part of an organisation with **HEART** values.

It's right to have **high expectations** for our children. But those high expectations must reach so much further than numbers - attendance percentages and test scores. Some will need more support than others to achieve their personal best, and our commitment to creating **equity** of opportunity for **all children** permeates all we do.

Perhaps the need for **resilience** has never been greater, at least not in our lifetime. Can resilience be contagious? Spreading from child to parent or carer, as they witness their child do or withstand something the parent would never have dreamed possible.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/1870educationact/>

**Together**, we must take every opportunity with our interactions, to give status, create belonging and systematically build esteem.

The mantra “attendance is everyone’s responsibility” is easy to repeat, but what does that look like? In a busy school, with busy staff, surely we can’t ask anymore of anyone?

How can we do ‘more’ without doing more? Making a difference with each interaction.

*“To feel a sense of belonging is to feel accepted, to feel seen and to feel included by a group of people... to not feel belonging is to experience the precarious and insecure sense of an outsider.”*

Owen Eastwood, 2021

Noticing. Welcoming. Accepting. Encouraging.

The smile on the gate. “It’s great to see you.” “How’s your mum now?” The response when it’s joggers today as the only pair of school trousers weren’t clean; or arriving late as “the first bus drove straight past”.

It’s not about accepting ‘excuses’, lowering standards, settling for less. But it is about walking in their shoes. Hearing their voice. Seeing it from both sides.

No one really wants to be somewhere they don’t belong; do they?

As Maya Angelou said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but **people will never forget how you made them feel.**” If that is even partly true, it really does matter.

Let’s find out why a child isn’t attending. Was it *really* that they had a headache, or was it there was no money for the bus today?

Let’s continue to build trusting relationships with our families. Let’s be kind but clear. **Let’s give children a reason to come in.**

Let’s increase the pull factor – for the parents and carers, as well as the child. Have the coffee mornings, even when *only* 3 parents come. Let’s persevere, invite others. Watch connections grow.

Our approach is underpinned by our quest to seek to understand the complexities in attendance, and our learners.

<https://www.cascade.app/blog/complicated-vs-complex-problems>

*“it’s crucial that we are always looking out for complex problems that need to be managed rather than solved. Because once we get to that point, we can take steps in the right direction. We can stop deluding ourselves with the perfect solution that we could find if we just had more time. Instead, we can start to put into action our plan to manage the situation over the long term.”*

*“There’s no way of really solving a complex problem, you can just manage it well or less well.”*

Jessica Nordlander

*“...It’s here in the depths of nuance, that companies can make their mark on the world, for good and for bad. This is because it deals with humanity at its core.”*

It's not an easy win, a quick fix. It's **complex**. It's a long game.

But what a privilege to be part of that long game. What a privilege. And what a responsibility.

## Deeply human experience...



STATUS



BELONGING



ESTEEM

Enabling children to **thrive in their place in the world**, which they exploit because of a **developed sense of self and agency** that is built on an ability to **seek meaning** and make connections based on evolving **understanding** secured through a foundation of **knowledge** and **skills**