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for Education

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Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Education

31 July 2012

Dear Secretary of State,

Update on implementing the recommendations from the review of school attendance

In your response to my report on improving school attendance you accepted all but one of the recommendations and asked that these should be implemented quickly. This letter is an update to show the progress of the work.

Reception of the review

Schools accept that poor attendance must be tackled as early as possible, before the problem becomes entrenched. Head teachers' associations particularly welcomed the recommendation to strengthen the rules on term time holidays, agreeing that these can be very disruptive to pupils' education. The National Association of Social Workers in Education recognised the Government's aim to make the penalty notices system swift and certain.

Changing the language and focus on attendance

The Government has changed the way it presents absence statistics in line with my recommendation. This took effect with the autumn term 2011 absence data published last month, in which the headline figures were the levels of overall and persistent absence in schools. Future Government Statistical First Releases will continue to focus on overall and persistent absence, rather than authorised and unauthorised absence.

Changes are also being made to the school performance tables. From the next, which will be published in December and January, the attendance data will show overall and persistent absence; unauthorised absence rates will no longer feature. This sends the message to schools that all attendance is important and absence must be driven down whether it is authorised or not.

New data on attendance

Absence data from September 2012 onwards will include pupils who are aged four on the 31st of August before the start of the academic year. All schools with classes for four-year-olds will submit the attendance records for this age group as part of their School Census return.

The School Census will also collect attendance records for all pupils up to the end of the summer term (previously this data covered only the first half of the summer term). This data will be published annually from March 2014 as part of the main absence statistics with the exception of attendance in the second half of the summer term in year 11. Officials will do further work to look at what schools do with year 11 pupils in the summer term. This work will tie in with the raising of the participation age.

Strengthening the regulations on term time holidays

Officials are revising the regulations on when schools can grant leave of absence and will consult on them in the autumn. Subject to Parliamentary approval this change will come into force from September 2013.

The new regulations will address the misconception that parents are entitled to family holidays during term time. Parents will still be able to request leave of absence, but it will be made clear that this should be granted at the head teacher's discretion and only in exceptional circumstances.

Penalty notices and prosecution

In your reply to my review, you said that the Government had taken an early step to implement one of my recommendations by increasing the amount stated on penalty notices from £50 and £100 to £60 and £120. This change will take effect from September 2012. Further changes to the regulations, which reduce the time limit by which a penalty notice must be paid, will come into effect in September 2013.

The Government has said it is considering whether to accept my recommendation to deduct unpaid penalty notices from child benefit.

Officials are developing a model for changing the penalty notice scheme to ensure that, where parents fail to pay, the money can be recouped without the need for a lengthy court process. When the Government decides on an enforcement measure for the new penalty notices, officials are prepared to put forward legislation speedily.

Discussions with Academies have showed that they welcome being given the power to prosecute parents for attendance offences. Legislation to implement this is also being developed so that it can be put before Parliament at the next opportunity.

Next Steps

I am certain that my recommendations, when fully implemented, will improve school attendance and strengthen the accountability between parents and schools. I continue to recommend that recouping fines through child benefit will lead to a system that is swift and certain, easy to understand, that will keep parents out of court and will be an effective deterrent.

I would like to thank officials in the Behaviour and Attendance in School Division and across the Department for their work in implementing these recommendations.

*Yours Sincerely,
Charlie*

Charlie Taylor
The Government's Expert Adviser on Behaviour