



Summary Report of Responses to the Consultation on the Improving Pupil Attendance Strategy

August 2016

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Section 1: Introduction

- 1.1 Attending school regularly is important for all children and young people because of the link between attendance and attainment. Overall school attendance was 94.6% of possible attendance in 2014/15. This translates into 2.8 million missed school days or the equivalent of 10 days for each pupil enrolled in schools.
- 1.2 Although the evidence shows that the majority of pupils attend school regularly, there are children and young people within our schools who struggle to attend and need extra support.
- 1.3 In order to provide a strategic and coordinated approach to improving pupil attendance, the Department drafted a universal strategy that brings together existing policies and support mechanisms. It sets out the key themes which the Department believes are crucial to the effective management and improvement of pupil attendance levels across all schools. The strategy also allows schools and the Education Authority to be flexible in the approaches that are used to take account of circumstances that may be specific to a school or individual pupil(s).
- 1.4 This strategy reflects that the schools most successful at improving attendance take a holistic approach and tailor their attendance policy to meet their own school's individual needs. These schools are proactive in the use of effective interventions for those struggling with attendance. The key elements present in these schools are:
 - **Leadership committed to prioritising attendance;**
 - **Effective early intervention;**
 - **Appropriate supports for pupils; and**
 - **Effective collaboration and engagement.**
- 1.5 The draft strategy encompasses all of these key elements and sets out the indicators of success in each of the elements.
- 1.6 A 12 week public consultation period on the draft strategy ended on 16 June 2016. This report provides an overview of the consultation process; provides a summary of responses to the consultation documents, and highlights key views emerging from the consultation.

Section 2: The Consultation Process

- 2.1 Prior to the drafting of the strategy, a pre-consultation was carried out with a range of stakeholders, including school teachers and principals, parents, young people and support services staff, commencing in June 2014. This took the form of workshops, presentations and questionnaires with the aim of capturing the issues that were important to each group. The feedback gathered was critical in informing the drafting of the strategy.
- 2.2 The Department of Education (DE) carried out a screening exercise on the equality and human rights implications of the strategy. This screening concluded that the strategy is specifically intended to increase educational outcomes of all children and young people enrolled in school by promoting the value of regular attendance at school and by its nature promoted equality of opportunity and good relations for all and as such, a full equality impact assessment was not required.
- 2.3 Consultation documents were issued to stakeholders in line with Northern Ireland Civil Service 'Guidance on Distribution of Departmental Publications and Consultation Documents'.
- 2.4 The consultation was publicised in the local press and a Departmental press release was issued. A notice was also placed on the C2K exchange used by all pupils and teachers. Individual letters were also sent to local Councils and relevant trade unions encouraging their participation in the consultation.
- 2.5 The consultation period ran from 24 March 2016 to 16 June 2016. The Equality Screening document, consultation document and the two versions of the questionnaires were placed on the DE and NI Direct websites.
- 2.6 Respondents were able to provide their comments and views through a variety of ways. A consultation questionnaire (hereinafter referred to as the Full Questionnaire) was designed by DE to assist stakeholders in considering the draft strategy. English and Irish language versions of the questionnaires were available for completion online; and hard copy and electronic versions of the consultation documents were made available.

- 2.7 In order to obtain the views of pupils and young people, a young person's version of the questionnaire was made available to ensure pupils of all ages were able to respond meaningfully to the consultation.
- 2.8 There were eleven questions in the full questionnaire and nine questions in the young person's version of the questionnaire. Throughout the questionnaires, respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements. All respondents were also given the opportunity to provide any additional comments.
- 2.9 Some respondents chose to make a written submission rather than respond using the questionnaires. These responses have been reflected in the summary of responses and will be taken into consideration in the drafting of the final strategy.
- 2.10 A number of responses expressed views on areas of education policy outside the scope of this strategy. While it is not possible for these views to be reflected in this strategy, where appropriate, they have been shared with the relevant policy leads within the Department.

Section 3: Responses received

- 3.1 A total of 282 responses were formally submitted during the consultation period using the consultation questionnaire. There were 6 responses received as full written responses that did not use a questionnaire.
- 3.2 A list of organisations (including schools) which specifically identified themselves in submitting a response to the consultation is attached at Annex A.
- 3.3 Of the total number of responses received, 111 were completed using the full questionnaire and 171 were completed using the young person's version of the questionnaire.
- 3.4 Table 1 below sets out the breakdown of respondents using each version of the questionnaire and how they chose to submit their response.

Table 1 Responses by Questionnaire and method of submission

Type	Number	Percentage
Responses using the full questionnaire	111	38.4
Responses using young person's questionnaire	171	59.4
Written responses not using either version of the questionnaire	6	2.0
Total number of people involved in consultation responses	288	100.0

Respondent Profile

3.5 Table 2 below sets out the breakdown of respondents to the full questionnaire by category as identified in their response.

Table 2 Full Questionnaire Respondent Profile

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Pupil	2	1.8
Teacher	27	24.3
Organisation	12	10.8
Member of the public	1	0.9
Parent	64	57.7
Trade union rep	2	1.8
Other	3	2.7
TOTAL	111	100

3.6 Over half (57.7%) of all responses using the full questionnaire were from parents and nearly a quarter (24.3%) were from teachers.

3.7 Table 3 below sets out the breakdown of those who responded using the young person's questionnaire by school year where this was indicated. This table shows that all young people who responded were in primary school.

Table 3 Young Person's Questionnaire Respondent Profile

Year Group	Number	Percentage
Year 4	27	15.8
Year 5	36	21.1
Year 6	66	38.6
Year 7	42	24.6
TOTAL	171	100.0

Section 4: Key views emerging from the consultation

- 4.1 Additional comments made within consultation responses were analysed and comments were grouped into common themes. The prevalent themes have been identified in this analysis alongside a summary of the main points. Out of a total of 111 respondents who submitted responses using the full questionnaire, 36 provided a narrative response. A summary of some of the issues raised is shown below.
- 4.2 In general, respondents welcomed the strategy and understood the value of attending school. The need for a universal strategy in particular was acknowledged by a number of representative bodies. A number of respondents also acknowledged the good work already being undertaken by schools and the Education Authority in relation to pupil attendance. There was also recognition of the key roles to be played by both schools and parents in promoting attendance.

Resources

- 4.3 A recurring theme amongst responses was the desire for greater resources to be allocated directly to schools in order to enable them to improve their local management of pupil attendance. Several responders also believed that resources should be redeployed from support services to be given to schools.
- 4.4 The issue of the need for further resources was referred to by a number of teaching unions as crucial in facilitating an improvement in pupil attendance.
- 4.5 Teaching unions emphasised that while broadly supporting the importance given within the strategy to the leadership role to be played by school principals and staff in tackling non-attendance there was a real need for this to be underpinned with suitably resourced support services, effective training for staff and the availability of specialist services.

Consequences of Non-Attendance

- 4.6 There was a broad spectrum of opinion in relation to the consequences for parents of children with poor attendance records. There were a number of responses, including from the teaching union sector, who believed there should be more effective punitive measures applied in such cases, for example in the use of fines. However there were respondents, including from the statutory sector, who believed that such sanctions for

parents would not be appropriate, preferring a more supportive role towards families of pupils with poor attendance levels.

- 4.7 A number of representative bodies felt that the strategy should go further in relation to enforcement measures to tackle unauthorised absence with more involvement from other Departments such as the Department of Justice.
- 4.8 Several responders acknowledged that there were a number of legitimate reasons as to why pupils would not be able to attend school on any given day, such as medical reasons, and that any consequences of non-attendance should take account of this. They believed that the support available to such pupils should be tailored to their needs and therefore a “one size fits all” approach cannot be used for all pupils with poor attendance records.

Targeted Support

- 4.9 The role, and also specific needs, of parents were highlighted. In particular, the benefits of meaningful engagement and building of relationships between parents and schools. Several responders highlighted that parents and schools working in close partnership was critical to improving pupil attendance. There were also comments relating to the need for effective support to be targeted at specific groups of parents, for example those on low incomes or those with poor educational outcomes themselves.
- 4.10 A number of responses from organisations highlighted the additional needs of specific groups of young people and recommended that more consideration be given to the nature of the support offered to them. Examples of these groups included Looked After Children, Newcomers, Travellers, ethnic minorities, young carers, young people with disabilities and those living in areas of social deprivation. It was also suggested that there was an opportunity to assist in the targeting of the support by more clearly identifying the various groups of pupils that are shown to be more likely to miss school.
- 4.11 Alongside the support offered to specific groups of young people, several responses emphasised the broader value and importance of the role played by effective pastoral care in improving pupil attendance. A number wanted particular emphasis to be placed on services that target support towards pupils with issues relating to mental health or emotional health and well-being, such as counselling services.

4.12 There was broad support for the support services offered directly by schools that assist in the promotion of attendance such as breakfast and after school clubs. It was felt that resources should be made available to enable more schools to offer these services.

Other Issues

4.13 There was broad support for the use of a more multi-agency approach in tackling a wide range of issues affecting non-attendance, involving those from the voluntary and community sector alongside the statutory sector.

4.14 In relation to the Education Welfare Service (EWS), there was broad consensus that it should continue to play a crucial role in supporting pupils with poor attendance records and their families. A number of respondents expressed a desire for further resources to be allocated to EWS, to allow it to fully engage with all schools, and provide effective support and intervention in all cases.

4.15 A number of respondents identified the benefits of recognition being given to pupils with good attendance records as a way of providing an incentive to all pupils to improve attendance levels.

4.16 One organisation articulated a number of areas where it believed that the appropriate authorities should be obligated to ensure mandatory training for Boards of Governors on improving attendance and also training for teachers on how to engage effectively with parents.

4.17 It was suggested that there should be more emphasis on punctuality including a standardised time after which a pupil is marked as late on the basis that lateness can also disrupt learning for individuals as well as at classroom level. It was felt such an approach would be more consistent in identifying pupils marked as late across the education sector.

4.18 The need for good practice to be rolled out more consistently across schools was highlighted in order to ensure a more uniform approach.

4.19 There were a number of specific comments regarding the use of some terminology in the strategy. For example, the use of the phrase “vulnerable groups” was questioned, as was the term “regular attendance” in relation to how that was defined.

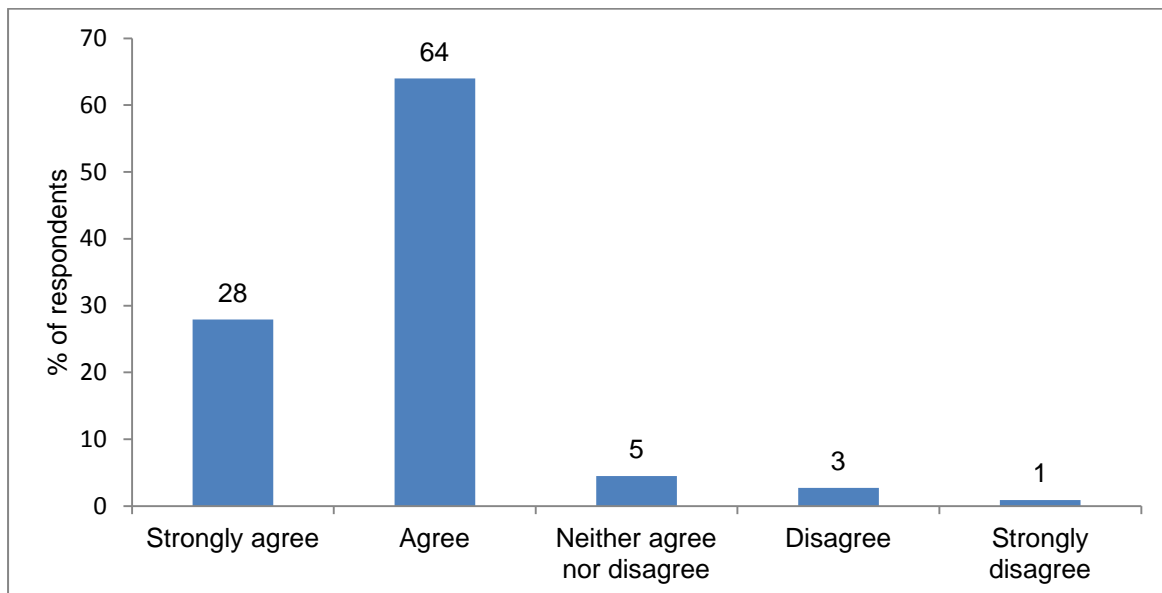
4.20 One respondent asked the Department to review its decision to screen out the draft strategy and to carry out a full and comprehensive equality impact assessment. In light of this the Department has reviewed the screening decision for the strategy and is content with the original decision.

4.21 The Attendance Strategy provides a framework for current and future policies and supports to improving pupil attendance to ensure a coherent and collaborative approach. The aim of the strategy is to maximise the attendance levels of all pupils. It highlights that targeted support may be necessary for some groups of pupils; however the overall impact of the strategy on the equality of opportunities and/or good relations categories is anticipated to be minor.

Section 5: Analysis of Full Questionnaire Responses

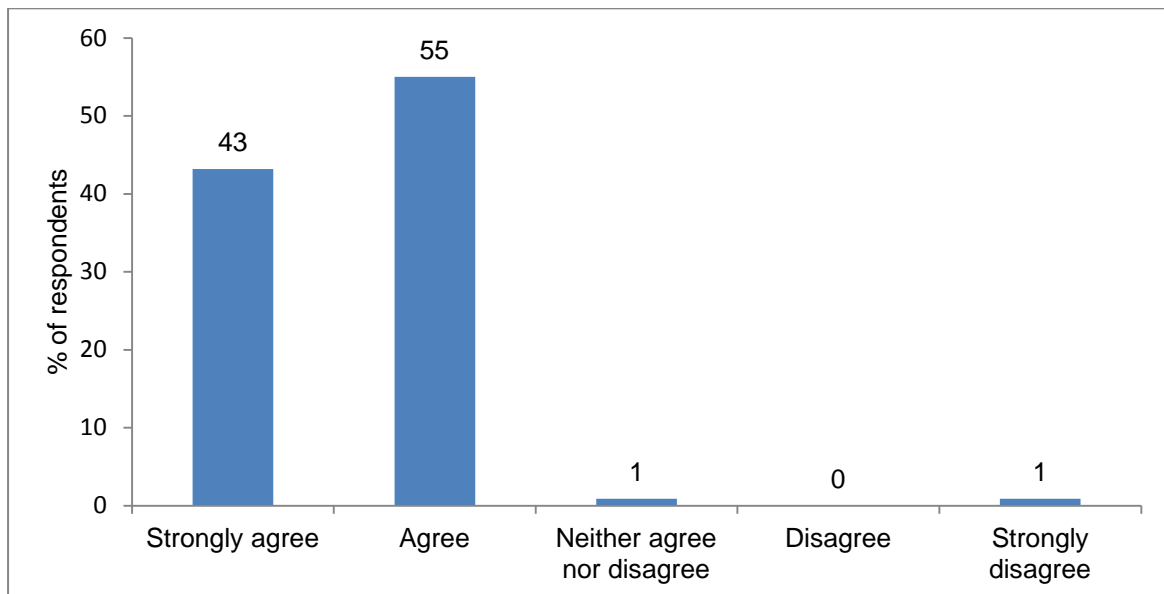
- 5.1 The full questionnaire asked 12 questions, targeted towards an adult audience. In 11 of these 12 questions, respondents were asked whether they: “strongly agreed”; “agreed”; “neither agreed nor disagreed”; “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with a series of statements related to pupil attendance. The option of replying “don’t know” was also available to respondents.
- 5.2 For all of the following questions, there were 111 respondents however the percentage figures may not total 100% in each case due to roundings.

Q1 - Do you agree that an attendance strategy will provide guidance to help those involved in managing attendance?



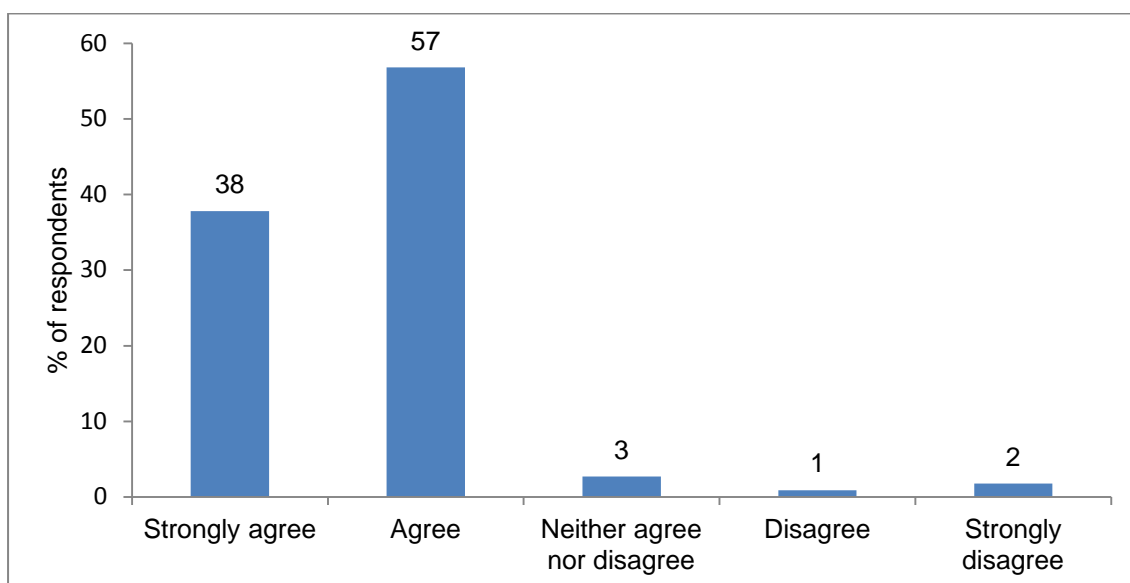
- 5.3 Ninety-two per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “an attendance strategy will provide guidance to help those involved in managing attendance”.

Q2 - Do you agree that every school should have an Attendance Policy which sets out the school's policies and procedures for managing attendance?



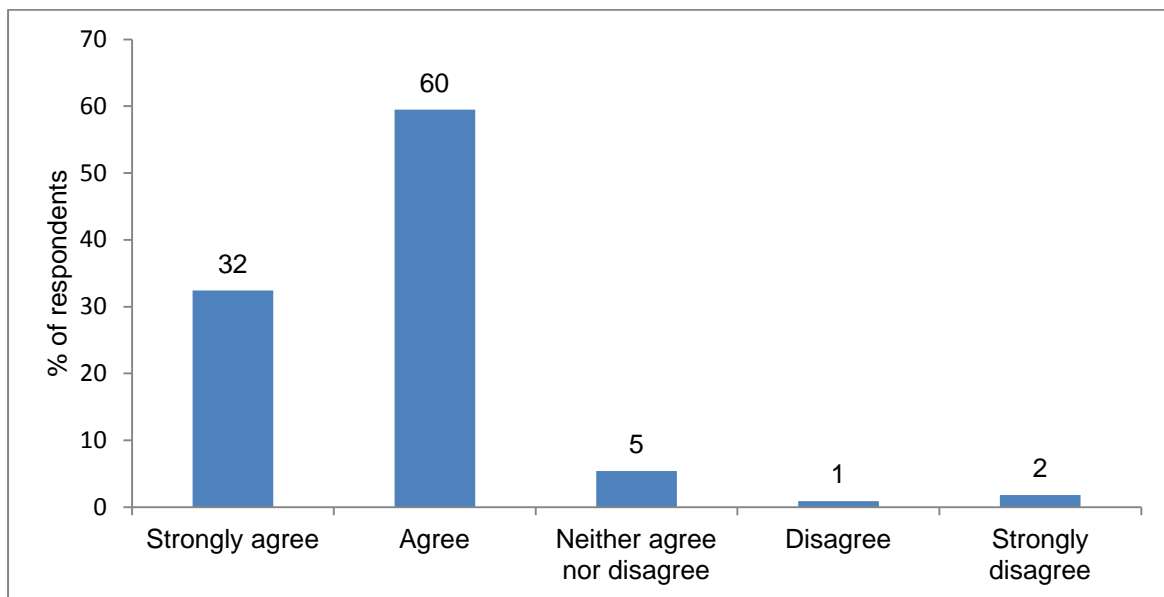
5.4 Ninety-eight per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “every school should have an Attendance Policy which sets out the school’s policies and procedures for managing attendance”.

Q3 - Do you agree that there should be clearly defined roles and responsibilities for those involved in improving attendance internally and externally to the school?



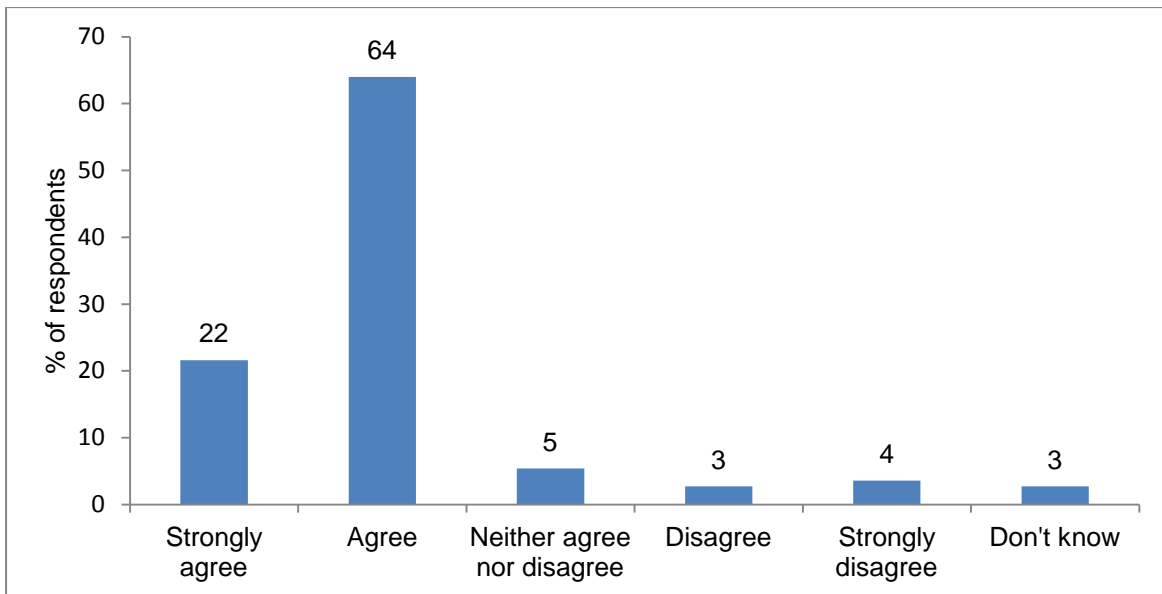
5.5 Ninety-five per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “there should be clearly defined roles and responsibilities for those involved in improving attendance internally and externally to the school”.

Q4 - Do you agree that the Board of Governors of each school should regularly discuss the school’s performance in respect of attendance and seek assurance that any concerns are being addressed appropriately?



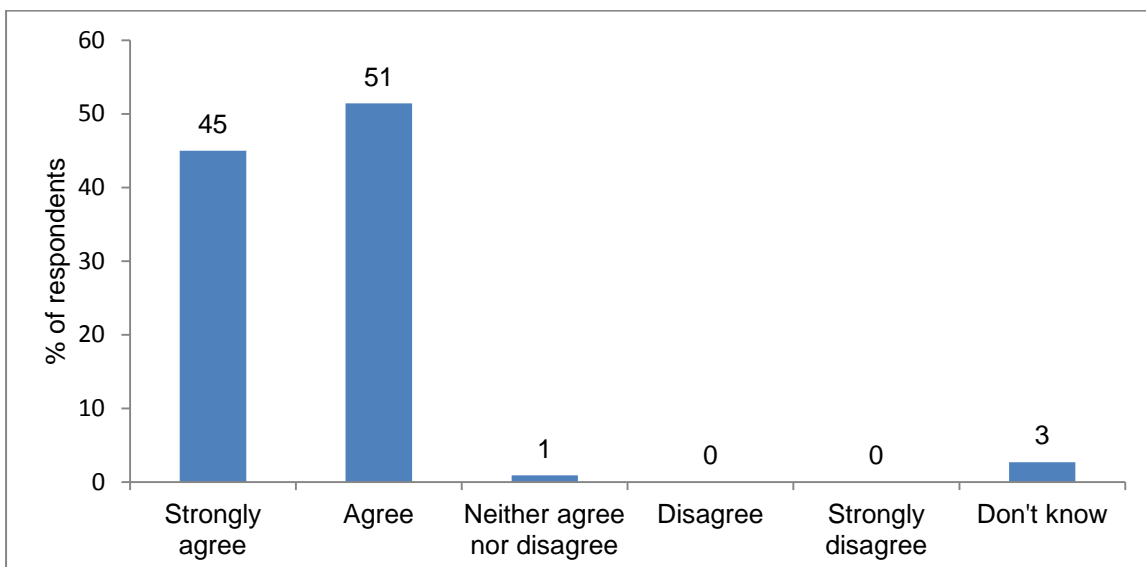
5.6 Ninety-two per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “the Board of Governors of each school should regularly discuss the school’s performance in respect of attendance and seek assurance that any concerns are being addressed appropriately”.

Q5 - Do you agree that school leaders should consider attendance performance when determining school improvement plans and allocating resources from their delegated school budget?



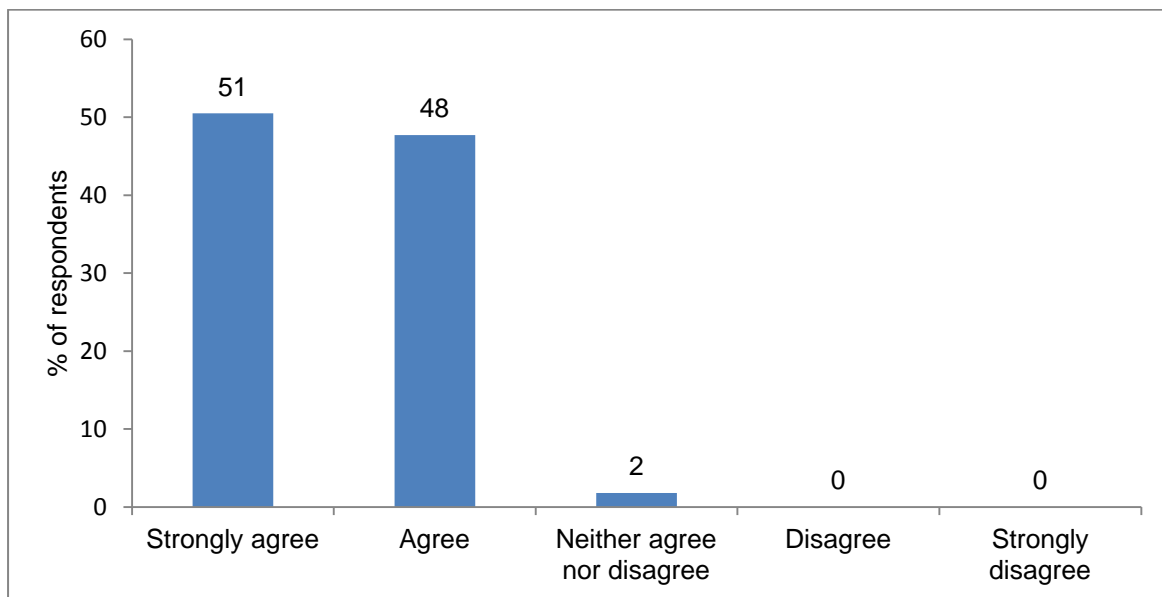
5.7 Eighty-six per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “school leaders should consider attendance performance when determining school improvement plans and allocating resources from their delegated school budget”.

Q6 - Do you agree that schools should have established procedures in place to monitor attendance patterns and intervene at the earliest opportunity, where there is cause for concern?



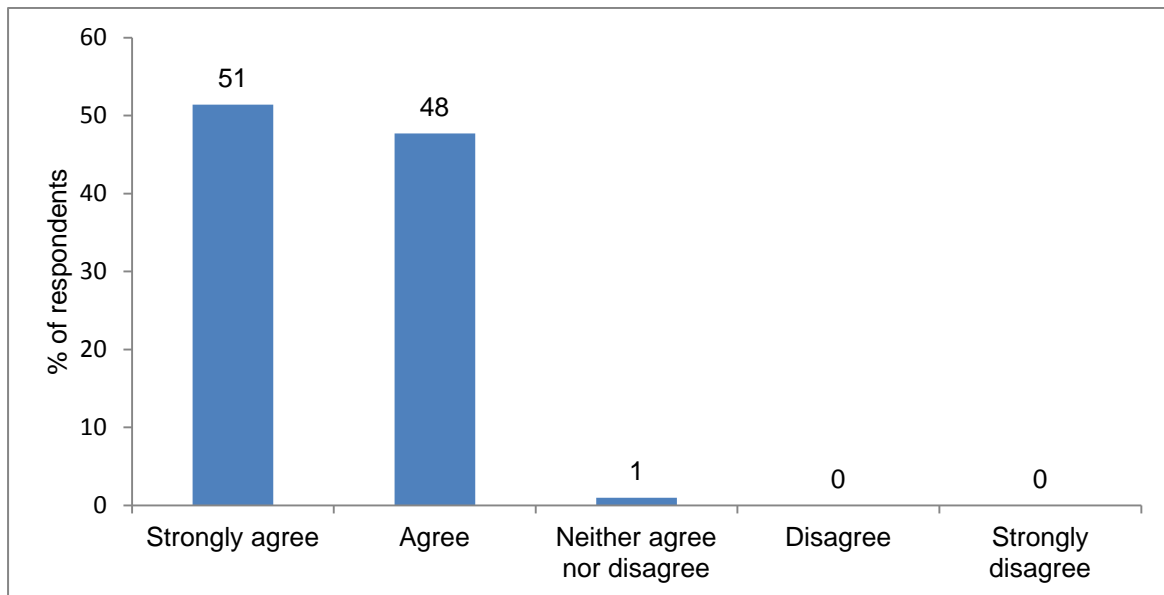
5.8 Ninety-six per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “schools should have established procedures in place to monitor attendance patterns and intervene at the earliest opportunity, where there is cause for concern”.

Q7 - Do you agree that parents / carers should be involved at an early stage with any attendance concerns regarding their child?



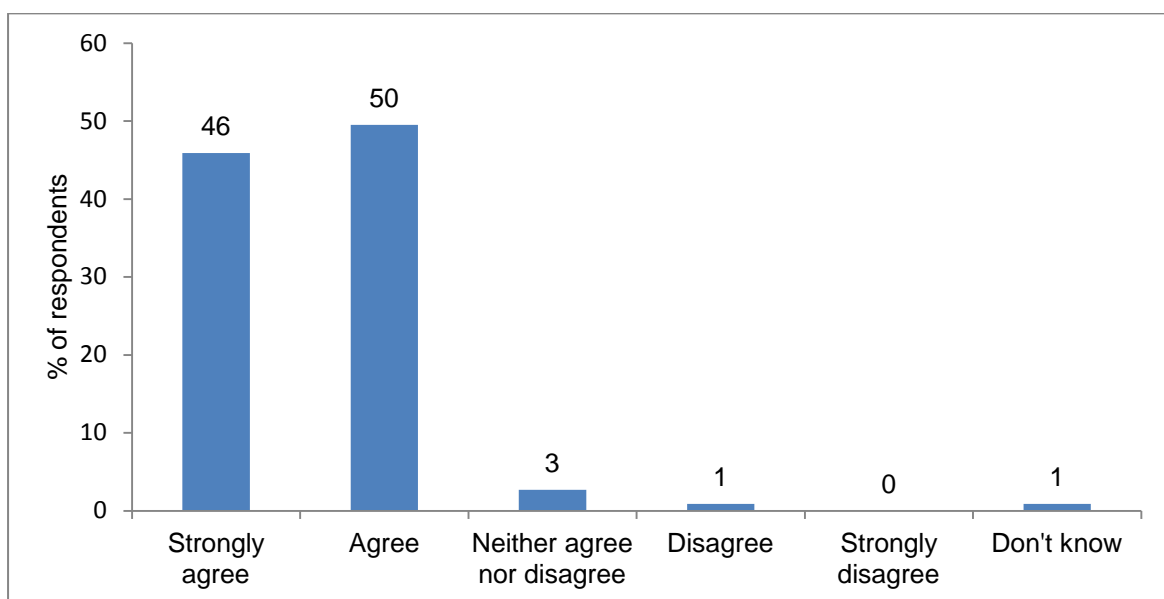
5.9 Ninety-nine per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “parents / carers should be involved at an early stage with any attendance concerns regarding their child”.

Q8 - Do you agree that engagement between parents / carers, pupils and schools is important to improve attendance?



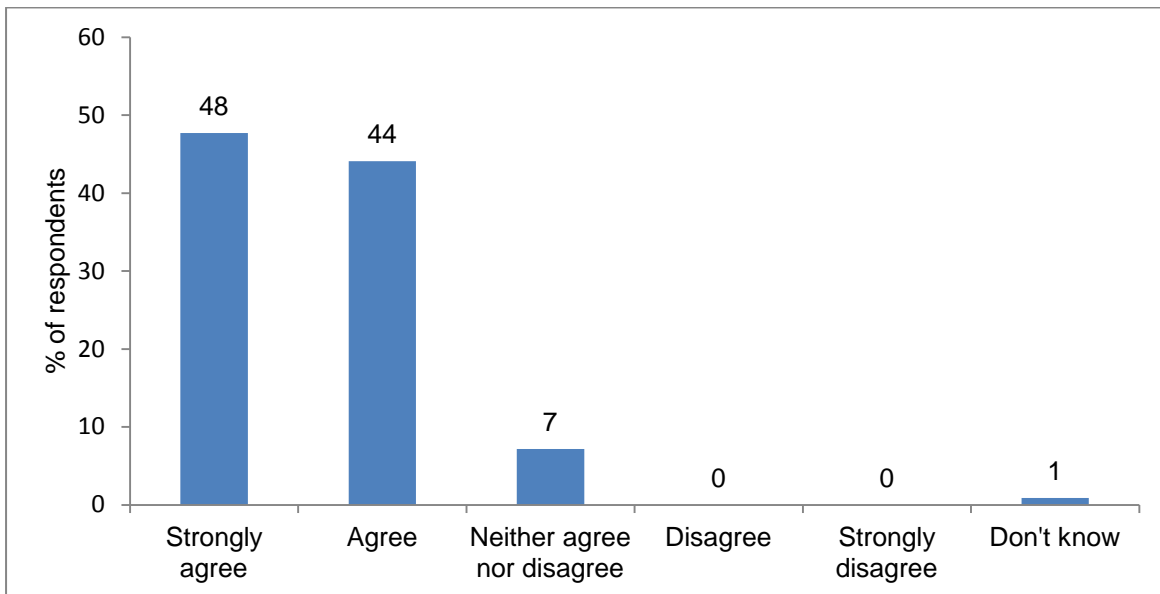
5.10 Ninety-nine per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “engagement between parents / carers, pupils and schools is important to improve attendance”.

Q9 - Do you agree that support services should be available to intervene on a timely basis when a school has concerns about attendance that it is unable to resolve?



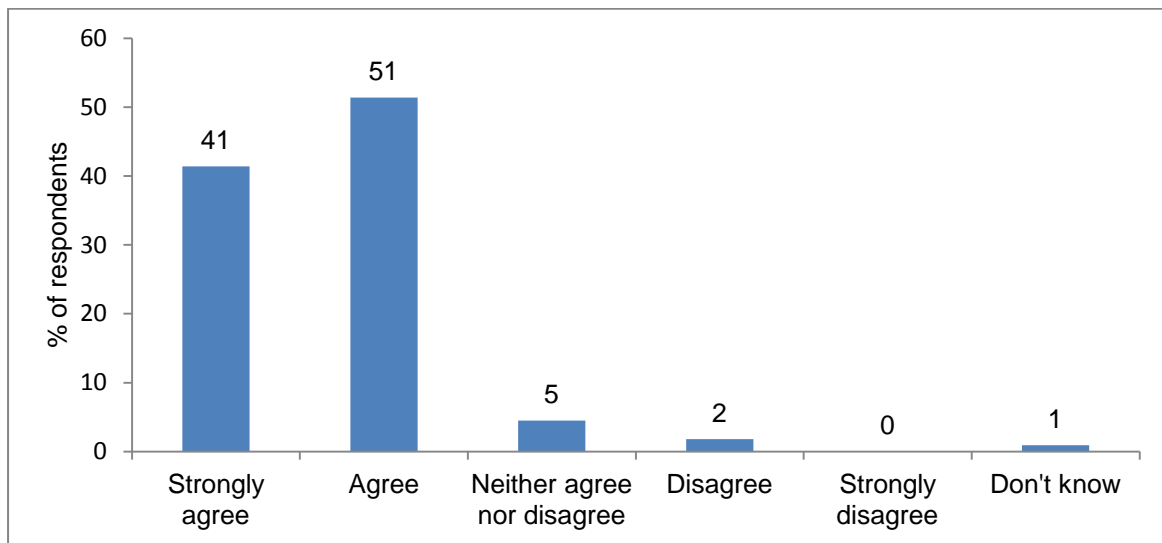
5.11 Ninety-six per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “support services should be available to intervene on a timely basis when a school has concerns about attendance that it is unable to resolve”.

Q10 - Do you agree that those struggling with attendance including vulnerable groups should be given additional support?



5.12 Ninety-two per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “those struggling with attendance including vulnerable groups should be given additional support”.

Q11 - Do you agree that promoting the value of education and communicating the link between attendance and attainment is a good investment of resources?

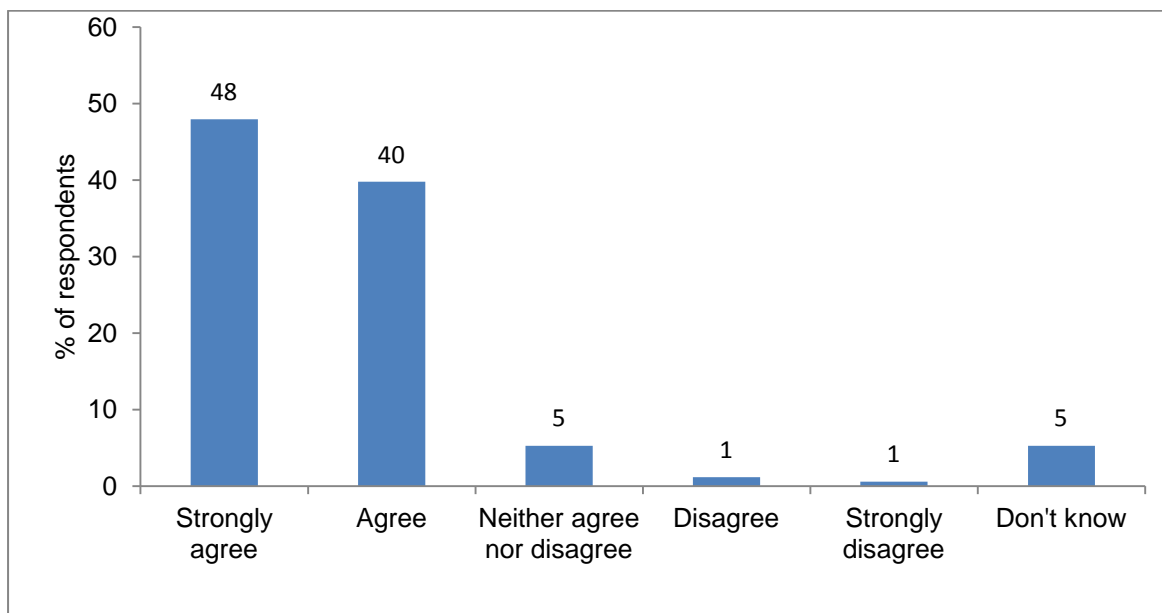


5.13 Ninety-two per cent of adult respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “promoting the value of education and communicating the link between attendance and attainment is a good investment of resources”.

Section 6: Analysis of Young Person’s Questionnaire Responses

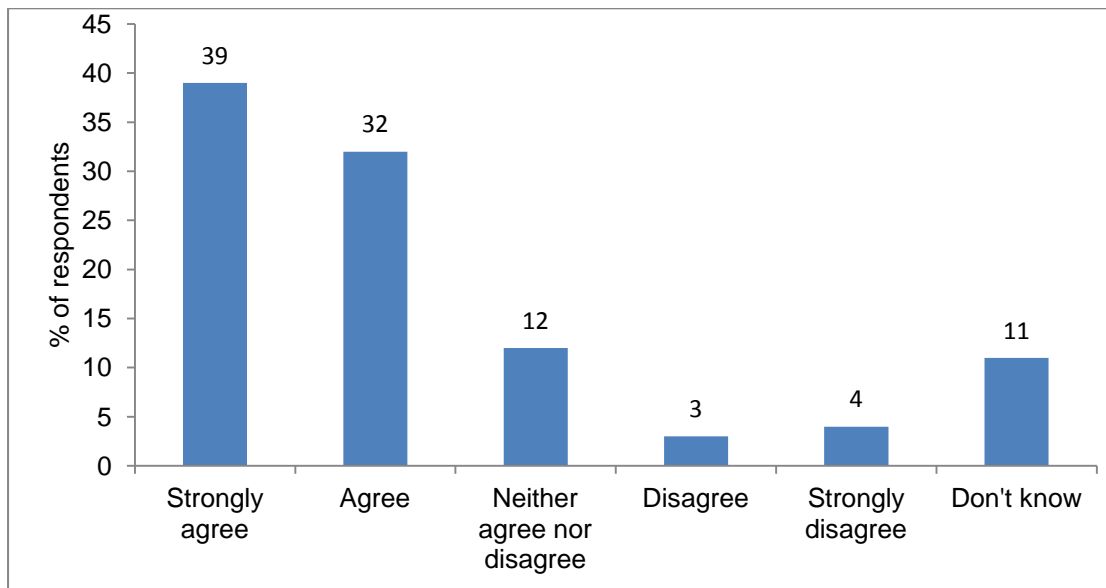
- 6.1 The young person’s questionnaire asked ten questions. In nine of these ten questions children and young people were asked whether they: “strongly agreed”; “agreed”; “neither agreed nor disagreed”; “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with nine statements related to pupil attendance. The option of replying “don’t know” was also available to respondents.
- 6.2 For all of the following questions, there were 171 respondents however the percentage figures may not total 100% in each case due to roundings.

Q1 - Do you agree that you need to attend school regularly to have a better future?



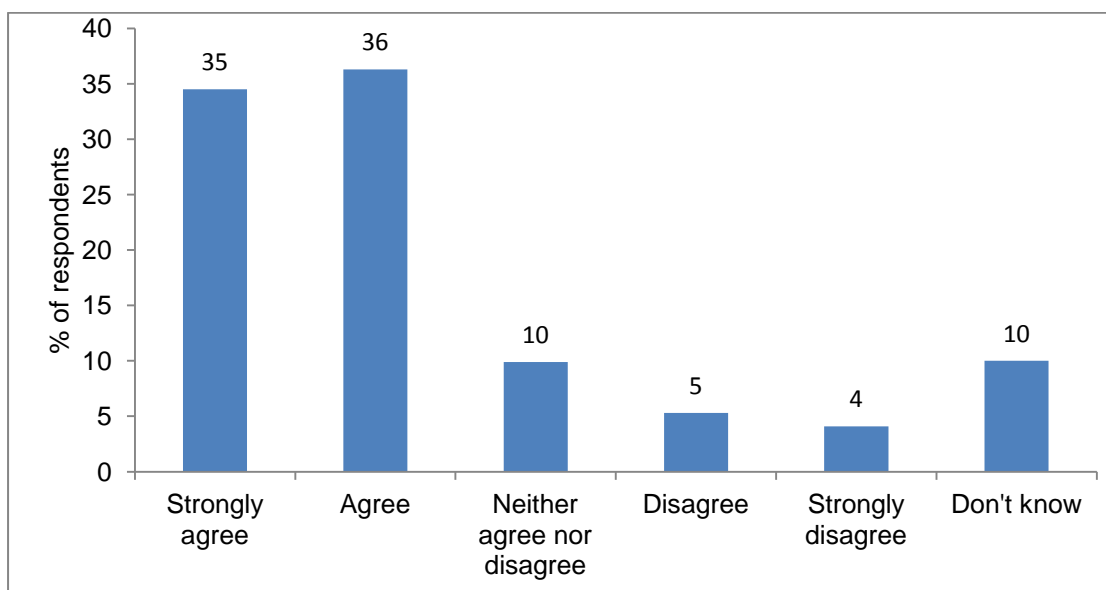
- 6.3 Eighty-eight per cent of respondents who are children and young people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “you need to attend school regularly to have a better future”.

Q2 - Do you think it is important for your school to have clear attendance and time-keeping rules that all pupils know about?



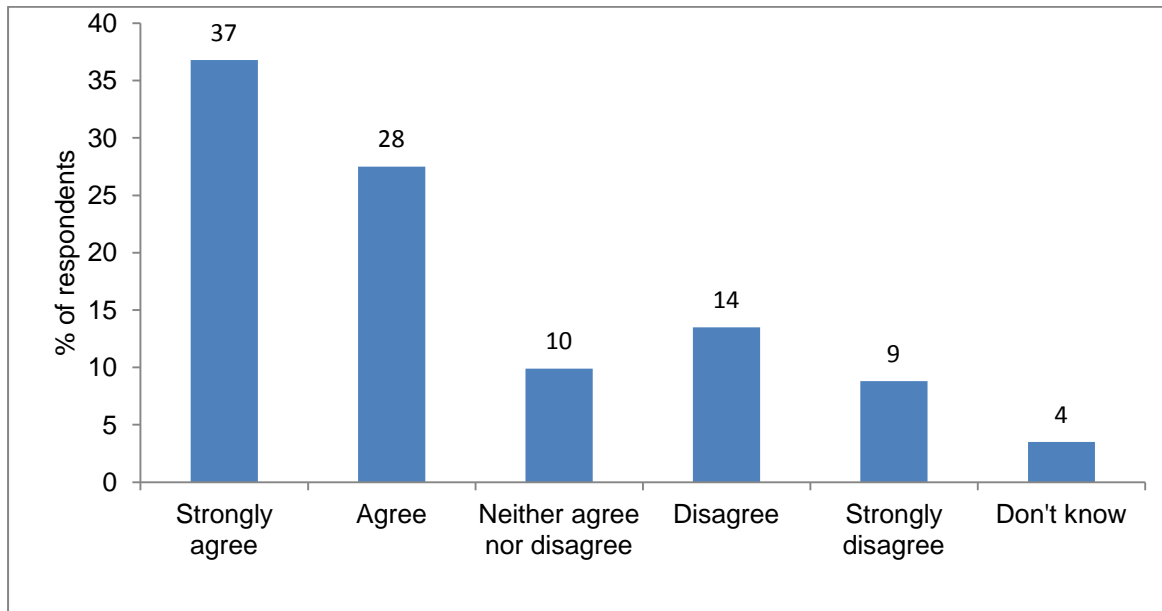
6.4 Seventy-one per cent of respondents who are children and young people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “it is important for your school to have clear attendance and time-keeping rules that all pupils know about”.

Q3 - Do you agree that your school should encourage you to attend school regularly?



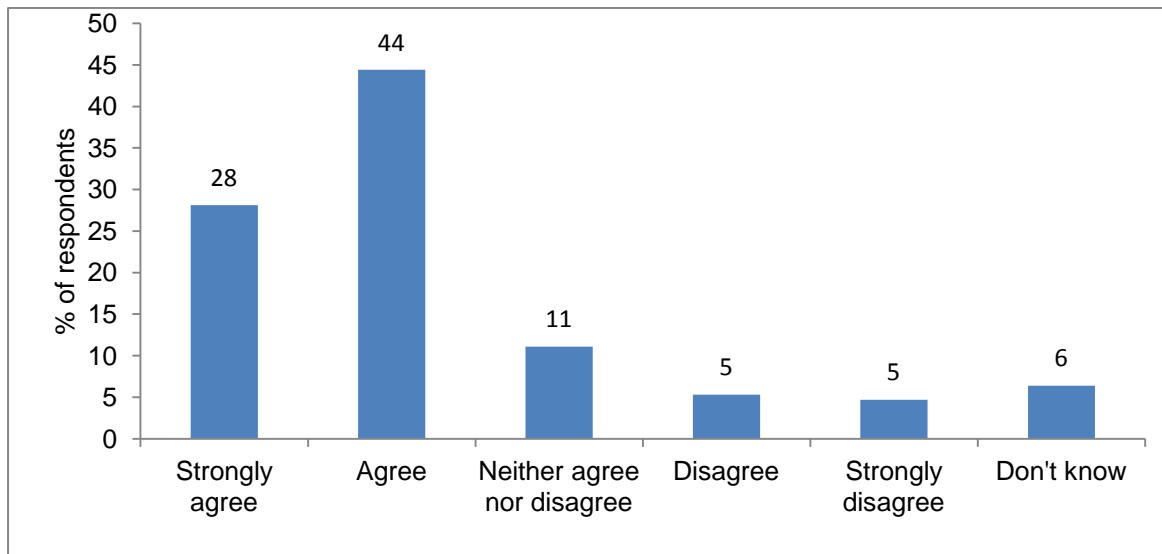
6.5 Seventy-one per cent of respondents who are children and young people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “school should encourage you to attend regularly”.

Q4 - Do you agree that your school should always find out the reason why you are absent from school?



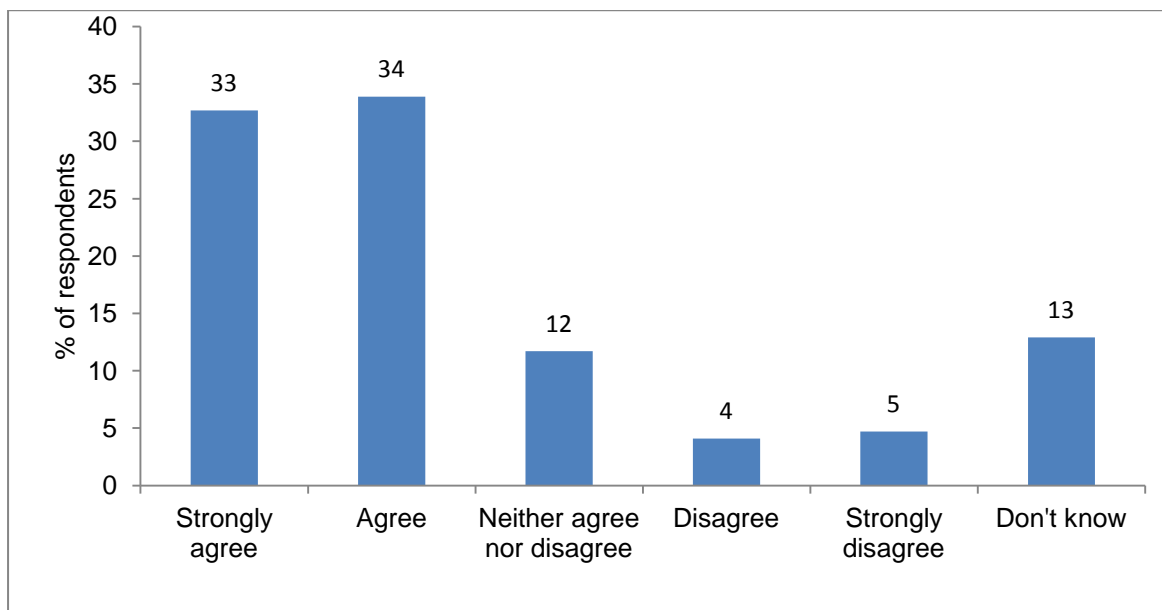
6.6 Sixty-five per cent of respondents who are children and young people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “school should always find out the reason why you are absent from school”.

Q5 - Do you agree that your parents / carers should be told regularly about your attendance at school?



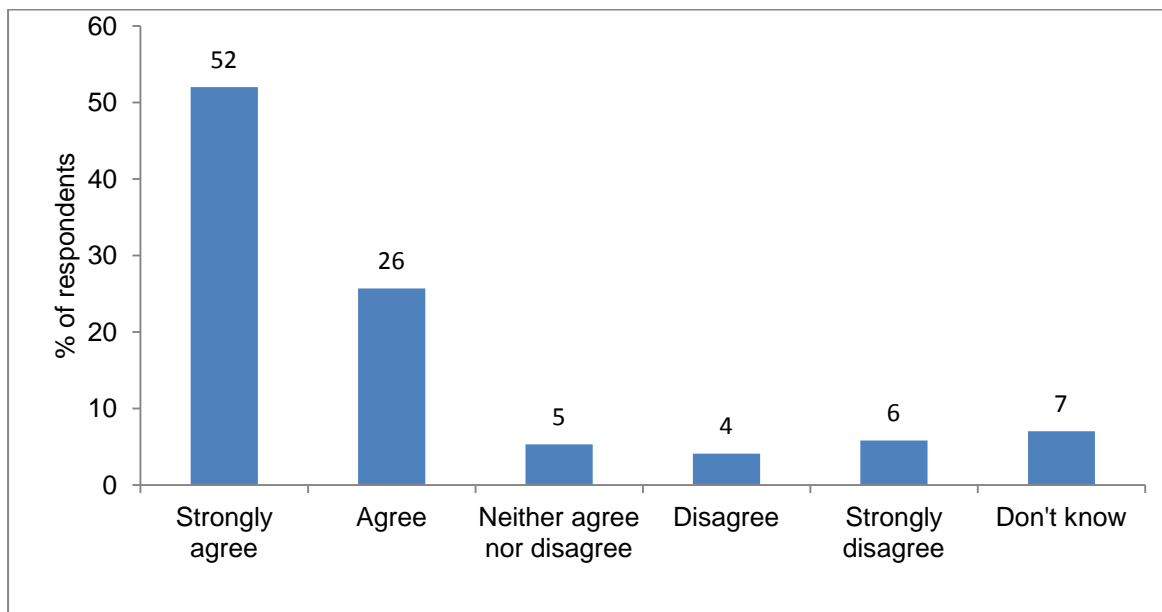
6.7 Seventy-two per cent of respondents who are children and young people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “parents / carers should be told regularly about your attendance at school”.

Q6 - Do you agree that your school should encourage your parents / carers to take an interest in your attendance?



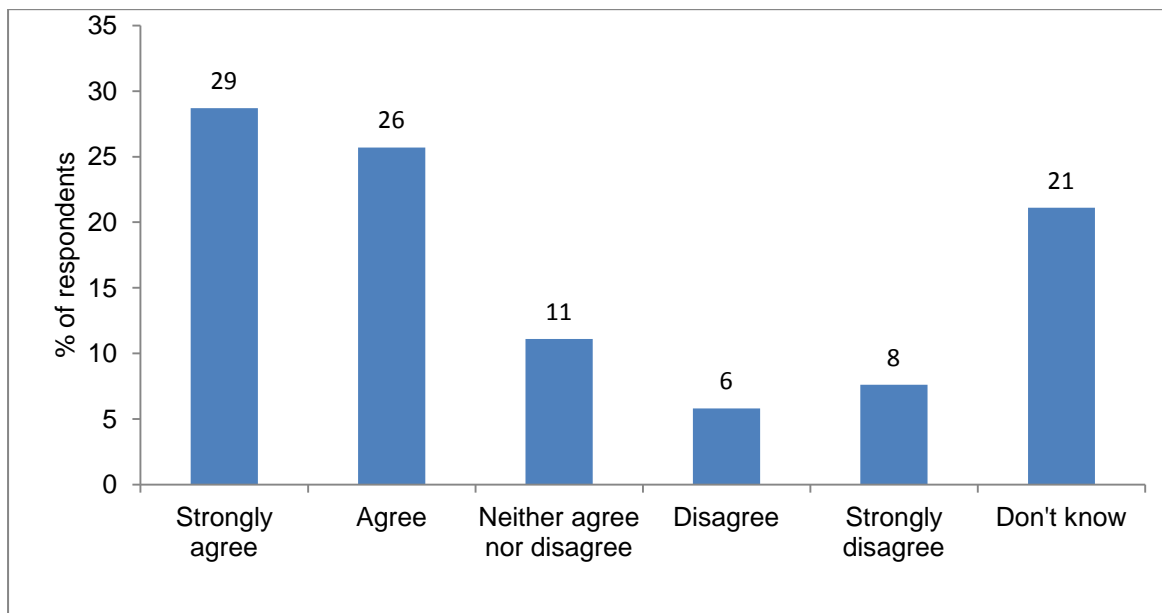
6.8 Sixty-seven per cent of respondents who are children and young people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “your school should encourage your parents / carers to take an interest in your attendance”.

Q7 - Do you agree that your school should provide help and support for any pupil who finds it hard to attend school regularly?



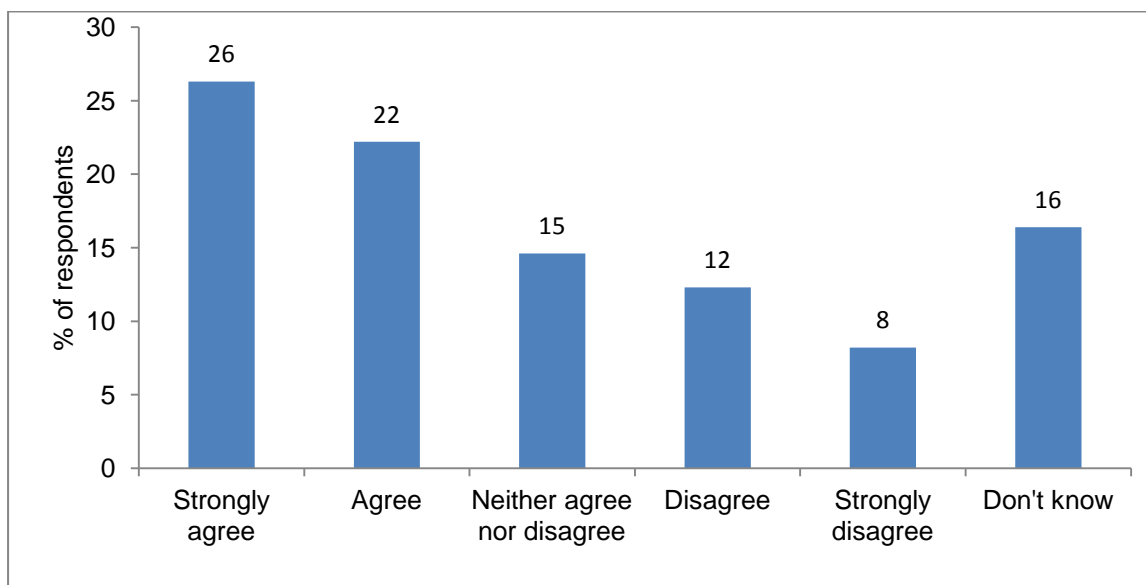
6.9 Seventy-eight per cent of respondents who are children and young people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “your school should provide help and support for any pupil who finds it hard to attend school regularly”.

Q8 - Do you agree that sometimes your school should ask for extra help from others in order to support pupils who find it hard to attend school regularly?



6.10 Fifty-five per cent of respondents who are children and young people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “sometimes your school should ask for extra help from others in order to support pupils who find it hard to attend school regularly”.

Q9 - Do you think that the Miss School = Miss Out message should be communicated in other places, such as youth clubs, sports clubs, libraries, leisure centres and doctors' surgeries?



6.11 Forty-eight per cent of respondents who are children and young people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “the Miss School = Miss Out message should be communicated in other places, such as youth clubs, sports clubs, libraries, leisure centres and doctors’ surgeries.

Section 7: Next steps to be taken by the Department

7.1 The Minister and his officials in DE will now give further consideration to the strategy in light of the responses received. This report summarises the key responses and views emerging from the consultation; however all of the views, comments and recommendations submitted will be considered as part of the ongoing strategy development.

List of responses of Organisations choosing to identify themselves as respondents

Full Questionnaire

1. Acorn Integrated Primary School
2. Antrim Grammar School
3. Ardnashee School & College
4. Association of School & College Leaders
5. Association of Teachers & Lecturers
6. Ballyclare High School
7. Cranmore Integrated Primary School
8. Disability Action
9. Education Authority
10. Extern
11. Fermanagh & Omagh Council
12. Glenwood Primary School
13. Grange Primary School, Kilkeel
14. Grosvenor Grammar School
15. Hart Memorial Primary School
16. Knockloughrim Primary School
17. Lack Primary School
18. Lurgan College
19. Mid Ulster Council
20. National Association of Head Teachers (NI)
21. Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
22. Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People
23. Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities
24. Orritor Primary School
25. Phoenix Integrated Primary School, Cookstown
26. Rowandale Integrated Primary School
27. Royal Belfast Academical Institution
28. Strabane Academy
29. St. Columban's College, Kilkeel
30. St. Francis Primary School, Lurgan
31. St. Louise's Comprehensive College, Belfast
32. St. Mary's Primary School, Derrymore
33. St. Peter's Primary School, Bessbrook
34. St. Ronan's College, Lurgan
35. Transferors Representatives Council
36. Traveller Families (response coordinated by Early Years)
37. Ulster Teachers Union
38. Voice of Young People in Care

Young Persons Questionnaire

1. Pupils of Hart Memorial Primary School
2. Pupils of Phoenix Integrated Primary School