

Quick Guide:

Identify Vulnerable Students with These 8 Signs



Contents

01.

Welcome

02.

Who are vulnerable students?

03.

How can schools identify vulnerable students?

04.

Quick guide: Signs to look out for

05.

Supporting vulnerable students

06.

About Academy21



“All students are unique, and the most effective methods of learning vary between individuals. This is particularly true for vulnerable students, who often need additional or differing forms of support to thrive in their schooling.

Being able to identify these vulnerable students is the first step to providing them with the support they need and the education they deserve. That is why it is crucial that educators are aware of the signs that may indicate a need for intervention.

At Academy21, we bring high-quality alternative provision to students from a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances, and with various levels of need. In this quick guide, we’ll describe eight key indicators to monitor or look out for when identifying vulnerability in your pupils.

We hope you find this guide useful. If you are in need of any further guidance on how to support vulnerable pupils at your school, please don’t hesitate to get in touch with us at Academy21.”



Clare Brokenshire

Head of Academy21
Part of the Inspired Education Group

Identifying your vulnerable students

Vulnerable students are young people who require additional support with their education.

This includes students with a vast array of difficulties, from special educational needs to behavioural challenges. Students may be categorised as vulnerable for long-term periods, or they may 'bounce back' with short-term support. Vulnerability can even be impacted by world events such as the recent pandemic.

With so many potential causes and surrounding factors, it's no surprise that schools often struggle to pinpoint which pupils are vulnerable and in need of additional support.

Of course, identifying vulnerable students is crucial.

If these young people don't get the support they need, when they need it, they face the risk of serious academic decline. Over time, these students may become school refusers or even face temporary or permanent exclusion.

The best way to tackle these concerns is to recognise which students are vulnerable as early as possible and provide them with the support they need to get back on track.

In a recent study, 3 in 5 teachers reported that vulnerable pupils are less engaged in their learning than their peers.



How can schools identify vulnerable students?

The best strategies for identifying vulnerable students combine both quantitative data and qualitative insights.

Using data

School records are a great place to start when determining which students need support. Consider:

- Attendance data
- Grades tracked over time
- Exclusions, detentions, and sanctions

If your school uses software for behaviour monitoring, you may be able to establish alerts tailored to the circumstances of your school and students.

Guiding these staff on signs to look out for will improve your ability to identify vulnerable students as early as possible.

Listen to your staff

Insights from school staff, meanwhile, can help to identify vulnerabilities before they affect attendance, grades, and infractions. Monitoring students can also explain the root cause of a drop in attainment or rise in truancy, helping to determine the best course of support.

A solid pastoral system relies on a range of staff and leaders, including:

- Teachers
- Learning support assistants
- Safeguarding leads
- SENCO
- School nurses or counsellors
- Behaviour and inclusions specialists

Guiding staff across the school on signs to look out for increases your chances of identifying vulnerable students as early as possible.



Identifying vulnerable students:

The signs to look out for

Spotting students who need support is far easier when you know what to look out for.

We recommend that schools monitor the following eight key factors and warning signs across four broad categories:

01.

Risk factors

Certain circumstances make young people more likely to struggle in school. Allocating resources to monitor these students before problems occur is one of the best ways to prevent them from falling behind.

03.

Changes in behaviour

Vulnerability often shows in a student's behaviour and attitude to learning before it shows in their attendance or grades. That's why it's crucial for teachers and support staff to flag any drastic changes in attitude, both to learning and in general.

02.

Data points

Looking at key figures from your school records is one of the quickest, easiest ways to identify students who may be vulnerable. If a student's attendance or attainment is already being affected, it's time to consider intervention.

04.

Interactions with others

How do your students interact with their teachers, classmates, and other peers at school? If a student is causing a disturbance or being disturbed by others, they may be at risk of academic decline.

Signs to look out for: Risk factors

01.

Pre-established circumstances

While children of all backgrounds can face difficulties at school, it is wise to keep an eye on pupils who are known to have suffered adverse childhood experiences in the past.

Keep in mind that a student's circumstances can change quickly. Changes at home, in particular, can have a sudden knock-on effect at school — even for pupils who were previous highly engaged.

This includes...

- Students with an EHCP
- Other pupils with SEND
- Children in care (LAC)
- Pupils who speak English as a second language
- Teenage parents, both mothers and fathers
- Young offenders

02.

Difficulties at home

Keep in mind that a student's circumstances can change quickly. In particular, changes at home can have a sudden knock-on effect at school — even for pupils who were previous highly engaged.

Where possible, your pastoral team should keep track of any difficulties children are experiencing at home. If a student is going through challenges, monitor them over the next few months to see whether they need any short-term support to get back on track.

This includes...

- Loss of a family member
- Incarceration of a family member
- Parental separation or divorce
- Moving home due to family breakdown
- Family deployment in the armed forces
- Exposure to ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) such as domestic violence

Signs to look out for:

Data points

03.

Repeated absences

According to a 2016 report from the Department for Education, every missed day of school increases a child's risk of lower attainment.

Whatever the reason behind it, persistent absence is a clear sign that a student needs more support or an alternative learning pathway.

Truancy is always a cause for concern, but don't overlook authorised absences.

Missing school regularly due to chronic medical conditions, frequent hospital appointments, or mental health struggles can be just as detrimental to a pupil's academic progress.

Online alternative provision is a great way to support any student who cannot attend physical school on a regular basis.

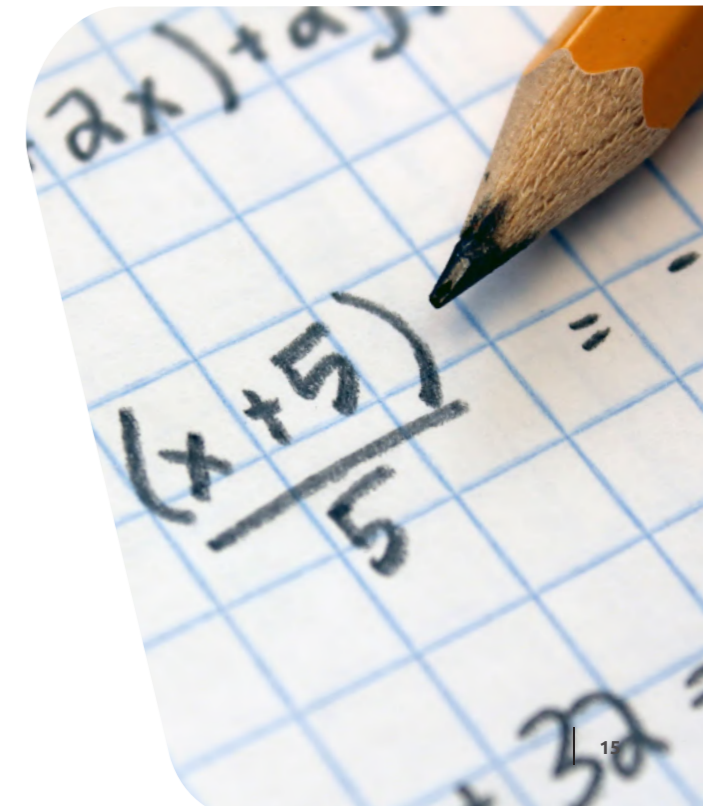
04.

Low or falling grades

It's completely normal for a student's grades to fluctuate in certain subjects. A drop in attainment across the board, however, often indicates a bigger issue at play.

Young people whose grades fall may be struggling to pay attention in class due to educational needs, or they may be disengaging from their education due to troubles outside the classroom. No matter the issue, early intervention and support is the best way to get them back on track.

Grade-monitoring tools and spreadsheets can help you track how pupils are performing over time. Look out for declines in usual progress or a persistent failure to meet set targets.



Signs to look out for: Changes in behaviour

05.

Lack of engagement

You can often tell something is wrong when a student's grades begin to fall, or when they start to miss days of school. However, it is possible to catch a drop in engagement before this.

Make sure teachers are always on the lookout for changes in levels of engagement. Spotting the signs before there is any impact on grades and attendance will help head off any drop in attainment levels.

Temporary behavioural changes are often down to hormones or social pressures, but don't neglect to talk to students who have a particularly sudden, drastic, or unexplainable change in demeanour.

This includes students who are distancing themselves from their learning may stop completing homework, openly express a lack of interest in school, or refuse to participate in classroom activities.

06.

Changes in demeanour

Alongside a changed attitude to learning, you can also spot a vulnerable student by changes in their general demeanour.

Temporary behavioural changes are often down to hormones or social pressures, but talk to students who have a particularly sudden, drastic, or unexplainable change in demeanour.

These pupils may be suffering from mental health struggles or difficulties outside of the classroom. Over time, this can lead to school refusal or a lack of engagement with learning.

This includes...

- Become withdrawn, aloof or upset,
- Express feelings of hopelessness
- Become irritable or quick to snap
- Stop taking part in clubs and extra curricular activities they previously enjoyed
- Neglect their hygiene or outward presentation
- Come to school tired or fall asleep in class
- Ask to be excused from class frequently

Signs to look out for:

Interactions with others

07.

Classroom disruptions

It's easy to dismiss pupils who disrupt the class as 'naughty' or 'unruly'. However, these are the pupils that often find themselves excluded from school — both temporarily and permanently.

However, students who display challenging behaviours can often get back on track with learning and become productive, harmonious class members with short-term support or alternative provision.

If a teacher reports that a student is being persistently rude, defiant, oppositional, or even aggressive in lessons, flag the issue. For the sake of the pupil, their classmates, and their teachers, it's important to get to the root of the problem and address it before these behaviours escalate.

Whether in person or online, physical, or emotional, bullying can lead to children struggling to focus or avoiding coming to school entirely.

08.

Social difficulties

Difficulties outside the classroom are some of the most common causes of anxiety, low attendance, and school refusal, so it's important to look at how a child interacts with their peers.

Sudden friendship breakdowns and instances of bullying can be more than just playground problems. Whether in-person or online, physical, or emotional, bullying can lead children to struggling to focus or avoiding coming to school entirely.

These students often need a supportive learning environment where they can distance themselves from troublesome classmates and rebuild their confidence before re-entering school.

Students who have been bullied may benefit from online alternative provision, where they can ease back into communicating without missing out on learning.

Supporting vulnerable students

Once you know which students need your help, how should you support them?

Support needs are specific to each individual student. For those who have recently become vulnerable or just started to disengage from their learning, keeping these three Cs in mind can help you create a supportive environment.

Online alternative provision

Some students need further support and a change in environment to bounce back.

When the mainstream environment remains ineffective despite intervention, online alternative provision can provide vulnerable young people with another way to re-engage.

Through online lessons with qualified, experienced teachers, students get to catch up on academic study while rebuilding their confidence and enthusiasm for learning.



01. Consistency

When young people are going through unpredictable difficulties, consistency can be of great help. Provide clear instructions and set clear rules to create routine and stability in the classroom. In turn, this sense of normality can help children get back on track with the day-to-day demands of school.

02. Compassion

Expecting too much from a student too soon can put them off reintegrating into the classroom. Educators and school staff can help students by being understanding and showing compassion. Recognise a pupil's efforts, no matter how gradual, to help them ease back on track.

03. Communication

Whatever the background to their struggles is, vulnerable learners are often timid and anxious about communicating with others. Gently and gradually encourage them to work with their classmates and talk to their teachers. This will help them feel less isolated and increase their participation in lessons.

About Academy21

High-quality online alternative provision for students across England and Wales

Supporting over 1,000 pupils each year, Academy21 brings students with behavioural, medical, and mental health needs a pathway to achieve strong recognised outcomes.

In a full virtual schooling environment, we are able to provide students with the flexibility, pastoral care, and education quality they need to get back on track with progress, become enthusiastic learners, and return to a mainstream classroom in the future.

Key facts...

- National Curriculum
- Lessons from Mon-Fri
- Small class sizes
- Flexible options



Our provision is:

- 01.** Personalised to individual students' needs.
- 02.** Flexibly tailored for short and long-term requirements.
- 03.** High-quality, providing strong academic leadership.
- 04.** Safe and quality assured by numerous processes.
- 05.** Transparent thanks to 24/7 online reporting.
- 06.** Great value, with changes at no additional cost.
- 07.** Partner centric, with honest and direct communication.
- 08.** Wellbeing focused, with regular tutorials and health and well-being workshops available.



Vishal was a school refuser who struggled to communicate with others and make friends.

We enrolled him in Academy21 at home and encouraged him to speak directly with his teachers... As he progressed and his confidence grew... he began to make meaningful friends. After just a few months he returned to school. When he settled back into the classroom, he was able to make friends and even socialise with them outside school!

Nathalie Ehlinger

Abbeyfield school in Chippenham

* Not the student's real name



To get in touch, call us on
01438 535001 or email us at
contact@academy21.co.uk

If you are interested in finding out more about Academy21 and our alternative education provision or wish to discuss the individual needs of your pupil(s), please contact our friendly team.

academy21.co.uk