



22 July 2020

Dear Leaders across Sussex with responsibility for CYP (Head Teachers, LAs, CCGs, MPs)

Re: Call for Sussex to unite and adopt inclusive, non-punitive, welcome back to school

We are a group of local charities and parent carer forums writing collectively to ask that you give, and/or actively encourage school leaders and decision makers, both locally and in government to give, all children and young people the best possible welcome back to school in September, with a clear focus on the needs of children and young people with SEND, to ensure their successful transition back into education.

The attainment gap for these children is already too large and so we fully support the guidance for children with SEND to return to school, wherever this is possible and safe. This letter sets out ideas from the parent carer community about how to encourage and support attendance to get the best results for our children.

Our local (and DCP) national surveys have showed that CYP with SEND have been disproportionately affected during lockdown with 70-80% reporting worsening mental health concerns and many will be highly anxious or frightened about returning to school, which may have a detrimental impact on their transition back.

We know schools have been working exceptionally hard during lockdown, and are now trying to plan for full return in September, and most are already mindful of the need to focus on the wellbeing of their pupils. But we are very concerned about some of the recent government guidance that suggest schools might want to adopt punitive measures to ensure attendance. Will you join us in our call for all schools across Sussex to adopt supportive, inclusive, policies? Suggestions from parent carers include:

- **Not issuing fines** to families if CYP with SEND do not attend school, especially in the first term back. Fining is likely to have the adverse effect and may lead some parents to feeling they have no choice but to take their child off the school roll to avoid being fined. It's great to see one West Sussex Head Teacher has already committed to this see: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/12009798/headteacher-refuses-fine-parents-return-school-september/>.
- **Not excluding CYP with SEND, especially if distressed behaviour** is due to having been away from school for so long, the transition back to school or because they are not used to the new rules/adopt social distancing etc. See this recent research too: <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/launch-school-exclusion-risks-after-covid-19-report/>.
- Instead, keep the focus on what additional support a child needs to facilitate their return, **developing individual Transition Plans** – for all pupils with SEND, so schools can talk to parents and plan how their child's needs about returning to school can be best met.
- **Providing targeted information for the SEND community that builds confidence and allays fears** – that speaks to both the young person, but also their parent carer. We are happy to help review or create any comms to this community if schools would like our input.
- **Choosing to ring-fence more** of 'catch up/tutoring' fund to target the most vulnerable. The government announced that £350m out of the £1bn will be ring fenced for vulnerable pupils and we assume this will be targeted to those on pupil premium. Can you dedicate more of this fund to help 'close the

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attainment gap' for all vulnerable children including those on the SEND registers? Families are keen to hear from schools how this investment will be allocated and how SEND pupils in particular will be prioritised, so we urge all schools to clearly set this out on the Local Offer. Whilst this funding can be spent at the discretion of the Head and needs to meet the varying needs of a school community, we urge Sussex leaders to consider how some level of equity is realised across the patch. Ideally schools should be encouraged to co-produce this offer with families and pupils to best identify and deliver what is most needed, and to assess the impact of it. The Parent Carer Forums (ESPCF, PaCC and WSPCF) will be important partners for these discussions in each area.

- **Providing a comprehensive virtual offer to those pupils who need to remain at home** - asking schools to optimise their initiative and all available technology, to allow these students to feel part of their cohort and 'virtually' in their classrooms every day.

It would be great if we can publically and collectively reassure families and children that they are going to be supported to re-engage with their learning at this worrying time.

Finally, we are hearing some wonderful examples of schools who have reported improvements in pupils with SEND's engagement and enthusiasm for learning, because of smaller class sizes and nurturing approach during lockdown. It would be fantastic if school partnership groups can capture and share some of these positive experiences and seek to retain some of this emphasis.

Thank you for your continued support for this vulnerable cohort of families. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



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