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The Rt Hon Keir Starmer
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to you following our recent exchange at Prime Minister's Questions, relating to the current way in which absence that is connected to unmet SEND needs is being treated.

As I outlined in my question to you, the current situation sees parents who desperately want their children to be in school, but cannot get the support for their children to make that possible, threatened with prosecutions, fines, and even in extreme cases prison time. This is because the reasons for a child's absence is not considered when School Attendance Orders are issued, even if it is because the school they are in is unable to meet their needs.

As you acknowledged in your response to me in the House, pupils with SEND already face complex barriers to school and parents feel outraged at the way they are being let down due to inadequate support. Every parent wants their child to get a good education, but the current approach is solely focused on classroom attendance instead of learning.

Since my question, I have been inundated with messages from parents who are so relieved to finally have someone speaking up on this issue. Many have commented about the huge emotional pressure it places on their family, with many more feeling like the system is cold and doesn't listen to their voices.

One recurring issue was the 'off-rolling' of children where their SEND needs are not being met. The reason for pulling their children from school is to avoid the pressure over attendance and to shield them from potential prosecution which comes as a result of persistent low attendance.

This is a perverse situation and not one we should be accepting. Why is it that the focus is placed upon punishing parents for matters that are outside of their control? Why is the only measurable outcome that matters time in a classroom, instead of time spent learning? And how are fines or prison time a proportionate response in these situations?

This is a burning injustice that for too long has gone under the radar. I have spoken with so many parents and organisations that support children with SEND and all agree the current approach is not working and is in dire need of reform.

In our exchange, I highlighted Lords Amendment 349A to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is currently undergoing Report Stage in the House of Lords. This is intended to halt the unjust prosecutions while a more comprehensive solution is found, hopefully through the upcoming SEND review. I appreciate your remarks about ensuring it would be looked at "in the normal way" but that does not answer the question of whether it is something you are open to considering.

So, with that in mind, I have three short questions to put to you:

1. Will you ask your colleagues in the House of Lords to support Amendment 349A?
2. If not, why not?
3. And finally, will you meet with me – as I asked in my PMQ – to discuss this matter further?

Since becoming Prime Minister, you have openly acknowledged the failings within the SEND system, and I appreciate that you may not have known about this matter before I asked you about it. However, I hope you will agree that something must be done to protect pupils and parents from being punished for the failings of a broken system.

I look forward to your response and hope that, working constructively together, we can finally put an end to this outrageous practice and ensure the focus is on supporting all children with SEND to get an appropriate education – no matter where it takes place.

Best regards,



Claire Young MP
Member of Parliament for Thornbury & Yate