



Thursday 4th February 2021

Dear Parents,

You may be aware of an article in today's Sutton Guardian which is also being shared by the NEU across social media sites. This concerns proposed strike action at Barrow Hedges Primary School. We have been alerted by the NEU of the results of an indicative ballot to undertake industrial action. Some teachers are opposed to the perceived *"unreasonable deduction of pay when a NEU member is unable to attend school because of childcare responsibilities related to Covid-19."*

The purpose of this letter is to provide parents with information regarding this issue because we are deeply saddened about how this has been presented in the press and indeed the impact that the involvement of the NEU has had on the school and its community.

Firstly, we would like to assure you that any strike action undertaken does not adversely impact any provision, either in school or remote education for pupils at home. All children currently attending school will be able to do so and our remote provision will continue each day.

Some NEU members are objecting to the application of the Discretionary Leave Policy during this period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some teachers believe that this policy should be amended so that full pay is received each and every time a member of staff's child's bubble closes and a member of staff has to provide childcare at home.

The Discretionary Leave Policy has been in place for a number of years and is one that was transferred from when Barrow Hedges was a locally maintained school under the London Borough of Sutton. This was adopted by the Trust as a model policy agreed in consultation with all the unions. This allows for five fully paid days' leave for emergency childcare situations. As with all publicly funded bodies, we are accountable for ensuring that our budget is allocated appropriately. As such, we believe that five paid discretionary leave days is reasonable and fair. As a Trust, the same policies apply across all of our five schools.

Since the beginning of the pandemic last March, we have supported all staff to work from home for a variety of reasons, including those related to childcare. This includes a substantial number of staff, neither critically vulnerable nor extremely critically vulnerable, who remained at home for the vast majority of March to July 2020 whilst their colleagues taught the bubbles in school.

Upon the outbreak of the pandemic, consideration was given to a number of different factors so that reasonable adjustments could be made to accommodate situations that could potentially arise due to Covid-19. For example, full pay in instances when a staff member must themselves self isolate and work from home, if well enough to do so. Additionally, the adjustment to the policy so that staff are able to take five dependency days in one block should the need arise. Usually, the five days must be spread across the academic year.



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When schools are fully open, as was the case between September until the end of last term, the Discretionary Leave Policy applies which, as aforementioned, allows for five days paid leave for childcare related bubble closures as well as an agreement for staff to carry out planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) from home, which equates to a further day's pay.

When schools are fully open to all children, it is neither possible or desirable to have teachers live-stream lessons or record lessons from home. This does not fit with the arrangements for blended/remote learning – of course, we would want your child to come to school and be taught by a teacher, either one from Barrow Hedges or a familiar agency teacher. It would not be equitable to all the other children if one class are not provided with a teacher when schools are fully open. Thus, there is an additional cost incurred when teachers are absent from work due to the supply cover required. Furthermore, discretionary leave for childcare purposes is exactly that – a time when our staff need to assume their parent role.

We believe any childcare leave should be shared between both parents/carers. So in instances where a member of staff has a child who is required to isolate, we do not find it unreasonable to expect, that where there is another parent, that this parent shares some of the responsibility for the childcare. We are a publicly funded organisation and we do not feel it is appropriate to use this funding to cover the whole period of teacher absence as we have a duty and a desire to prioritise a supply teacher for your child's class when schools are fully open. If staff members have any difficulty with their childcare arrangements and if they approach the relevant senior leaders at school or Trust level, individual circumstances can be considered. Unfortunately, NEU involvement has escalated this situation where it need not have been the case.

As you will know from all letters sent to parents throughout this pandemic, it is of high importance to the schools within the Trust that we know our communities and engage with them well, supporting one another as best we can. We value all our staff as critical workers and recognise the wonderful job they are doing in these challenging times. We also value the excellent work that all critical workers and parents do and, reflecting on our Discretionary Leave Policy, we know that the Trust policy is more favourable than many other public sector, private sector and corporate policies which we know will be applicable to many of our parents, including those that work for the NHS and the police. We are acutely aware that many parents have taken holiday and/or unpaid leave to care for their child to support schools during this time of partial closure and we have been extremely grateful for this.

We have engaged and met with the NEU on this matter. Most significantly, however, some of our teachers have approached leaders about their own engagement with the NEU and as a result, a complaint has been logged with the NEU at a senior level.

We are deeply saddened by the publication of this article and the inaccuracies within this. The Sutton Guardian have not contacted the school at all and although they asked the Trust for comment, the majority of this response was excluded from the article. We were not fully apprised as to the publication of this article. We therefore can only apologise that this letter is being sent to you after many of you will have read the local newspaper report and/or social media posts about this.

We reiterate that the school is unaffected by potential strike action because we have enough staff to facilitate in school provision and remote education for those pupils at home.

If any parent feels that they would like to discuss this situation further, then we are more than willing to facilitate this. Do contact us via office@barrowhedges.com.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Sharon Roberts
CEO, Cirrus Primary Academy Trust

Mrs Louise Wood
Headteacher