

16th July 2020

Dear Parents/Carers

Attendance Matters

I would like to thank you for your continued support in helping your school to support your child with their learning; and for some of you, supporting your child to attend sessions in school throughout the pandemic.

It is important to acknowledge that this has been an unprecedented and strange time to live through, one that has brought us all many challenges to face both personally, within our workplaces and our general lives. However, I have witnessed a lot of kindness, understanding and dedication within the last few months that I know will continue to help everyone move forward.

As of writing this letter, from September 2020 the Government are expecting all children to return to school. It is expected that legislation relating to school attendance will be reinstated and attendance at school will be mandatory, meaning local authority power to fine will return for unauthorised absence from school. This means that, the normal rules on school attendance will apply, including:

- *parents' duty to secure that their child attends regularly at school where the child is a registered pupil at school and they are of compulsory school age;*
- *schools' responsibilities to record attendance and follow up absence*
- *the availability to issue sanctions, including fixed penalty notices in line with local authorities' codes of conduct*

What does this mean in practice? - As a trust, supporting our staff and students to return to school safe and well is important and in terms of enforcing attendance at school, supporting a child to attend is our first aim. All our schools are already preparing and implementing new systems, in line with government and Public Health England guidance, to create a safe environment for children and staff in September.

Guidance states schools are required to take a balanced approach when dealing with attendance matters, and be mindful of the impact that COVID may have had on students and their families. Local Authorities will be requiring schools to provide clear evidence that they have attempted to engage with families to offer reassurance, support and referrals to outside agencies where necessary, as part of their **'Early Help Pathways'** prior to seeking legal sanctions. This combines support provided by the academy and with additional help from external agencies where required.

Therefore, our schools are currently ensuring any student who may have barriers to overcome in returning to school, is identified so that support can be put into place. If you feel that your child may require support, please make contact with your school to discuss your child's needs, as soon as possible - *'prevention is better than cure'*.

If your child has previously been shielding, please note the guidance has now changed and shielding will be paused on 1st August 2020 (subject to a continued decline in the rates of community transmission). This means shielded students will also return to school unless their clinician states in writing that they should continue to shield. You should discuss any concerns you have about a return to school at their next routine appointment.

What happens if the support doesn't work? - We would always endeavour to make sure the support offered for your family/child works to improve your/their wellbeing and their ability to attend school. All support is about *'working together'* to support your child in the best way possible.

There will be occasions where absence is deemed acceptable and therefore 'authorised' (e.g. the absence is due to an exceptional circumstance or a COVID related issue, and is evidenced as such), which would not cause any further action to happen.

However, if the support in place should cause an improvement, but doesn't, and the reasons given are not deemed acceptable and therefore 'unauthorised', the law is there to safeguard your child's access to their education and the law will be enforced if necessary e.g. if absence is persistent and ongoing with no exceptional reason.

Single Period Term Time Absence (e.g. holiday or events) - the reinstated legislation covers all absence from school; both persistent absence and absence for single periods. I am sure you will agree, given the amount of school time students have missed this year, it is even more important that absence is kept to a minimum and holidays or events are arranged for outside of the school term time wherever possible. Unfortunately, 'being unable to take a holiday earlier in the year' is now the norm for almost every family in the UK and this means it will not necessarily be deemed as an exceptional circumstance alone.

Additionally, when returning from a leave of absence during a school holiday period, your child will be expected to be available to return to school on the first day of the term or half-term. This means that you will need to factor in any potential known quarantine period following your holiday to allow for them to be at school when required; absence for this reason may not be authorised without evidence that the quarantine was an unexpected government change, or that the holiday was booked prior to the pandemic.

The reinstated legislation will remain the same; Head Teachers must only approve leave of absence if the request is for '**exceptional circumstances**' and received in advance. If leave of absence is absolutely necessary and you feel it falls into 'exceptional circumstances' criteria, you will need to apply for the absence using the Term Time Absence Request Form available from your school. You will then be notified in writing as to the decision regarding the request.

What can you do to help? - The biggest and most helpful thing you can do for your child is help them to feel happy (or at least OK) about returning to school. Helping them to understand the importance of returning to a normality that means they can catch up with their learning and restart their social lives will make them feel more confident about the future.

Talking to your child about their worries and fears will help them understand how they are feeling, acknowledge how they feel and put their emotions into context. A lot of children will be excited about returning to the familiarity of their friends and classes as well as feeling a little apprehensive at the prospect too, this is completely normal. As adults, we know that excitement, anxiety, fear and apprehension can all have similar physical symptoms, so it is important to recognise this along with, most of the time, our experiences are never normally as bad as we imagine they will be. Passing this information onto our children will help them to understand things better and give them confidence to recognise how they are feeling and to give things a go. For further advice on supporting them with their worries and other useful information we have a help page: <https://www.cmatrust.co.uk/attendance-2/>

We hope that the above information assists you to make good choices in respect of your child's attendance and I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a happy and safe summer break.

Yours faithfully



Sharon Templeman
CMAT Attendance Welfare Leader