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Mr Mark Brown
Statistics Branch – DENI
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

*Mr Wright
Mr Montgomery
10/23/00
6/3*

25 February 2000

Dear Mr Brown

Re Recording of Absence due to Pupil Protests

This matter was discussed at a recent meeting of Chief Education Welfare Officers with Mrs Mary Potter who advised me to inform you of the advice given to school principals within the NEELB.

Pupils who are absent from school because they are involved in a protest either with or without their parents consent should be recorded as H – other absence. This would be regarded as an unauthorised absence.

Pupils who register at school and subsequently leave school to protest should be regarded as having a period absence and should be dealt with according to the schools established procedures.

I hope you find this information useful.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Shaw

Margaret A Shaw (Mrs)
Chief Education Welfare Officer



Managing Pupil Protests

1. Introduction

The following guidance has been prepared for the purpose of assisting principals manage school situations when a significant minority of pupils disrupt school to protest about issues that are beyond the control of the school. The guidance takes account of the experiences of principals whose schools have been disrupted. The document uses examples of good practice as well as highlighting important procedural matters but recognises that circumstances surrounding future protests will vary and definitive advice for every scenario is not possible. It also acknowledges that every school has its own specific policies in place to guide parents, staff and pupils about matters of discipline and health and safety. A starting point for every school might be to review these in the light of this guidance and past experience of protests to ensure if they are adequate to deal with any future action.

2. Boards of Governors and School Protests

A Board of Governors is responsible for managing discipline as well as ensuring the health and safety and welfare of all persons who use school premises. In carrying out these responsibilities a Board of Governors delegates responsibility for procedures relating to health/safety and discipline to the Principal. In the discharge of their statutory responsibilities Governors should ensure:

- discipline and health and safety policies are reviewed to take account of situations in which pupils absent themselves from class to undertake protests in or around school premises
- all teaching/non teaching staff have been informed about procedures when responding to significant disruption by pupils inside or outside the school
- where there are concerns about the possibility of future disruption procedures are in place to inform parents about the implications of pupils becoming involved in such action
- all serious incidents are investigated by them and that decisions about suspension or expulsion from school are in accordance with the school's discipline policy. Police involvement in an incident does not normally prevent a school from operating its own disciplinary procedures
- all reports of incidents are considered and acted upon where these have implications for health/safety and the maintenance of good order
- procedures exist to inform outside bodies ie Employing Authority / police of any incidents that have resulted in a breach of the peace outside or inside school or damage to person or premises.

3. School Discipline Policy

The school discipline policy sets out the standards of behaviour which are expected from pupils and the procedures / sanctions which apply when behaviour is unacceptable. It should be reviewed by the principal and the Board of Governors to ensure it is adequate to meet this and any new form of disruption. Parental support or consent for protest action should not prevent the school from taking all necessary measures to ensure education is provided in a safe and secure environment

4. The Role of the Police and Public Order Issues

Where there is information available indicating a protest is imminent the local RUC duty Inspector should be informed. The police at this stage will rely heavily on a school's own assessment of the potential for disturbance.

When protesting pupils walk out of class and remain on the school grounds ie playground / playing field, they should be closely supervised at all times to ensure order and discipline. Supervision would reduce the possibility of the school being found negligent should a pupil(s) get injured during such an incident.

When a protesting group gathers at a school gate the police will not necessarily want to act immediately to prevent the blocking of access to a school. This will be a decision taken by the local Commander depending on the circumstances. Should adults enter a school and behave in an intimidatory manner the police have the power to remove them. At all times the police will act in liaison with the principal of the school.

School gates/doors may be locked by staff to prevent protestors entering school grounds and threatening the health and safety of staff and pupils. This situation would require close supervision as pupils who wish to leave school to embark on a protest cannot be prevented from doing so by this action. To attempt to restrain a pupil in this way could result subsequently in an allegation of false imprisonment.

5. Recording Absences

Pupils who absent themselves from school to become involved in a protest, with or without parental consent should be recorded as H ie other absence and this would be regarded as an unauthorised absence. It is important that pupils who are either considering or who get involved in protest action are informed about this.

Pupils who register at school and subsequently leave school without permission should be regarded as having a period/s of absence and this should also be recorded as a H.

The School Meals Service is obliged to provide meals to pupils who are "in attendance" at school. When a pupil has absented him/herself and subsequently seeks re-admission ie to use school facilities and in circumstances where there is a

reasonable belief that further disruption may occur, the principal may decide to deny access.

6. Communicating With Parents

It is important to communicate with all parents, including those whose children are not taking part in the protest. The purpose of this communication is to:

- indicate the school's attitude and position with regard to the protest
- clarify the consequences of participation eg potential for misbehaviour, risk to pupil safety, restrictions on use of school facilities, implications for attendance records, possible disciplinary consequences
- dispel any rumours or scare mongering that may exist
- allay the fears of parents who do not wish their children to be involved eg assure them that school will continue to operate normally and does not support or condone the protest
- make clear that pupils who are protesting outside the school grounds are not the school's responsibility
- emphasise the responsibility of parents in supporting the school.

Letter to all Parents

Advantages:

- Ensures school's views / position reaches all parents
- Allows the school to set out a reasoned and considered position

Points to Consider

- Post the letter to ensure that all parents receive it
- Remember that it may take 2/3 days for parents to receive.

Telephone Calls to Parents of Protesters

Advantages:

- Speed – allows early contact with parents which may reduce numbers of protesters on subsequent days

- Misinformation given to parents can be quickly corrected

Points to Consider

- Time consuming and repetitive (Principal and Senior Staff could share task)
- Some parents are inaccessible by phone.

7. Communicating With Pupils

A duty of care for these pupils remains with the principal. If information indicates that a protest is imminent, the principal and senior staff should meet with all pupils possibly in their year groups, to:

- Indicate the reasons why the protest is inappropriate eg safety, potential misbehaviour, damage to schools reputation, likelihood of protest being ineffective
- Clarify the consequences of their actions eg
 - They are in breach of school policy and may be subject to sanctions
 - There will be no supervision while outside school grounds
 - Any absence will be unauthorised and recorded as such.
- Dispel rumours
- Confirm the rights of those who wish to remain in school to do so
- Stress that lessons will continue as normal
- Indicate that in the event of a walkout parents will be contacted.

If a protest takes place the principal should if possible speak to the protesting pupils to:

- Reiterate the consequences of their actions as detailed
- Indicate that parents will be contacted
- Explain the basis for their return to school. Principals and staff should be satisfied that pupils who are re-admitted to school will act in a reasonable manner.

8. Communicating With Staff

It is important that principals ensure as far as possible, that all teachers understand the procedures and adhere to these in a consistent manner.

Staff should be advised to:

- Avoid engaging in discussion or 'banter' about the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of any proposed or actual action.
- Refrain from physically attempting to restrain or prevent pupils from leaving their classroom or the school premises.
- Record the names of any pupils whose behaviour/language is in breach of the school 'Code of Conduct' and to give these to the principal
- Avoid making any attempt to remonstrate with pupils who have left the school premises.

9. Communicating With The Media

Some Basic Rules

Principals should:

- Be honest
- Remain in control
- Avoid being drawn into a lengthy interview
- Refrain from saying 'the school has no comment to make'
- Describe what has happened in the school in a straightforward and succinct way
- Consider what really needs to be said before the interview. (Stay on that subject, don't allow yourself to be 'led' and always underline that it is school policy you are talking about and never express a personal or political point of view). Most radio/TV interviews will provide 30 - 50 seconds of coverage.

TV and Radio

- Ensure there is time to consider a response
- Avoid 'reading' from a prepared script
- Avoid 'dodging' the questions

- Avoid getting angry with the 'interviewer'

Always try to finish with a positive message about your school.

National/Daily Newspapers

- Never put yourself in the situation where you are responding immediately to a phone call from one of the above.
- Try and find out via your secretary, what the call is about, 'is it a request for information, is it asking for your response to an event or an allegation etc?' Tell your secretary to inform the caller you will phone back in 15/20 minutes. Then use that time to prepare what you want to say. Then always call back. After that the basic rules apply.
- It may be appropriate to draft a statement and ask the interviewer if they will accept a faxed statement for publication.
- Remember it is not the job of a newspaper to sell your school or its point of view. That is your job.

Local/Weekly Newspapers

How you deal with these will depend on your relationship with them. Generally they will wish to be helpful and will print the story as the school gives it to them. Rarely they are looking for an immediate response. Talk to them and ask them to agree to publish a statement put out by the school. If they insist on an interview -- agree. Tell them you will call back in 20 minutes or so. Then call them back.

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