

# School Absenteeism

Mark G. Borg

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Together with such problems as literacy and bullying, absenteeism from school constitutes one of the greatest threats facing our educational system, as is the case in other countries. In the United Kingdom, for instance, about 24 per cent of secondary school children absent themselves from school for one reason or another; from 3 to 7 per cent are absent for some valid reason.

At a time when all the stakeholders in education in this country are preparing themselves (not without enthusiasm and commitment, it needs to be said) for the implementation of some of the many important reforms contemplated by the National Minimum Curriculum, let us not think or dare hope that the problems that plague the educational system will simply disappear the moment we head along the road of the much-needed and long-awaited reforms. The problems that threaten our educational system, including absenteeism, have been long in the pipeline. Dealing with them will require incessant effort and time.

## What is school absenteeism?

Before taking a closer look at the problem of school absenteeism and the reasons why increasing numbers of students absent themselves from school, it is first pertinent to delineate what we mean by *school absenteeism* and related concepts.

The various forms of absenteeism may be grouped under the umbrella term of ‘school non-attendance’. It is imperative that, in understanding the nature and dynamics of the problem of absenteeism, the various concepts are differentiated. Five concepts or types will be considered:

- *Absenteeism due to sickness*
- *Absenteeism due to playing sick - Malingering*
- *Absenteeism instigated by parents - Parental withdrawal*
- *Absenteeism due to School Phobia*
- *Absenteeism instigated by students*
- *psychological absenteeism (informal mobility)*
- *physical absenteeism (truancy)*



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## ● Absenteeism due to sickness

The student is detained in hospital or at home by his/her parents because he/she is not well due to some malady or indisposition. Most often than not, the student is kept from going

to school on the advice of a medical practitioner who certifies the student’s legitimate absence.

Although this is purely a medical problem, one cannot ignore the effects that long absence from school has on scholastic performance and attainment, even if legitimate. In such cases supplementary support is essential.

Official figures on ‘certified absence’ from school should give a relatively accurate picture of this aspect of the problem. I hardly need to go into the details of why I am using the conditional here. The apparent ease with which medical certificates are sometimes produced raises many ethical questions that do not fall within the remit and purposes of this paper.

## ● Absenteeism due to playing sick - malingering

There are students who avoid going to school by playing sick. Their ruse can be so convincing that their parents are often taken in by this and allow them to stay at home. Indeed, more often than not, these parents go on to inform the school that their son or daughter is not feeling well and, therefore, has to remain at home.

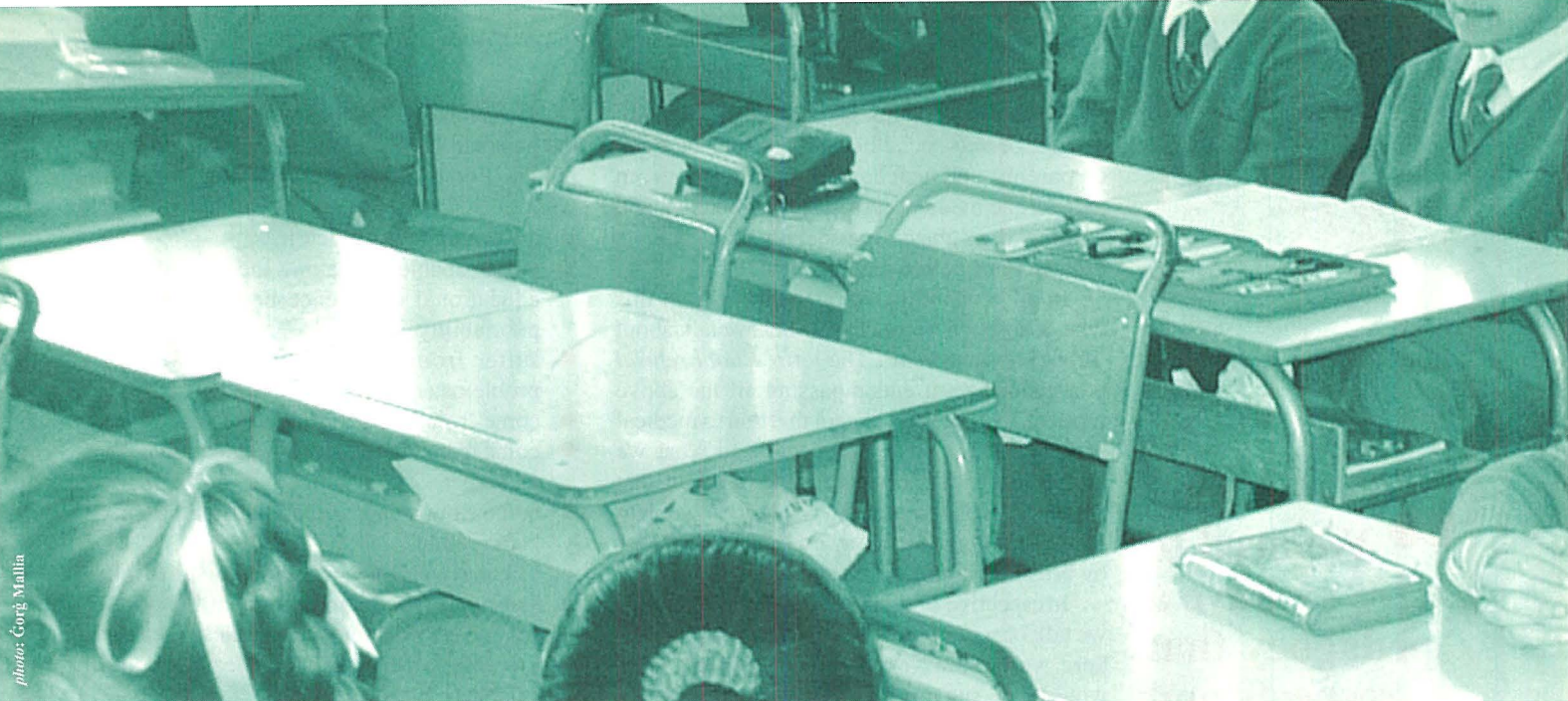
This charade goes on until the parents start becoming suspicious about the sporadic illnesses and decide on consulting a general practitioner. It is surprising how quickly all the lethargy disappears, whereupon the student starts preparing his/her school-bag for the morrow! Clearly, this is not a medical problem, but a social one.

Attempts by the present writer to obtain valid and reliable figures as to the scale of this problem have proved futile. One must bear in mind that a student can be absent up to two days per month without the need of producing a medical certificate or without having parents arraigned at court.

## ● Absenteeism instigated by parents - parental withdrawal

Here, students absent themselves from school because they:

- (a) are encouraged to do so by their own parents; (*Who needs schooling? Education is an utter waste of time? There are better things in life than schooling.*)
- (b) are of help to their parents (e.g. they are kept at home to mind over younger siblings, or to help out mother or father in their chores);



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(c) are subjected to such utter dejection and abandon at home that their parents do not even bother to take them to school or allow them to do so.

More often than not, such parents have a very poor opinion of education and schooling. They are parents who do not accept the fact that the law of the country protects the right of the child for a proper education - at least until school-leaving age. As such, this type of absenteeism is illegal. Although such parents are normally aware of this they simply do nothing to ensure that their children attend school. Consequently, they are subject to arraignment at court and fines as dictated by law. (It is not uncommon to find parents who would willingly pay these fines because they earn more by having their children help them out.) As with malingering, this is also a social problem.

I believe that a record of the number of arraignments is kept by the welfare section at the Education Division. Hence, we could obtain a very reliable indication of the scale of this particular problem.

### ● **Absenteeism due to school phobia**

This type of absenteeism is due neither to the student's wish to deliberately absent himself/herself from school nor because he/she is kept at home by his/her parents. The student absents himself/herself because he/she is simply terrified by the prospect of having to go to school on account of someone at school or something associated with school. There is nothing that parents or teachers can say or do to convince the student to return to school. This is a psychological problem that requires the specialised help of a psychologist. It is not a medical condition.

It is perfectly normal to come across a number of genuine cases of school phobia in

any scholastic year. Having said that, one hardly needs to point out how common it is for schools to receive medical certificates diagnosing this phobia!

### ● **Absenteeism instigated by students**

Actually, we here find two types of absenteeism. In the first of these, although students are physically present at school they are for all intents and purposes, psychologically absent (*informal mobility*). The second type involves the students being physically absent from the school premises (*truancy*). Let us consider them in turn.

#### **Psychological absenteeism (informal mobility)**

Here the student attends school and remains within the school's premises. However, he/she is 'absent' because he/she does not pay any attention at all or participate in the lesson, or skips certain lessons, or attends some lessons instead of others. The student tries to make his/her life at school as bearable as possible by following his/her own program of lessons. Hence, the student would be avoiding what annoys him/her at school while at the same time refraining from physically absenting himself/herself from school. This is a psycho-social problem.

#### **Physical absenteeism (truancy)**

This involves the student's absenteeism from school without the parents' knowledge, or their permission or encouragement, or without the school's permission. The student either does not go to school altogether or goes to school for the first few lessons and then leaves school to play the truant. In most cases, these students also stay away from home during school hours. That is, they play the truant until it is time to go back home.