

Dear parents and carers,

As you are aware we are working hard to improve attendance at the school. This is because our overall attendance is significantly lower than other local schools and the attendance of our most disadvantaged children is in the lowest 10% in the country. A situation we clearly can't allow to continue - and one we want to work with you to change.

We've been trying to improve attendance at Ashmead over the last three years. During this time we have tried to encourage better attendance a number of ways, for example:

- recognising and celebrating class attendance in our weekly celebration assembly
- requiring 1:1 meetings with families who want to take their child out of school on holiday during term-time
- meeting with families that have 'persistent absence' (attendance of less than 90%) to discuss ways to get their children in to school more regularly
- requiring medical evidence if a child is persistently off sick
- partnering with the Attendance and Welfare team at Lewisham to emphasise to parents the importance of regular school attendance.

Unfortunately, these actions have not had a big enough effect on our overall attendance figures.

It is critical for our children - and our school - that we rapidly improve attendance levels. Therefore we have introduced a number of new actions we hope will have a more significant impact encouraging attendance. These include:

- Writing to all parents and carers giving your child's mid year attendance percentage, to help improve attendance for the rest of the year. Often, it can surprise families when they see how much impact absence has had on the child's overall attendance percentage.
- Talking to children more frequently about their attendance and the importance of coming to school every day.
- Calculating the class attendance percentage every day, displaying this outside each class and congratulating the class on 100% attendance days.
- Having inter-class weekly competitions to achieve a bronze, silver or gold medal to celebrate the best attendance and punctuality that week.
- Celebrating the attendance of individual children with an in school 'treat', chosen by the children, for those with excellent attendance.
- Resetting our attendance expectations, so all children have the chance to be celebrated for excellent attendance during the second half of the year.
- Investing in more frequent meetings with the specialist Lewisham Attendance and Welfare Officer (AWO) to check our systems are effective and discuss the best strategies to improve attendance.
- Meetings with the AWO and parents of those children who have low attendance to discuss ways forward for individual families. This means working with families whose attendance is low due to authorised or unauthorised absences, as reducing both types of absence is important.

Obviously, unauthorised absences shouldn't be happening at all but, sadly, we have many absences of this nature. Last year there were **1,230** unauthorised absences, **more than half of which were due to term-time holidays**. This is roughly equivalent to having three Ashmead children who never come to school.

But it is also important that we work with families to reduce absence due to illness. Of course we don't want you to send your child to school if they are too unwell to learn. However, it does mean that we want to work with parents and children to minimise absences. These are some of the things we look at with families when we meet:

- The pattern of attendance. Quite often our data shows a percentage much lower than parents are aware of, particularly when absence takes the form of single days at different points in the year. There are also sometimes patterns worth exploring such as a high number of illnesses on

a Monday or a Friday, particularly just before or just after a holiday.

- The right level of resilience for both children and parents. Deciding a child is too unwell to come to school is a judgment all parents have to make. We want to avoid the two extremes – we **don't** want very ill children being sent to school but neither do we want children kept at home who, with encouragement and perseverance, could cope at school. Our data suggests the latter is more of an issue than the former. If a child is feeling less than 100% well at the beginning of the day we encourage families to bring them to school and let us know this. We can then keep a close eye on them. In most cases the child is able to have a good day at school. We talk with the children about this too and them knowing that they can cope with a day even if they start off not feeling great is important in forming their own habits of resilience.
- Habits at home, e.g. diet, bed-time, screen time (especially in children's bedrooms), homework, impact of very young or teenage siblings, etc. Sometimes there are simple adjustments in home routines that can really help children to be ready every day for school.
- Specific medical conditions. Where this is the case it will often lead to some absences that are unavoidable. But it is always useful to discuss the issue as there may be support the school can offer.
- Legal position. Parents do have a legal duty to send their children to school and there are times when the legal consequences of not meeting this duty need to be addressed. Our preference – and Lewisham Council's – would always be to work with families to avoid legal action but to do this it is important that families are aware of the risks of very low attendance. It would be unfair for families not to know this.

We have always rewarded attendance by celebrating the classes with the best attendance each week and will continue to do this.

In addition, we have recently added rewards for individual children with good attendance. We recognise it isn't ideal to use extrinsic awards for attendance - and we also understand some parents' objection to these types of measures. However, Ashmead's attendance has remained stubbornly below national averages for a number of years and we need to try a combination of new, more high profile measures, which we hope will have a greater impact.

The evidence so far is that the increased focus on attendance is making a difference. Attendance for March this year is 97.52 % whereas for last year it was 95.71%. That may not seem much of a difference, but in attendance terms this is significant.

We have always celebrated class attendance and are really proud to recognise children whose attendance is good or has improved, because they are making a huge effort. Our long-term hope would be that attendance improves, so that the focus can shift to celebration rather than awards.

Getting this right is not easy and we are thinking hard about tweaks to the system so that we get the right balance. For example, we do understand that some children only ever have time off for unavoidable illness and so would also like to celebrate those children who, when they are in school, make the effort to arrive on time every day. If your child has no 'lates' for the days they have been in school they will also have this recognised at the end of the year.

We recognise the increased intensity of focus on attendance has taken some parents and carers by surprise – and that, understandably, you have a number of questions about the changes. We hope that this letter helps to explain the current situation, why we are putting in place more high-profile measures, and what exactly we are doing to tackle the difficult problem of sustained low attendance at Ashmead.

Please keep reading Parentmail and the school newsletter for more information about how our attendance initiative is going and if you have any feedback, we would welcome your views.

Regards, Sean