



Wednesday, 8 March 2017

Absenteeism, Persistent Absenteeism and the issuing of fines / Court Orders

Dear Parents

Several parents have approached me to question the school's position on absenteeism. In particular queries have been raised around recent letters issued to parents informing them that they are required to attend a meeting to discuss possible actions, including the issuing of fines or Court Orders.

Firstly, I will make clear that it is not the school's policy, but that of the Department of Education, to issue fines (also known as fixed penalties) for persistent absenteeism; I do however understand the necessity to do so in some cases.

It is the Department of Education/Ofsted that dictate attendance below **95% is poor and that below 90% is 'persistent absenteeism'**. The reasons for this have been made clear before; good attendance is vital for the success of pupils and their wellbeing. Our own school data, as well as that issued nationally, makes clear that poor attendance results in poorer outcomes for children.

The Law

Children must attend school under the Education Act 1989 (revised). Poor attendance at school can result in one or more of the following:

- a Parenting Order
- an Education Supervision Order
- a School Attendance Order
- a fine (sometimes known as a 'penalty notice')

Parents should understand that attendance is an issue for children at our school –

We are in the bottom 10% nationally and our persistent absence record is worse. This impacts on outcomes for children individually and the school as a whole.

I will actively seek to enforce the necessary legal actions to address absence affairs where improvements are not seen and /or parents do not engage with or recognise the legitimate concern.

They are only children; does it really matter?

Yes. The fact is that **children who attend school for less than 95% of the time underperform significantly and have ominously reduced lifetime opportunities.** It is not good enough to send your child to a good school or be graded a 'Good School' if absenteeism impacts on achievement. Schools with poor attendance and diminished outcomes do not remain 'Good'.

But my child has been ill and I have told you this?

Absence is absence, and impacts on a child's learning and wellbeing, regardless of the reason. This is clear in the actions taken under national policy. Whilst I have utter respect for parents who state that absence has been a result of specific unavoidable illness, this does not negate the fact that their child has been impacted by it, or that the policy applies to all. A child, who is absent due to intermittent illness, has missed the same amount of time as a child who has been absent as a result of a parent's failure to bring them to school for unauthorised reasons.

If a parent is subjected to a fine, this can be appealed against on medical grounds, but it should be noted that the absence is not ignored owing to circumstance and may not be seen as 'good reason' in court without specific, long term, medical support and evidence.

To be clear, under policy and in reality, absence through illness has the same impact as absence for any other reason and as such is included in your child's absence figures. This is a national requirement.

So, are you saying you want me to bring my child into school when they are ill?

No. But I do ask parents to consider carefully if absence is really necessary. We are not medical practitioners and cannot make decisions on behalf of health professionals, or indeed parents – the choice is yours.

My child always attends school, yet you say that there are 'unauthorised absences', how can this be?

If your child arrives late, beyond the close of register, the late mark is converted to an unauthorised absence. Again, this is a national requirement, not the school's. This is done because too much time in school has been missed. Arrive late and children may be considered absent; arrive persistently late, and it is easy to fall below the expectation.

I cannot afford a fine, how will I pay the school?

Firstly, fines are not issued by, or paid to the school – despite what you may have read on social media or in popular press. The courts issue fines and the revenue is taken by them. If you cannot pay a fine, this is a matter for the courts and is dealt with in line with any other unpaid debts to the Crown. The school has no say in this.

I will not pay the fine, what can they do to me?

Simply put, the fine increases to up to £2500. If you continue not to pay, you can get up to a 3 month prison sentence.

I did not realise this and I have received a letter re my child's absence. What can I do?

Ashgate Primary School is here to help you when and where we can.

- The first step is to attend the meeting and work with the school. This will be your chance to seek support if there are underlying reasons for the absences. Whilst we cannot act on your behalf, we can point you in the right direction and look to see if there is anything we can do to help.
- Recognise that there is an issue, and do all you can to reverse any absence trends. This may be easier said than done, but it cannot be ignored for your child's sake. It is never too late.
- Act promptly if you receive notices, attendance letters and/or court notices. They will not go away.

I wish to end by stating that it is my duty as Headteacher to address poor attendance and the duty of my Governing Body to hold me accountable for it. The vast majority of parents at Ashgate Primary School ensure their children attend in line with the expectation and I am grateful for this, as are my staff. I cannot however ignore that attendance in my school, for too many children, is below that expected. It is a stark and frightening fact that whilst we are driving up standards across the school, many are missing out on and suffering as a result. This has a negative impact on the children and the wider school.

We have always had a firm stance on attendance matters and will continue to do so and I know that the wider community supports this. Your actions are appreciated.

Yours sincerely

Mr Seargent