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Love to learn, learning to love, all different, all equal

Dear Parent/Carers

Welcome back to the new academic year. We hope you and your family had a restful summer break. As we begin the 2025/2026 school year, we would like to take this opportunity to remind all families of our shared commitment to excellent school attendance. In line with Medway Local Authority and national expectations, we are aiming for a minimum attendance rate of 96% for every pupil. Regular attendance is vital to ensure that your child benefits fully from their education, achieves their potential, and builds strong foundations for future success.

There has been growing national concern regarding declining school attendance rates across the UK. In response, the Department for Education (DfE) introduced statutory guidance, effective from August 2024, aimed at reducing term-time holidays and unauthorised absences, and supporting families whose children are struggling to attend.

'Support First'

As the DfE notes, *'Improving attendance is everyone's business'*, and it is important that we, as your child's school, work together in partnership with you, your family, your child, and the wider community.

The statutory DfE 'Working Together to Improve School Attendance' Guidance emphasises a 'Support First' ethos, and recognises that *'the barriers to accessing education are wide and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individual pupils and families... [It] is essential for pupils to get the most out of their school experience, including their attainment, wellbeing, and wider life chances.'*

If you are concerned about your child's attendance, then please contact Mrs Kember, office@sthelens.medway.sch.uk as soon as possible so that barriers to attendance can be understood, and appropriate support can be put in place to support you, your family, and your child to prevent further absences.

Medical evidence

In the majority of cases a parent's notification that their child is too ill to attend school will be evident and can be accepted without question or concern. Only where the school has genuine and reasonable doubt about the authenticity of the illness will medical evidence be requested to support the absence and when attendance is a cause for concern, evidence will also be requested to authorise absence/s.

Formalising and intensifying the support

Where voluntary support has not been effective and/or has not been engaged with, we will work with partners, including the local authority, to formalise and intensify the support.

As part of the measures introduced, if a pupil has 10 sessions of absence within a 10-week period, the pupil's parent(s)/carer(s) may receive a 'Notice to Improve' notification sent via email or letter. Each day of absence is recorded as two sessions (morning and afternoon). Unauthorised absences include:

- unauthorised absence (where there is no reasonable circumstance for the absence taking place, O code),
- arriving late after the register has closed (U Code),
- or a combination of these with holidays taken during term time (Unauthorised holiday – G code)

These 10 weeks can span different terms and even different educational settings, such as transitions in-year school changes and alternative provision. For instance, if your child misses 3 days of school for a holiday in September (6 sessions) and is late after the register closes on 4 occasions (4 sessions) between September and October, you may be issued a 'Notice to Improve' notification.

The 'Notice to Improve' notification will set out the expectations and period notice for the improvement of attendance such as 'no further unauthorised absences'. Should the expectations not be met in the improvement period, then a Penalty Notice may then be requested by the school and issued by the Local Authority (LA) to each parent/carer responsible for the child.

Any holiday-related absence taken that includes 10 sessions in 10 weeks, may result in a Penalty Notice. In this instance, a 'Notice to Improve' notification **will not** be issued beforehand.

The penalty notice amount increased from August 2024 with **a maximum of two penalty notices within a rolling three-year period:-**

- **First offence** - The first time a Penalty Notice is issued the amount will be: £80 per parent, per child paid within 21 days. This increases to £160 per parent, per child if paid after day 21, until day 28. Any non-payment of the Penalty Notice may be referred to the Magistrates Court.

- **Second Offence** (within 3 years) - the second time a Penalty Notice is issued the amount will be £160 per parent, per child paid within 28 days. Any non-payment of the Penalty Notice may be referred to the Magistrates Court.

- **Third Offence and subsequent Offences** (within 3 years) - the third time an offence is committed a Penalty Notice will not be issued, and the case may be presented straight to the Magistrates' Court under s.444 of the Education Act (1996) or other legal interventions considered. The Magistrates' Court can order fines up to £2500 per parent, per child.

Parents with parental responsibility, and adults residing with the child, including for example, stepparents who have day-to-day responsibility for the child, may be fined, and this applies to each child who is absent. For example, if two adults take two children out of school, the total fines would be £640 (reduced to £320 for a first offence paid within 21 days).

If a Penalty Notice is not paid within the time limits set out in the letter to the parent, Medway Local Authority may proceed the case to court.

We recognise that these Penalty Notices may be unpopular with families, but it is important to inform you of these changes promptly.

Nationally, Headteachers are:

- **not permitted to approve term-time holidays** except in genuinely exceptional circumstances, and
- are to consider each application for a leave of absence individually before making our decision.

The law clearly expects Headteachers to enforce these penalties strictly.

The policy also states that schools are required to consider requesting the issuance of Penalty Notices when the criteria are met. This is a statutory national process that applies to all state-funded schools in England.

Our school attendance policy in line with these requirements can be found on the school website.

The primary goal of these measures is to ensure that children do not miss out on their education. Every lesson is a crucial part of your child's learning journey, and frequent absences can significantly hinder their progress. Thank you for your continued cooperation in supporting your child's education.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Kember
Headteacher