



Authorised Absence from School – Summary

House of Commons - Debate Summary

06/06/2019

Conservative member for St Austell and Newquay, Steve Double tabled the Westminster Hall debate on authorised absence from schools.

Double confirmed that he had campaigned for the Government to review and change their policy, arguing that it is not the role of the state to dictate to parents what is right and best for their children.

He expressed his frustration with the current system noting that there was not clear guidance as to what constitutes an exceptional circumstance. "Education is about far more than what takes place in our classrooms, and attending such events broadens children's experiences and knowledge and gives them a wider view of the world, so it is incredibly beneficial to their education."

He argued that headteachers should be given discretion, as they knew the pupils and the families.

Helen Goodman (Lab, Bishop Auckland) expressed her concern that Ofsted will mark down a school that attendance falls below 96 per cent- irrespective of the circumstances.

Double spoke of fines that were given to families who do remove children from school for holiday, arguing that some families have no choice due to the prices being cheaper out of season and the parents work schedules.

Mental health and wellbeing for children was mentioned by Goodman, and Double agreed that schools needed to understand the importance of allowing families time off. "The way the policy is being driven by Ofsted and some of our schools is incredibly detrimental to the wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable children in our communities."

The Minister for School Standards, Nick Gibb responded that "regular attendance at school is fundamental to ensuring that every pupil, no matter their background, can meet their full potential. It is about social mobility."

He set out the Government's policy on reducing absence and addressed the issue of term-time holidays.

"There is a correlation between time absent from school and attainment. Pupils with higher overall absence tend to do less well in their GCSEs, even after taking their prior attainment and some other characteristics into account."

He challenged the claim that the Department's attendance policy is counter-productive, noting that there had been a significant fall in overall absence.

"The Government recognise the value of family holidays in providing enriching experiences that can indeed have educational value. However, the school year is designed to give families the opportunity to enjoy breaks and holidays without disrupting their children's education."

Responded to the claims made about Ofsted, the Minister stated that the inspection framework makes it clear that it will consider an up-to-date attendance analysis for all groups of pupils.

"Inspectors will make a judgment about the behaviour and attitudes in a school. The inspection framework specifies that in doing so, they will look for a strong focus on attendance and punctuality, so that disruption is minimised."

He concluded that: "The Government take the issue seriously and have put in place a number of measures to prioritise and incentivise school attendance. We will continue to monitor progress and encourage schools and local authorities to use their powers to stagger term dates where appropriate."

Question put and agreed to.