



## Request for Expressions of Interest

Understanding the impact of School Choices that create a safe, positive place to learn through improving attendance and reducing exclusions

**Opening date:** Tuesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2022 **Closing date EOIs:** Tuesday, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2022

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We know that school absenteeism (missed attendance as well as fixed and permanent exclusion) has the potential to impact on students' attainment, but also on the likelihood of them becoming involved in violence. Many students with poor attendance and those being excluded from school are the most disadvantaged.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) are partnering to find, fund, and evaluate programmes and practices in England and Wales that could keep children safe from involvement in violence and/or improve academic attainment, by reducing absenteeism.

This funding round is focused on generating evidence on the **practices and approaches** that schools choose to implement without manualised programmes ('School Choices'). A related funding round focusing on existing programmes opened on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2022 – see [here](#) for further information.

### Why are we funding this round

School leaders make choices about school-wide **practices and approaches** that are intended to produce positive outcomes for pupils, such as how to organise the school day or communicate with families. However, many school-level practices have limited or no evidence for them, which means leaders must make decisions using other information. The aim of School Choices research is to produce causal evidence about the impact of different school-level approaches and policies on outcomes of interest, with particular attention to impact on pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. These studies aim to provide schools with evidence to inform their decision-making around everyday practices and policies that are not captured by manualised interventions with external training, support or delivery, for example comparing the impact of a two-year or three-year Key Stage 4.

In regards to practices related to attendance and exclusion, our scoping work highlights that:

- Schools currently use a variety of practices to monitor attendance, address issues around attendance and disruptive behaviour, and manage exclusions.
- School staff and other stakeholders feel that there is often not sufficient evidence or guidance materials to support school leaders in making these choices.

### Scope of the round

**Main research question (across this approaches-focused round and the programmes-focused round):** *Which approaches are most effective in enabling 5-18-year-olds at the highest risk of absenteeism and/or exclusion from school, including those from disadvantaged, marginalised or vulnerable families to attend, positively engage with, and remain in school/college, to improve their attainment and reduce the likelihood of them becoming involved in violence?*

This round is designed to fund **research projects** that examine the impact of school choices on pupils' attendance and exclusion outcomes, as well as their academic attainment and/or likelihood to become involved in violence, where relevant. Research teams must propose research questions that can be answered through causal impact evaluation approaches, such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental designs (QEDs).

## Who should apply?

Research teams with experience of conducting impact and process evaluations in education, particularly with the populations we are targeting: those from disadvantaged, marginalised or vulnerable families.

We are interested in proposals from single research teams and consortia with complementary expertise and where the consortium can demonstrate that they will work well together to ensure the quality and efficiency of the project. This call for proposals is open; researchers do not need to be part of EEF's or YEF's panel of evaluators.

We accept applications from legally constituted organisations and not from individuals. The organisation does not have to be based in England or Wales, but if not based there, we would expect you to demonstrate the partnerships and knowledge required to work with English and/or Welsh schools.

**This funding round is not designed for programme developers seeking funding for evaluation.** Programme developers should please visit the application page on the EEF website [here](#).

## What research questions should the research focus on?

We are particularly interested in approaches in the following key areas:

- Attendance monitoring and response systems, including parent communication, parent engagement, use of attendance officers, penalties for poor attendance, attendance awards and incentives
- Behaviour management approaches and policies, including around bullying
- Approaches to social and emotional learning
- Internal alternative provision, such as the use of in-school inclusion units and nurture groups

We have identified some priority preliminary research questions that we are particularly keen to fund, which are provided below. We would expect applicants submitting proposals for these questions to refine the questions in their submissions and during the scoping phase (see below). In addition, we are not limiting funding to these questions and are interested in receiving proposals on other approaches that fit the scope of the round.

- What is the impact of different approaches to parent communication around absence on the attendance rate of chronically absent pupils? For example, negative vs positive framing of the message, generalised vs personalised messaging, differences in timing, modality, messenger.
- What is the impact of different approaches to deploying attendance officers on the attendance rate of chronically absent pupils?
- What is the impact of different approaches to the use of in-school inclusion units on the rate of exclusion?
- Do schools adopting a 'warm-strict' approach benefit from improved attendance and exclusion rates?

Approaches should be of high interest to school leaders and teachers in large numbers of English and/or Welsh schools and represent a real choice that can be made by school leadership.

Research questions must focus on the impact of one approach compared to one or more sufficiently distinct approaches. Most likely the comparison will be between two or more distinct approaches, but it might be appropriate to compare one approach against the absence of that approach. At least one of the approaches studied must have a theory of change that leads directly to improved attendance or reduced exclusions in the short term (for example, within a timeframe of one or two school years), as well as a long-term outcome of improved attainment or reduced involvement in violence which may take longer time to emerge.

Approaches can be universal or targeted. If the approach is universal, the research should be primarily designed to understand the impact on pupils who should most benefit from the approach (e.g., pupils on free school meals, pupils with the lowest attendance rates, pupils with highest rate of behavioural issues, pupils with a record of poor academic attainment).

## What research methodology is appropriate?

Approaches must be evaluated using a **causal impact evaluation design**, such as an RCT or a QED. The evaluation is expected to measure the impact of the approaches on **attendance or exclusion**. Attainment or involvement in violence may be measured as long-term outcomes where this is considered to be feasible (but at least one of them must be predicted by the theory of change as a plausible long-term outcome, even if this is not measured). Secondary outcomes may also be included where feasible.

Developing an appropriate and rigorous evaluation design requires a thorough understanding of how and why schools currently implement the approaches. We expect research teams to have a good understanding of these issues and to present indicative evaluation designs in their proposals.

In addition, we expect research projects to include a scoping phase during which research teams refine their research questions, verify their assumptions, and interrogate the feasibility of their evaluation designs. This phase may involve research into how clearly defined the choices are, the prevalence of the choices, how to identify schools using the approach, how schools decided on their current practice, school willingness to change their practice, and schools' willingness to comply with randomisation where an RCT is being considered.

The scoping phase will end with a presentation from the research team with:

- their recommendations about whether it is possible to take the research question forward,
- the refined research question,
- a refined theory of change,
- a refined evaluation design,
- proposed outcome measures,
- sample size estimates.

Based on the research team's findings and recommendations, the decision on whether to take the research question forward will be jointly taken by the EEF and the YEF.

Upon approval, the research team will be expected to submit a protocol or study plan detailing their final evaluation design. Research projects are expected to include process evaluations whenever feasible.

## Research management

The EEF will oversee the day-to-day management of funded projects, and research teams will be expected to follow the [EEF's guidance for evaluators](#).

Each study will be supported by an independent Study Advisory Group, who will provide feedback and advice to the research team around the design of the study whilst ensuring the highest standards of

rigour and research quality. Additionally, the Study Advisory Group will ensure alignment with relevant ethical procedures and contribute to mitigating any conflicts of interest that may arise.

## What does a successful Expression of Interest and proposal look like?

The applications process is divided into two separate phases, an **i) Expression of Interest (EOI) phase** and a **ii) Proposal phase**, each with their own considerations.

At a high level, a successful **EOI** should:

- Propose a **research question that clearly compares two (or more) distinct approaches**. It may be useful to write out the research question using the PICO (population, intervention, comparison, outcome) framework.
- Have a **clear rationale** for why the research question matters, its **relevance** to schools and to disadvantaged pupils, and how it **fits** within the existing body of research.
- Involve a **strong team** with prior experience of similar research, including both excellent evaluation expertise as well as prior research and/or practical expertise related to the approaches being investigated. Please include full CVs of all proposed team members, highlighting relevant expertise.
- Suggest an **appropriate and rigorous causal impact evaluation methodology** for answering the proposed research question. At EOI stage, we expect research teams to provide an indication of the high-level evaluation design.
- Be around **2,000 words long**, excluding references and CVs (indicative length, the focus should be on quality rather than quantity).

In addition to the above, a successful **proposal** will:

- Provide a more **detailed description of the approaches** that you are proposing to evaluate. This should include:
  - A detailed description of what each approach involves
  - Any available information about the prevalence of the approaches and potential reasons why schools might prefer one over the other.
- Summarise any existing **evidence on the effectiveness of the two (or more) approaches** for improving attendance and/or reducing exclusions, or for improving related educational outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. This should include a description of the expected mechanisms through which each approach would be expected to impact attendance and/or exclusions (i.e. a theory of change).
- Provide a detailed design of the **scoping phase** to further refine research questions and establish the research feasibility (see section above for greater clarity on what scoping entails).
  - Research teams should outline what aspects of their research question and proposed evaluation methodology require further refinement and why, i.e. where there are uncertainties.
  - Proposals should then outline how research teams propose to collect information to address these uncertainties, for example, through desk-based literature reviews, qualitative interviews or focus groups, surveys, etc.
- Provide **greater detail on the proposed impact evaluation methodology**, including:
  - Describing the proposed impact evaluation approach (e.g. RCT, matched difference-in-differences, propensity score matching, etc.). Where research teams propose an RCT, please provide some justification for why you expect randomisation to be feasible. Where research teams propose a QED, please provide justification for how you expect to create comparable comparison groups.
  - Provide power and sample size calculation and describe how you expect to identify schools that use each of the approaches, and how you expect to recruit them to the study if recruitment is needed.

- Describe the proposed outcome measures.
  - This should include principles highlighted in the EEF's [Statistical Analysis Guidance](#) as well as those stated under the EEF's published guidance on [Conducting and Reporting Non-experimental Designs](#) (depending on the proposed methodological approach).
- Complement impact assessment with a comprehensive **Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE)**. Describe research approach and how the IPE will uncover different mechanisms related to the impact. Where relevant, this should include principles highlighted in the EEF's [IPE Guidance](#).
- Describe key **ethical considerations** for the research design to the extent that they are known at this stage.
- Describe the research team's approach to considering issues of **diversity and inclusion** in their research design and implementation. This could include, for example, reflections on whether some groups are expected to be more or less able to engage with or benefit from the approach, and how that can be explored through the scoping phase, the sampling design or the IPE. It may also include reflections on the team's approach to carrying out culturally and racially sensitive fieldwork.
- Represent **good value for money**. All applications must attach a budget spreadsheet with reasonable disaggregation across cost categories. We acknowledge accurately costing the main evaluation may be difficult without having conducted the scoping phase. Please provide your best estimate of costs for the evaluation and detail any assumptions. The main evaluation budget can be revised after the scoping phase is completed. Our grant funding is restricted to cover activities supporting your proposed project and cannot be used to cover costs that have already been incurred. The EEF will provide a budget template at proposal stage.
- Be around **4,000 words long**, excluding references (indicative length, the focus should be on quality rather than quantity).

## What criteria will be used to award funding?

The EEF will assess applications in line with the two phases presented above. Research teams with a successful **Expression of Interest** will be invited to submit a more in-depth **Proposal**. Each respective phase will be scored by the EEF's evaluation team under the following criteria:

### **Phase 1 – Expression of Interest**

Expression of Interest will be assessed against the following criteria, for which an equal weighting will apply:

- I) The research team collectively has both excellent evaluation expertise as well as prior research and/or practical expertise related to the approaches being investigated
- II) The proposed research question is well defined and relevant both in terms of the research round and to practitioners
- III) The key methodological considerations for deciding on the study design and its essential elements are well presented

**Table 1 – Scoring Criteria**

Scoring Criteria	
0	Totally fails to meet the requirement - information not available
1	Meets some of the requirements with limited supporting information

2	Meets some of the requirements with reasonable explanation
3	Fully meets the requirements with detailed explanation and evidence
4	Exceeds the requirements with extensive explanation and evidence

## Phase 2 – Proposal

Evaluation proposals will be assessed against the following criteria, each with their respective weighting and under the same scoring scale as for Expression of Interest (see Table 1 above for reference)

- I) Capability and relevant experience of core project team (35%)
  - The proposed team demonstrates a track record of delivering similar impact evaluations (i.e., in line with the identification strategy the team is proposing)
  - The proposed team demonstrates experience conducting qualitative and quantitative research in educational settings
  - The proposed team demonstrates understanding of the evidence/existing research, context and expertise that are relevant for the 'Choices' being evaluated
- II) Methodology and approach (50%)
  - The proposed research question is well defined, including clearly describing the population, intervention, comparison, and outcome.
  - The proposed evaluation design will provide high quality evidence to answer the identified research question.
  - The proposal describes which aspects of the research question and evaluation design are uncertain, and how the scoping phase will be used to address these uncertainties.
  - The methodological decisions for the impact evaluation are feasible, appropriate, and well-justified, including adequate consideration of how schools using each approach will be identified, how comparable groups will be created, and sample size considerations.
  - The attendance/exclusion outcome measures suggested are high-quality and suitable to the study aims (i.e., are they convenient to collect, affordable, reduce burden on schools, validated by literature, validated for UK population, etc)
  - The implementation and process evaluation proposed is high-quality and suitable to the study aims (i.e., outlines instruments, collection methods, sampling procedures, etc)
  - Key ethical issues raised by the evaluation approach have been identified and appropriate mitigations are proposed.
  - The proposal considers how diversity and inclusion considerations can be incorporated into the design and execution of the evaluation.
  - Key risks to project delivery are identified and appropriate strategies to mitigate these risks are proposed
  - Data protection safeguards and GDPR compliance relevant to the project are outlined (including legal bases for processing personal data and any special categories of personal data)
- III) Value for money (15%)
  - Detailed cost of your proposal and how this demonstrates value for money.

## How to apply

Interested applicants should submit their **Expressions of Interest** to Guillermo Romero ([guillermo.romero@eefoundation.org.uk](mailto:guillermo.romero@eefoundation.org.uk)) by 5pm on **Tuesday, 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2022**. Successful applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal.

If you have any questions, please contact Guillermo Romero ([guillermo.romero@eefoundation.org.uk](mailto:guillermo.romero@eefoundation.org.uk)). If you wish to submit an EOI that addresses a research question that is not one of our priority questions (but still fits the overall theme of the round), we encourage you to contact us to discuss your idea before submitting.

## Timeline

<b>Deadline for EOIs</b>	Tuesday, 31 <sup>st</sup> May 2022
<b>Shortlisted applicants invited to submit full proposals</b>	Friday 10 <sup>th</sup> June 2022
<b>Deadline for full proposals</b>	Tuesday 12 <sup>th</sup> July 2022
<b>Selected applicants notified</b>	Week of 25 <sup>th</sup> July 2022