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**Letter to Parents from Anna Halliday, the Commissioner for Education and Wellbeing,
Staffordshire County Council**

Re: Changes to Penalty Notices for Absences from School

Dear Parents,

The opportunity for your child to have access to a good education in a Staffordshire school is very important to us all. Encouraging good attendance gives each pupil the best chance to learn and achieve to their full potential.

The vast majority of our pupils achieve very good attendance, and the number of unauthorised absences (without permission agreed by the school) is lower in Staffordshire than compared to the national average. We also have an improving picture on the number of persistent absences (children who repeatedly miss sessions) as this has reduced each year since 2010. Therefore, good attendance is not a problem in most cases.

Head teachers continue to hold the responsibility for deciding if a request made by a parent or carer for leave of absence should be granted, to give permission for "authorised" absence in exceptional circumstances.

Last year the Department for Education (DfE) introduced changes to the law regarding parents taking their children out of school during term time. These changes meant that parents risk receiving a penalty notice (fine) issued by the Local Authority for taking their child out of school in term time without permission from the head teacher.

One year on from these changes, the Local Authority has consulted with schools and reviewed the county's criteria for issuing these penalty notices, for those pupils who miss out on school without permission, and where the Local Authority is, therefore, required by law to take appropriate action.

This has resulted in some changes which are outlined below and which came into effect from 23rd February 2015.

Penalty Notice for leave of absence (holiday) in term time

- Previously our approach was to only issue a Penalty Notice if the pupil's overall attendance was below 87%. This threshold has now been removed.

- Previously only one Penalty Notice per pupil was issued within an academic year. This limit has been removed so more than one Penalty Notice could be issued for repeated absence without permission during term time.
- Previously pupils missing 10 sessions or five days taken together risked a Penalty Notice. Now a combined total of ten sessions (not necessarily grouped as 5 consecutive days) could trigger a Penalty Notice.
- Instead of monitoring and totalling holiday absences taken across each academic year, they will now be monitored across the previous three terms, regardless of academic year

Penalty Notice for persistent absence

Parents whose child is repeatedly absent will now only receive one warning notice period to bring about improvement in attendance in a single academic year. If attendance deteriorates again then no further formal warning notice will be issued and the Local Authority can automatically consider other statutory actions if unauthorised absence re-occurs.

These changes have been agreed with head teachers and have been implemented to support good attendance. Further details and a copy of the revised Code of Conduct for issuing Penalty Notices can be obtained from the council's website

<http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/education/welfareservice/Attendance/home.aspx>

The Local Authority will continue to monitor all school attendance and take appropriate action for absences during term time, both to support head teachers in their role and in challenging the small minority of parents that choose to disregard the law.

In contrast, I would like to offer my congratulations to the vast majority of pupils who have an excellent record of attendance, and recognise that so many of our parents are very careful not to book holidays during term-time, despite the challenges this can sometimes present.

Yours faithfully

Anna Halliday

Commissioner for Education and Wellbeing

PLEASE SEE: GUIDANCE NOTES FOR PARENTS REQUESTING LEAVE IN TERM TIME

Available on our website