

Term-Time Holidays

There is a lot of confusion about families taking their children out of school for holidays in term time. Nationally, the number of people being fined for term time holidays has risen exponentially in recent years and the media has reported a number of cases where parents have tried to appeal against what they consider harsh decisions by some headteachers. This has led to incorrect and ill-advised advice being given on some websites and social media, even from people in the profession. Of course we support the view that under normal circumstances such holidays should not happen. However, we are keen to use common sense and appreciate that a strict application of the rules can make life difficult for supportive families and cause unnecessary conflict with the school, which nobody wants.

The legal position is that parents who take a student out of school without authorisation, even for a day, are liable to a Fixed Penalty Notice, whatever the record of the student involved. Heads are encouraged not to accept prices, flights, landmark birthdays and family events as exceptional circumstances because they apply to almost every family. Some families now add the cost of the fine to the holiday, which can still be a saving.

We would like to make our position as clear as we reasonably can.

The first thing to do is request a term time holiday in plenty of time but at least two weeks before you plan to depart. The Headteacher does not automatically declare every request unauthorised, so it may be authorised; a number are. Some families can only take holidays from work at certain times because of the way their industry functions. Sometimes a family has had a particularly challenging time and the school agrees time off is in the best interest of the students concerned. There are also circumstances that could not be foreseen that make the need to take someone out of school necessary. These would be authorised. The whole picture is taken into account, although you would expect us to be especially reluctant for students in Year 10 and above.

What can't be authorised is holidays taken because of flight times, price or because someone else booked the trip without checking. Most holidays are cheaper because the majority of people value their children's time in school too highly to consider taking their daughters or sons out. Landmark birthdays are not exceptional as every family has these. The judgement that the holiday is more educational is not relevant and not considered. The reason given has to be specific to the term date and not one that applies just as easily to school holidays. A family with the money to afford something extravagant or exotic has no more right to a break in term-time than someone taking a cheaper holiday.

If the absence is not authorised but goes ahead there are a series of stages that people may go through.

- The student is registered as taking an unauthorised absence.
- The absence is recorded as unauthorised and a fixed penalty notice is issued with a fine.
- The fine is doubled if not paid within 28 days.
- There is a court appearance and greater fine, running into thousands of pounds, can be given.
- A custodial sentence may also result if there is wilful non-payment or serious issues to do with repeated non-attendance at school.

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In most cases we don't see how a fine helps at all. In fact it serves to create bad feeling without impacting upon attendance or educational progress, which is our primary concern. For the majority of families taking unauthorised leave that is the end of the matter. In such cases someone will call home, discourage the holiday but say that we would not be seeking a penalty notice.

A request for a fixed penalty notice would be considered for;

- Students on exam courses missing more than a couple of days or important exams- this obviously affects a young person's prospects and should be avoided.
- Families where poor attendance is an on-going issue for at least one of the children involved.
- Families that have begun to build up a pattern of term time holidays.

In such cases we have requested penalty notices but this came as no surprise to the families concerned. We will always warn you of the possibility at the point of request.

The school would very much like to discourage dishonesty in front of the children concerned. It cannot be healthy for young people to see adults telling lies to secure a holiday by writing notes giving false reasons or taking the holiday and hoping it won't be followed-up. By being honest with each other the situation can almost always be managed with goodwill and understanding on both sides.

We hope this is reassuring and clears things up for you. While we are very keen to avoid people taking holidays in term-time, and appreciate the efforts of the vast majority to avoid doing so, we do understand that some people face different constraints and we are keen to help.

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