

Schools out?

Selected documents and analysis of the current school strikes

Dr Paul Stott and Iain Mansfield

Hackney School's Stri...
only admins can send messages



By an 11 year old

23:55

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Contents

About the Authors	2
Executive Summary	5
Policy recommendations	7
Introduction	9
Existing legislation and practice	11
The School Strikes	27
Conclusion	52
Appendix: Bristol	53

Executive Summary

This report serves as the first substantive analysis of the school strikes demanding a ceasefire in the Israel/Palestinian conflict, which spread across the country this November. No one should object to school pupils involving themselves in politics, or taking an interest in current affairs, including attending protests. The key thing is that this should not happen in school time. There have been plenty of protests at the weekend. Put simply, there is no good reason for children to be protesting Monday to Friday in school hours.

The authors ask a distinct question about the school strikes - when children leave school to join a protest, who is responsible for their safety and security, and if any come to harm, who will be responsible and held accountable?

For the education system, school strikes provide a challenge in three distinct areas. Participation in them serves as an unauthorised absence, in a period where school attendance is nowhere near what it should be. Indeed, given rates of attendance have not recovered from the shock of the pandemic, we risk a culture of absenteeism developing as the social covenant on school attendance frays.

The second issue is that of political neutrality. School strikes are not unique – indeed there was arguably a blind eye turned to walkouts in support of the climate action campaign within recent years. Those walking out in these school strikes, have referenced the earlier climate strikes. Such actions, though, should not set a precedent. In order to ensure the principle of political neutrality is maintained in our schools, school leaders and education authorities must ensure teachers do not support, or assist, political protests in any way. Where pupils have left school to join demonstrations, a full investigation must be conducted as to the process by which they left their desks, for the high street.

Thirdly, schools have a statutory duty to ensure that children are not drawn into extremism. Upholding that duty is extremely difficult if pupils are leaving their school to join political protests, and meeting potentially anybody who chooses to attend or organise a demonstration. The importance of social media and messaging sites, accessible by anyone with access to a mobile phone, is evidenced when this report details how the school strikes have been organised. The Instagram site School Strike for Palestine promotes in its resources section Islamist groups such as CAGE, who have long been denounced by both government and counter-extremism campaigners for their perceived extremism.

This research details some of the material being circulated ahead of

these demonstrations, and several of the activists and organisations involved. It is not rounded, for example asking pupils to prepare a speech on whether they are allowed to properly discuss the 'genocide' when they are at school. Some of the campaign groups involved, such as Counterfire or the Stop the War Coalition, come with distinct political baggage. While such groups are entirely legal should be free to campaign for their political positions, children should not be joining with these groups in school time.

Relatedly, schools must be mindful of their legal safeguarding duties. Even the best run protests carry inherent risks, with large crowds, a politically charged atmosphere and a large number of people, many or most of whom will not be known to the school authorities. It is highly questionable whether any school authorising pupils to attend a protest during school hours could properly claim that they were fully in control of the risks, whether those involve health and safety considerations or other, more serious, risks to welfare.

Policy recommendations

The Department for Education should update the *Working together to improve school attendance guidance* to make explicit, as the Education Secretary has said, that absence to attend protests or other activism is unacceptable and should never be authorised.

Headteachers should not authorise absence to attend protests and should emphasise to teachers in writing that advocating that pupils attend such protests is a clear breach of impartiality.

All absence for protest or other activism should normally result in a fixed penalty notice (fine). The Department for Education should further update its guidance to set out that any absence to attend protests or other activism should normally result in the issuance of a fixed penalty notice (fine), regardless of the total number of days of unauthorised absence taken by the child. Absence for activism is a deliberately premeditated act of truancy that can carry risks to the child, and accordingly should be treated in a more severe way than more 'typical' acts of unauthorised absence, such as a visit to grandparents during term time.

Local Authorities should similarly update their Codes of Practice on attendance to match this, confirming that absence to attend a political protest may result in a fixed penalty notice even if the normal thresholds for receiving a fixed penalty notice has not been breached.

Local authorities and MAT CEOs should support schools in issuing fixed penalty notices to the parents of children who are absent to attend such protests.

Where children have attended protests in school uniform, schools should act firmly to discipline these pupils under their behaviour policies, both for unauthorised absence and for any other misdeeds (such as disruption or property damage) that may have taken place. Punishments should be at a level to deter children from future unauthorised absences of this nature.

Where absence records or other evidence suggest that a large number of pupils from a school have been absent to attend such a protest, or where local staff or Department for Education regional teams become aware there is a problem, the Department for Education should commission a snap Ofsted inspection. This must include active investigation into what materials have been used in the school, and interviews with pupils and teachers to establish whether teachers have been involved in promoting the protests.

The procedures for referring teachers to the TRA (Teaching Regulation Agency) for breach of the Teachers' Standards should be updated to allow

for referrals by local authorities, the Department for Education and Ofsted, as well as employers and members of the public.

Should evidence come to light that any teachers have been taking pupils on such protests, the sternest possible action should be taken against the staff, including disciplinary action within their school and, if appropriate, referral to the TRA. If it appears that the action was taken with the complicity of the school authorities, or if the responsible authority (Local Authority, Multi-Academy Trust or diocese) does not take appropriate action, DfE should commission a snap Ofsted inspection.

Should any children be arrested for actions at a protest in school hours, a full investigation involving both the police and school must be conducted to ensure how they came to be out of school at that time, and the role played by any adults in taking them through the school gates and onto the streets.

Getting policy on school protests correct now, matters. Indulging protests in previous years has arguably not helped. The Department for Education and OFSTED needs to recognise that what schools do today sets precedent should future international conflicts play out on the streets of British cities. How comfortable would we be if instead of the Israel/Palestinian question, children were coming out onto the streets in Leicester or Birmingham to take sides in the conflict over Kashmir, or other disputes between India and Pakistan? The social cohesion of tomorrow is shaped by the decisions we take in our schools today.

Introduction

This analysis provides the first detailed study of the 2023 school protests, which have followed the 7 October attacks on Israel by Hamas, and the subsequent invasion of Gaza by Israeli armed forces. The text details existing legislation and practice with regards to school absence, before establishing what has happened at some of the protests, alongside an overview of individuals and organisations who have promoted the walkouts.

While unusual in the British school system, they are not unique. In 2003 schools in England, Scotland and Wales saw protests and strikes by pupils opposed to the American and British invasion of Iraq.¹ In 2018 school strikes for climate action began in Sweden, spreading internationally, making a public figure of a schoolgirl protester, Greta Thunberg. By April 2019, the 16-year-old Greta Thunberg was addressing the House of Parliament.²

Earlier that year, the climate strikes had seen students and pupils walk out of English schools and colleges, with some generous media coverage.³ These strikes appear to have enjoyed limited political impact, but in some cities did reach a level of prominence. They also continued as a tactic - on 28 February 2020 Bristol Youth Strike 4 Climate (BYS4C) organised a protest in the city, addressed by Greta Thunberg, which was attended by an estimated 20,000 protesters.⁴ It is perhaps no coincidence that the 2023 school strikes demanding a ceasefire in Gaza appear to have begun in Bristol, with Greta Thunberg and the climate protests referenced by those taking part.

While generating interest amongst young people in political issues and debates is a positive development, three substantive concerns must emerge from the school strikes. Firstly, participation in the strikes constitutes unauthorised absence, at a time when absence rates are already unusually high, having failed to fully recover from the COVID disruption. Put simply, the place for children is school, not the streets.

Secondly, if teachers were to be actively involved in protests, or in encouraging pupils to attend, it would potentially constitute a breach of the law on political impartiality. Schools have a delicate balancing act in introducing children to contentious arguments and debates - and there are few as contentious as Israel/Palestine. The school strikes add to an already challenging working environment.

Thirdly the school strikes come with a potential risk. It may, in some cases, increase the potential for school children to be drawn into political extremism through association with groups or individuals involved in violent or non-violent extremism. There are also significant risks

1. Stop the War: The story of Britain's biggest mass movement, Andrew Murray and Lindsey German, London: Bookmarks, 2005, p. 193-4
2. 'You did not act in time': Greta Thunberg's full speech to MPs, Guardian, 23 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/23/greta-thunberg-full-speech-to-mps-you-did-not-act-in-time>
3. See for example 'Climate strike: Why are students striking and will it have an impact?' Matt McGrath, BBC News, 15 February 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-47242477>
4. Let's march! Greta Thunberg is in Bristol for climate protest, CBBC Newsround, 28 February 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news-round/51670888>

involving schools' legal safeguarding duties. Even the best run protests carry inherent risks, with large crowds, a politically charged atmosphere and a large number of people, many or most of whom will not be known to the school authorities. It is highly questionable whether any school authorising pupils to attend a protest during school hours could properly claim that they were fully in control of the risks, whether those involve health and safety considerations or other, more serious, risks to welfare.

At a more fundamental level, a permissive environment towards school strikes risks damaging social cohesion. Divisions within schools and classrooms may occur, for example between Jewish and Muslim pupils, which teachers may find difficult to control. Handling these protests matters, because precedent is potentially set. What if a future wave of protests centres on the dispute concerning Kashmir, or a wider conflict between India and Pakistan. How comfortable would we be if groups of pupils poured onto the streets in those circumstances?

Existing legislation and practice

Unauthorised Absence

The question of unauthorised absence occurs in those circumstances where pupils are attending protests without the permission of their school or, at a minimum, in a way which is not organised or encouraged by the school. This section does not discuss the separate scenario of where an individual teacher, or the school as a whole, organises for pupils to attend a pro-Palestine protest during school hours, which is discussed under Political Impartiality.

Why does attendance matter?

Attendance matters. Every day missed from school has a small but measurable impact on pupil attainment, with research showing that each day of individual pupil absence results in around 0.3-0.4% of a standard deviation reduction in achievement.⁵ Government statistics demonstrate:

At KS2, pupils not meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths had an overall absence rate of 4.7%, compared to 3.5% among those meeting the expected standard. Moreover, the overall absence rate of pupils not meeting the expected standard was higher than among those meeting the higher standard (4.7% compared to 2.7%). At KS4, pupils not achieving grade 9 to 4 in English and maths had an overall absence rate of 8.8%, compared to 5.2% among those achieving grade 4-1. The overall absence rate of pupils not achieving grade 9 to 4 was over twice as high as those achieving grade 9 to 5 (8.8% compared to 3.7%).⁶

Yet, following the pandemic, absence levels remain at near record levels. Pupil attendance data shows that absence levels in the academic year 22/23 stood at 7.5%, which rises to 11.4% for pupils eligible for Free School Meals and 13.3% for pupils with an Education, Health and Care plan.⁷ Within this, the proportion of pupils who were persistently absent (defined as those who missed at least 10% of school) stood at 22.5%,⁸ up from 11% before the pandemic in 2018/19.⁹ The Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, has stated:

I fear that attendance has become the issue of our time. The number of children regularly missing school has more than doubled compared to pre-pandemic and we are only making slow progress in steadying school absence rates. Worryingly, over 120,000 children are missing at least half of their time in school.¹⁰

In addition to the impact on themselves, absences create a secondary

5. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research-projects/2022/jan/school-absences-and-pupil-achievement>
6. The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/the-link-between-absence-and-attainment-at-ks2-and-ks4/2018-19>
7. Pupil attendance in schools. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-attendance-in-schools/2023-week-29>
8. Ibid
9. Missing Children, Missing Grades, The Children's Commissioner for England. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/missing-children-missing-grades/>
10. Missing Children, Missing Grades, The Children's Commissioner for England. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/missing-children-missing-grades/>

impact upon other pupils by weakening the culture that attendance is vital. This is particularly the case if it is seen that that absence is permitted, or in some way endorsed, by teachers or the school. Creating a strong culture of attendance is critical to tackling absence rights, with a leading behavioural expert writing that “In successful schools, the expectation is 100% attendance and 100% punctuality. This admittedly near-impossible goal is embedded as an aspirational norm. Crucially, it is monitored and tracked in real time rather than retrospectively.”¹¹

Recent events, most significantly the lengthy school closures during the pandemic have badly damaged the social contract between parents and schools regarding attendance, with a study finding that “Covid has caused a seismic shift in parental attitudes to school attendance”; and that “There has been a fundamental breakdown in the relationship between schools and parents across the socioeconomic spectrum.”¹² Reversing this will be a long-term endeavour, and one that can be easily thrown off-track by anything that undermines a culture of 100% attendance.

When inspecting schools, Ofsted will consider attendance as part of their assessment of a school’s performance, in particular through the assessment of Behaviour and Attitudes and Leadership and Management. They will scrutinise attendance records and “will consider whether the school is doing all they reasonably can to achieve the highest possible attendance.”¹³ Ofsted have set out that:

*Inspection evidence and discussions with leaders indicate that schools that usually tackle absence well are continuing to do so. Leaders are using the same strategies that they usually do, showing the same persistence and conveying the same high expectations. At the same time, they are asking themselves their usual questions about what, if anything, they need to do differently to remove barriers to pupils’ attendance, and are systematically acting to do just that.*¹⁴

What does the law say?

The law requires that all children should receive a full-time education. For the vast majority of children this takes place in a school, the exception to this being the small proportion of children who are home educated.

For those children who attend school, it is a legal requirement upon their parents to make sure that they attend regularly, which guidance defines as:

*This means their child must attend every day that the school is open, except in a small number of allowable circumstances such as being too ill to attend or being given permission for an absence in advance from the school.*¹⁵

Where parents are not ensuring that their children are attending regularly, various powers exist to compel them to do so. This is typically enforced by Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs), or fines, of £60 if paid within 21 days of receipt, rising to £120 if paid after 21 days but within 28 days.

In the case of continued unauthorised absence, a Parenting Order can be issued in the Magistrates Court, requiring the parents to attend parenting classes; and other requirements may be added to ensure the child attends

11. Independent Review of Behaviour in Schools, Tom Bennett, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7506e4ed915d3c7d529cec/Tom_Bennett_Independent_Review_of_Behaviour_in_Schools.pdf
12. Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis, Public First. <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ATTENDANCE-REPORT-V02.pdf>
13. Ofsted School Inspection Handbook. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/school-inspection-handbook-for-september-2023>
14. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence>
15. Working together to improve school attendance 2022. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1099677/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance.pdf

school regularly. An Education Supervision Order can also be imposed through the Family or High Court and, ultimately, the Local Authority may choose to prosecute the parents in the Magistrates' Court, which can lead to the imposition of a fine, community service or imprisonment. Department for Education guidance states: "Prosecution in the Magistrates Court is the last resort where all other voluntary and formal support or legal intervention has failed or where support has been deemed inappropriate in the circumstances of the individual case."¹⁶

What constitutes exceptional circumstances?

Government guidance sets out that pupils should only be given permission to be absent in 'exceptional circumstances'. There is no definitive position on what constitutes 'exceptional circumstances', with the Department for Education's guidance on this matter consisting of the following:

Granting leaves of absence

28. Only exceptional circumstances warrant a leave of absence. Schools should consider each application individually taking into account the specific facts and circumstances and relevant background context behind the request.

29. If a leave of absence is granted, it is for the headteacher to determine the length of the time the pupil can be away from school.

30. As head teachers should only grant leaves of absence in exceptional circumstances it is unlikely a leave of absence will be granted for the purposes of a family holiday.¹⁷

Ultimately, considerable discretion is granted to headteachers in determining what constitutes 'exceptional circumstances'. It may appear unlikely that attending a political protest would constitute 'exceptional circumstances'; however, there is no explicit government guidance about whether or not this is the case. Nor do most school policies explicitly reference protests when discussing what forms of absence would or would not be authorised.¹⁸

In the Climate Strikes that occurred in 2019-20, the Department for Education confirmed that it was for individual head teachers to determine what constituted exceptional circumstances. The Association of School and College Leaders said that 'students should not miss school in order to take part in protests', and instead that schools should explore 'how else schools might allow students to give voice to their concerns.'¹⁹ The National Association of Head Teachers similarly said that "it's our position that the safety and wellbeing of students cannot be fully provided for off-premises at protests and strikes during school hours"; and likewise expressed support for other ways in which schools could help pupils voice their opinions.²⁰ However, *The Guardian* reported that in at least one school, Sibford School in Oxfordshire, the head teacher did authorise absences to attend a climate strike:²¹

16. Ibid

17. Ibid.

18. The authors looked at twenty school and academy trust attendance policies. None of them referred to protests.

19. <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/content/best-practice/climate-change-strikes-ideas-for-how-schools-can-respond/>

20. <https://thehub.naht.org.uk/staging/supporting-action-on-climate-change-in-your-school/>

21. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/feb/26/should-children-be-allowed-time-off-school-to-strike>



Toby Spence
head, Sibford school, Banbury, Oxfordshire

“Yes. The school community felt very strongly about the strike and I was happy to authorise the absences of those who wanted to take part. I sense a great deal of exasperation from children that political leaders of the world today seem to be unable or unwilling to take decisive and unilateral action on climate change. Instant gratification and myopic political point-scoring blindly trumps all.

“As the head of a Quaker school that takes its responsibility towards the environment seriously, I believe it is incumbent upon us to support the children of today in making their voices heard. What is education about? If we do not have a planet to live on, then there is not a lot of point in learning about Pythagoras or Shakespeare.

“Whatever the debate about climate change, there is clear and troubling scientific evidence, which cannot be ignored. Many children rightly have a sense of urgency and they absolutely should have a voice.”

More recently, the Education Secretary Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP posted on X, formerly Twitter, to say that ‘missing school for activism is unacceptable’:²²



When would parents be fined?

If an absence was not authorised, it would by definition be unauthorised -- which could lead to parents receiving a Fixed Penalty Notice (fine). However, whether this would be likely in practice will depend on where they live and the approach of the individual school their children attend.

Local authorities are required to publish a Code of Conduct for issuing fixed penalty notices -- which must be adhered to by all schools, the police and any local authority officer issuing a penalty notice. Each Code must:

set out the situations where a fixed penalty notice is appropriate. These should include: a number of unauthorised absences, one off instances of irregular attendance (such as holidays taken during term time without the school's permission) and where an excluded child is found in a public place during school hours without a justifiable reason. The code must also specify the maximum number of penalty notices that may be issued to an individual parent in any 12 month period.²³

In practice, the Codes of local authorities typically allow a considerable degree of unauthorised absences before fines can be imposed. Bristol City

22. <https://x.com/GillianKeegan/status/1725536812704178449?s=20>

23. Working Together to Improve School Attendance. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1099677/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance.pdf

Council – in which pro-Palestine strikes have been occurring – states that a fixed penalty notice will not be issued unless a child has more than 4 days of unauthorised absences within the previous 10 week period :²⁴

WHEN ARE PENALTY NOTICES USED?

Penalty Notices may be used where absence is unauthorised and a pupil has 8 or more sessions (1 day = 2 sessions) of unauthorised absences within the previous 10 week period, for example:

- Unauthorised holiday (G), for example a parent has taken their child on holiday during term without authorisation.
- A pupil regularly arrives late for school after the register has closed (U)
- Odd days off which have not been authorised by the school (O)
- Enquiries at school after a truancy sweep show the pupil's absence at that time as unauthorised.
- The pupil is present in a public place during school hours whilst excluded from school

Similarly, Tower Hamlets Council -- another location where pro-Palestine strikes have occurred – states that a child can have unauthorised absence of up to three days before a fixed penalty notice will be issued:²⁵

Reasons for a Penalty Notice (fine)

- Unauthorised leave/holidays during term time for 6 or more half days
- If parents/carers do not attend In-School Attendance Panels where they have been invited to discuss their child's unauthorised absences and/or lateness
- Attendance of 90% or less over a school term with 20 or more unauthorised half-days. Where parents/carers have failed to work with the school to address and improve the situation.
- late arrival at school (10 minutes after the attendance register has closed) with 20 avoidable late marks or more over the period of a school term. After normal school procedures and sanctions have been followed. The journey, weather conditions and transport disruptions will be taken into consideration.
- A mix of unauthorised absence and avoidable lateness (10 minutes after the attendance register has closed) of 20 sessions or more over the period of a school term.
- If parents/carers do not make sure their child is not in a public place during the first 5 days of exclusion from school without a good reason.

Nor is this confined to local authorities where pro-Palestine strikes are occurring. Hertfordshire Council, for example, indicates that “the pupil must have at least 15 half days of unauthorised absence in the current and / or previous term” before a penalty notice will be issued,²⁶ and Kent Council says that it would require the pupil to be ‘absent for 10 or more half-day sessions (five school days) without authorisation during any 100 possible school sessions or 50 school days – these do not need to be consecutive.’²⁷

This has led to the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) stating:

*We've been assured by those working in schools that whilst this would count as an unauthorised absence, a child can have up to four days in a row unauthorised and would need 10 in a short amount of time to be fined. Please do check your own school policy.*²⁸

Provided their children do not already have a number of unauthorised absences, in most cases it is likely that this is correct – that parents

24. School Attendance Information Leaflet, Bristol City Council. <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/398-school-attendance-leaflet-2020/file#:~:text=1.,Penalty%20Notice.,pay%20may%20result%20in%20prosecution.>

25. School Absence Penalty Notice (Fine), Tower Hamlets Council. https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/ignl/education_and_learning/schools/School-Absence-Penalty-Notice-fine.aspx#:~:text=Parents%2Fcarers%20may%20get%20a,444%20Education%20Act%201996.

26. <https://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/schools/school-attendance/school-absences/pay-a-school-penalty-notice#:~:text=If%20your%20child%20misses%20school,not%20pay%20with-in%2021%20days.>

27. https://www.kelsi.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/62126/KCC-Penalty-Notice-Code-of-Conduct.pdf

28. <https://www.stopwar.org.uk/events/school-strike-for-palestine/>

are unlikely to receive a fixed penalty notice if their children have an unauthorised absence to attend a pro-Palestine strike.

Fixed penalty notices can only be issued by head teachers or someone authorised by them (a deputy or assistant head), a local authority officer or the police, and are issued at their discretion. Furthermore, some Codes of Conduct require that the Local Authority approves; for example, in Kent:

Kent County Council's Inclusion and Attendance Service will issue all Penalty Notices within the administrative area of Kent County Council for all unauthorised absences and exclusions. This ensures consistent and equitable delivery, avoids duplication of Penalty Notices, helps to maintain good school and alternative provision relationships with the home and ensures that there is no conflict with other enforcement sanctions,"²⁹ while in Cambridgeshire, "Head teachers and police officers should only issue a Penalty Notice following consultation, discussion, reflection and joint decision with County Council Attendance Legal Panel."³⁰

It is therefore possible that, even if the local authority's Code would suggest that a fixed penalty notice would normally be issued, one would not necessarily be issued in any specific instance.

The pro-Palestine Strikes and Absence

Under the current circumstances, three questions arise where pupils are missing school to attend pro-Palestine strikes:

- Is it formally an absence?
- Is it an authorised absence?
- Will effective action be taken?

On the first question, while it might appear obvious that it is an absence, schools require registers to be taken twice a day, for the morning and afternoon sessions. It is therefore possible that a pupil who attended a protest between 10am and 12 noon could be marked as 'present' in the morning and return in time to be marked as 'present' in the afternoon. This would then ensure that neither the pupil nor the school would accrue an unauthorised absence. While the school could seek to impose sanctions³¹ on the pupil regarding non-attendance during the individual lessons missed after the morning registration, they might not choose to, and the absence would not be formally recorded or visible to the Department for Education or Ofsted.

On the second, while the guidance provides discretion to Heads, it appears likely that in most cases schools would be unlikely to authorise an absence to attend a political protest – although a minority of schools might choose to do so.³² Most pupils attending protests are therefore likely to have it recorded as an unauthorised absence.

On the third, however, despite the Education Secretary's statement that 'missing school for activism is unacceptable', in practice there is little that

29. https://www.kelsi.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/62126/KCC-Penalty-Notice-Code-of-Conduct.pdf

30. <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/asset-library/penalty-notice-code-of-conduct-april-2023.pdf>

31. Such as a detention or other penalties.

32. Although one might question the decision on attendance or educational grounds, it is unlikely that simply authorising an absence to attend a protest -- where the school had not encouraged in any way the pupil to be absent or promoted that cause -- would, by itself constitute a breach of the law on political impartiality, unless the school was inconsistently granting absences for some protests and not others in a partial or biased way.

schools, local authorities and police officers would be able to do, at least for an individual instance. Although the exact parameters vary, most local authority Codes of Practice do not allow fixed penalty notices to be issued unless a pupil has accrued a number of unauthorised absences in a relatively short period of time. However firmly a school wished to penalise such conduct, their hands would be tied.

In the case where a pupil had already accrued a number of unauthorised absences, it might be possible for a fixed penalty notice to be issued; this would also be the case if a pupil attended a sufficient number of protests in close succession, such that the total number of unauthorised absences surpassed the threshold. Even in these circumstances, however, there is no surety of a fixed penalty notice being issued. The fact that in many local authorities both the school and the local authority must agree to issuing the fixed penalty notice, creates further opportunities for discretion -- perhaps particularly if the local authority, or councillors, are known to be sympathetic to the protests.

One option may be to directly discipline the pupil; however, this may be difficult if the pupil has attended the protest with their parents' permission, even if the absence was not authorised by the school. However, if the pupil has attended the protest wearing their school uniform then the school may have more options.

Most school behaviour policies say that staff members may discipline pupils outside school grounds when they are wearing school uniform. For example, the Behaviour Policy of Mulberry Academy, Ilford, a school from which it has been reported that pupils have been absent to take part in strikes, says the below:³³

The policy covers all students on roll at Mulberry School Shoreditch and extends beyond the school day and school premises to cover when students are:

- Taking part in any school-organised or school-related activity
- Travelling to or from school
- Wearing school uniform or in some other way identifiable as a student at the school
- Posing a threat to another student or member of the public
- Behaving in a way that could adversely affect the reputation of the school.

Where pupils have taken part in a protest wearing school uniform, even if actions cannot be taken to fine the parents, schools should act firmly to discipline these pupils under their behaviour policies, both for unauthorised absence and for any other misdeeds (such as disruption or property damage) that may have taken place. Punishments should be at a level to deter children from future unauthorised absences of this nature.

Political Impartiality

Under the Education Act 1996, schools are required to be politically impartial. These are set out in Sections 406 and 407:³⁴

406 Political Indoctrination

- (1) The local authority, governing body and head teacher shall forbid—
- (a) the pursuit of partisan political activities by any of those registered pupils at

33. Mulberry Academy Shoreditch Behaviour Policy <http://www.mulberryacademyshoreditch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Behaviour-Policy-Mar-2022.pdf>

34. Education Act 1996. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/406>

a maintained school who are junior pupils, and

(b) the promotion of partisan political views—

(i) in the teaching of any subject in the school (in the case of a school in England), or

(ii) in the teaching of any aspect of a curriculum provided in the school under the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 (in the case of a school in Wales)

(2) In the case of activities which take place otherwise than on the school premises, subsection (1)(a) applies only where arrangements for junior pupils to take part in the activities are made by—

(a) any member of the school's staff (in his capacity as such), or

(b) anyone acting on behalf of the school or of a member of the school's staff (in his capacity as such).

(3) In this section “maintained school” includes a community or foundation special school established in a hospital.

407 Duty to secure balanced treatment of political issues.

(1) The local authority, governing body and head teacher shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils while they are—

(a) in attendance at a maintained school, or

(b) taking part in extra-curricular activities which are provided or organised for registered pupils at the school by or on behalf of the school, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.

(2) In this section “maintained school” includes a community or foundation special school established in a hospital.

These provisions apply to all schools under local authority control. Similar provisions are included in the funding agreement of most academies. For independent schools, the legal duties are set out in Part 2 of the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, which also apply to academies.³⁵

Alongside these duties, schools also have a number of other obligations, including the duty to ‘foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it’ under the Equality Act 2010³⁶ and the Prevent duty under Section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015.³⁷

Political Impartiality and Protests

It is clear that schools must be impartial in their teaching about contested and politically controversial subjects, including Israel and Palestine. This report, however, will explicitly consider the duties of schools on impartiality, in connection with protests. There are at least four scenarios

35. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/3283/made>

36. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/11/chapter/1>

37. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/6/contents/enacted>

that could give rise to concern of a breach of the impartiality duties:

- If a school, or a teacher within a school, organised or led pupils to attend a pro-Palestine protest.
- If a school, or a teacher within a school, actively encouraged pupils to attend a pro-Palestine protest.
- If a school, or a teacher within a school, promoted an organisation that was organising pro-Palestine protests in a way which constituted the promotion of partisan political views, or failed to secure the balanced presentation of opposing views.
- If a teacher acted in a way that constituted gross misconduct and a breach of the Teachers' Standards.

In 2022, the Department for Education issued non-statutory guidance on political impartiality -- the first time guidance had been issued on this matter.³⁸ Helpfully, the guidance contains a number of statements and case studies related to protests. As non-statutory guidance, this document is not binding upon schools; however, it is helpful in that it sets out the expectations and interpretation of the Department for Education; furthermore, a court or other authority might look at the guidance when considering whether or not a school was meeting its legal responsibilities.

The guidance makes clear that “It is never appropriate for teachers and staff to promote their own partisan political views to pupils or encourage them to engage in specific political activity or join specific partisan groups.” It goes on to say, in a case study relating to environmental protests:

It would not be appropriate for a teacher to suggest that pupils join a certain campaigning group or engage in specific political activity, for example, an upcoming protest. Teachers and staff can, however, explain to pupils how they can get more actively involved outside of school. This might be by:

- *explaining the different partisan political views campaigning groups advocate*
- *telling pupils where they can find out more about this*
- *providing a balanced account of political issues related to [the issue in question].*

The guidance recognises that, in the aftermath of significant events, pupils might proactively raise issues related to what they have seen in the news, or that schools may wish to proactively teach about such issues. In such circumstances, it sets out that schools should be particularly careful to maintain impartiality:

During periods of heightened political activity and sensitivity, including around elections or in the aftermath of significant political events, staff should be mindful to avoid activity within the school that could be construed as promoting a particular partisan view.

Teachers and staff can continue to discuss political issues, including political parties, movements, and protests, that may be relevant to pupils. This must be done in a balanced manner and not involve promoting partisan political views on the issue.

38. Political Impartiality in Schools. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/political-impartiality-in-schools/political-impartiality-in-schools>

It continues to provide a case study involving protests across the country following an international incident:

Scenario Q

Following an international diplomatic incident, protests across the country have been organised and the issue has been raised in the classroom.

Teachers may support discussion about the issue which might refer to the protests. However, they must not advocate pupils join these protests or promote partisan political views advocated by the protest movement, or its opponents.

Both pupils and teachers can freely attend legal protests outside school.

It should be noted that although both teachers and pupils can freely attend legal protests outside school, it would still be inappropriate, and in breach of the duties on impartiality, for a teacher to advocate for a pupil to join a particular protest – whether or not that protest took place within school hours.

The guidance even includes a case study, ‘Scenario G’, specifically on Israel and Palestine, emphasising the importance of impartiality when using materials produced by external partners:

Schools and teachers should choose the resources they use when teaching about political issues carefully.

Before using any resources in teaching, teachers should review these thoroughly. They should consider whether, without specific additional context, the resource may undermine a balanced presentation or promote partisan political views.

Schools should be conscious of resources from external agencies that might initially appear appropriate but may contain bias and undermine a balanced account of the political issues being taught. See the section on using external agencies for more information.

Scenario G

A teacher finds a resource online designed to support teaching about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is a political issue. It is hosted by an external organisation which does not seem to have an obvious partisan political affiliation.

The resource appears to be helpful as it provides both factual content, and excerpts from statements by significant political figures from both sides of the conflict. However, on closer inspection, it does not provide a balanced account of the conflict. For instance, the apparently factual content includes partisan political views on both historical events in the region, presented without additional context that would make clear that these are contested views. Several quotes from political figures have been inappropriately abridged to present

an inaccurate version of what was really said, and important contextual information about these quotes has been omitted.

Given that it might not be clear to pupils that the resource promotes a contested partisan political view in this way, rather than providing a balanced account of the political issue in question, it may be advisable to avoid its use.

The guidance also contains helpful provisions on staff expressing their own political opinions, both in the school and on social media where it may be visible by pupils they teach:

Teachers and other staff have a responsibility to ensure that they act appropriately particularly in the political views they express.

There is no blanket prohibition on teachers and staff expressing their own views on political issues that are being taught to pupils. However, there is a risk that doing so could sometimes amount to promoting a partisan political view or compromise the balanced presentation of opposing views. Teachers and staff are in a position of authority and will typically be respected and trusted by the pupils they teach, giving their personal opinions greater weight and credibility.

As a general principle, they should avoid expressing their own personal political views to pupils unless they are confident this will not amount to promoting that view to pupils.

And that:

“Schools should be conscious of the fact that in some instances staff behaviour outside school may become visible to pupils, particularly when social media is used.”

Finally, the guidance contains a clear prohibition on working with external agencies with ‘extreme political positions’. These include, though are not limited to:

- promoting the adoption of non-democratic political systems rather than those based on democracy, for any purpose
- a publicly stated desire to abolish democracy, to end free and fair elections, or violently overthrow capitalism
- opposition to the right of freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of assembly or freedom of religion and conscience
- engaging in or encouraging active or persistent harassment or intimidation of individuals in support of their cause
- the use or endorsement of racist language or communications, including antisemitic (sic)³⁹
- promoting divisive narratives that seek to justify serious criminal activity, including violent action against people, criminal damage to property, hate crime or terrorism
- selecting and presenting information, in a biased or unbalanced manner, to make unsubstantiated accusations against state institutions to justify serious criminal activity, including violent

39. In the Department for Education’s guidance, this bullet ends at the word ‘antisemitic’ – it appears to be referring to antisemitic language or communications.

- action against people, criminal damage to property, hate crime or terrorism
- the encouragement or endorsement of serious criminal activity, including where organisations fail to condemn criminal actions that have been committed in their name or in support of their cause, including violent action against people, criminal damage to property, hate crime or terrorism.

The guidance further states that:

Schools should not under any circumstances work with, or use materials produced by, external agencies that take extreme political positions on these matters. This is the case even if the material itself is not extreme, as the use of it could imply endorsement or support of the organisation.

Collectively, both the underlying law and guidance are helpful in clarifying what schools and teachers should and should not do.

It is clearly inappropriate – and expressly contrary to the guidance – for a teacher or school to actively advocate for pupils to attend a pro-Palestine protest. This would include both organising pupils to attend such a protest, taking them on such a protest, or simply recommending that they attend. This would be the case whether or not the protest took place within school hours.

It would be acceptable for a teacher to mention that such protests were occurring, as part of teaching about the current situation in the Middle East and domestic reaction in an impartial and balanced way, ideally if other ways, including pro-Israeli activities, were mentioned as to how pupils could express their views. Teachers would need to be careful that this did not cross the line into actively advocating for pupils to attend such protests.

Teachers should be careful to teach about the current situation in the Middle East – and the domestic reaction – in an impartial and balanced way, offering a balanced presentation of opposing views, regardless of their own personal opinions. They should be cautious about voicing their own opinions, lest this undermine that impartial approach, and should take care to ensure any resources they use are appropriate and non-partisan, particularly where these are provided by external groups. If partisan resources are used – for example as part of teaching about what different groups have said about the conflict, with an older age group – they should be contrasted with other resources produced by other bodies, rather than presented uncritically as factual.

Finally, they should on no account use materials from, or otherwise work with, organisations that take extreme political positions. In particular, the provisions which might potentially be relevant to the current situation include organisations that use or endorse racist or antisemitic language or communications, or any organisations involved in the promotion or support of terrorism.

Political Impartiality and the Teachers' Standards

In addition to schools having a requirement to maintain political impartiality, teachers are also obliged to maintain professional standards. These are set out in the Teachers' Standards, published by the Department for Education. These have statutory force under regulation 6(8)(a) of the Education (School Teachers' Appraisal) (England) Regulations 2012. The Teachers' Standards define the minimum level of practice for trainees and teachers to achieve qualified teacher status, set a clear baseline of expectations for the professional practice and conduct of teachers and define the minimum level of practice expected of teachers in England.⁴⁰

Part Two of these sets out standards in Personal and Professional Conduct:

Part Two: Personal and professional conduct

A teacher is expected to demonstrate consistently high standards of personal and professional conduct. The following statements define the behaviour and attitudes which set the required standard for conduct throughout a teacher's career.

- Teachers uphold public trust in the profession and maintain high standards of ethics and behaviour, within and outside school, by:
 - treating pupils with dignity, building relationships rooted in mutual respect, and at all times observing proper boundaries appropriate to a teacher's professional position
 - having regard for the need to safeguard pupils' well-being, in accordance with statutory provisions
 - showing tolerance of and respect for the rights of others
 - not undermining fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs
 - ensuring that personal beliefs are not expressed in ways which exploit pupils' vulnerability or might lead them to break the law.
- Teachers must have proper and professional regard for the ethos, policies and practices of the school in which they teach, and maintain high standards in their own attendance and punctuality.
- Teachers must have an understanding of, and always act within, the statutory frameworks which set out their professional duties and responsibilities.

The most relevant of these with respect to the pro-Palestine protests are likely to be 'showing tolerance of and respect for the rights of others', 'not undermining fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs', 'ensuring that personal beliefs are not expressed in ways which exploit pupils' vulnerability or might lead them to break the law', and the requirement to 'have an understanding of, and always act within, the statutory frameworks which set out their professional duties and responsibilities' – which would include political impartiality.

It should be noted that a breach of the impartiality rules would not necessarily constitute a breach of the Teachers' Standards, particularly if this

40. Teachers' Standards. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards>

was minor or done in good faith. For example, a teacher who accidentally used biased or partisan material in school, from an organisation that they thought was impartial but was actually promoting a particular agenda, would be highly unlikely to be breaching the Standards. Such a mistake would be more appropriately dealt with within the school, with a member of the leadership team explaining how more care should be taken in using materials from external bodies, particularly in contentious areas such as this.

It is, however, possible that certain actions by teachers could result in a breach of the standards. Examples of activities that might be likely to cause concern include, but are not limited to:

- A teacher advocating for pupils to join, or actively organising and accompanying pupils on, a protest in which law-breaking was planned.
- A teacher who exposed pupils to materials, individuals or groups that would be likely to see the pupils become drawn into extremism.
- A teacher knowingly using materials which were grossly in breach of the impartiality rules, such as those which excused terrorism or were produced by groups with extreme political positions.
- A teacher who promoted racist or antisemitic tropes or ideology to their pupils, or who glorified terrorism or proscribed terrorist groups.
- A teacher who, regardless of whether pupils were present, glorified terrorism or proscribed terrorist groups, or espoused antisemitism, racism or hatred towards others as part of a protest or other activity.

Whether or not a teacher has breached the Standards is determined by the Teaching Regulation Agency (TRA). A teacher can be referred either by their employer, or by any member of the public, and the referral must include details of the alleged breach of the standards. An investigation will then be carried out by the TRA, followed by a hearing before a panel of teacher and lay members -- which may result in a teacher being given a Prohibition Order, prohibiting them from teaching for life, though in some cases the teacher may apply for this to be reviewed and removed after a certain period of time.

Political Impartiality and the pro-Palestine Protests

It is currently unclear whether or not any teachers have been involved in organising pupils to attend the pro-Palestine protests, accompanying them on the protests or otherwise advocating to them to attend. Any such activity would, if discovered, constitute a clear breach of impartiality.

Teachers should also take great care when using any material produced by organisations promoting the protests in schools. If presented uncritically, or in isolation, this would be likely to constitute promotion

of the protests, and politically partisan teaching about the events. It could be appropriate to use such material as part of a balanced lesson teaching about the different domestic reactions to the conflict in the Middle East, in which case it would likely be most appropriate to contrast these with materials produced by other groups approaching the issue from the other side of the debate, as well as official statements and commentary or balanced media commentary.

The potential for pupils to be drawn into extremism

The school strikes raise safeguarding issues. As will be shown in the next section on the protests and some of the organisations involved in them, they entail hundreds of children leaving the secure environment of their school, for political protests in towns and city centres. Parents and teachers will have very little control over who children meet, or what they are exposed to.

Schools have legal duties regarding safeguarding, which are set out in full in the statutory guidance document *Keeping Children Safe in Education*, published by the Department for Education⁴¹. Even the best run protests carry inherent risks, with large crowds, a politically charged atmosphere and a large number of people, many or most of whom will not be known to the school authorities. It is highly questionable whether any school authorising pupils to attend a protest during school hours could properly claim that they were fully in control of the risks, whether those involve health and safety considerations or other, more serious, risks to welfare.

In 2019, the law firm Stone King, published a note which set out the risks that schools should be mindful of.⁴² It said:

“In determining their stance on climate action, schools must be mindful of their safeguarding and health and safety obligations towards pupils. Schools have a legal responsibility for students during school hours, and authorising an absence in these circumstances effectively endorses attendance at a mass event over which a school has no control. In addition, while the youth-led climate strikes have to date been peaceful, participation at an event of this size will inevitably pose some risk to pupils, particularly where the nearest strike is some distance away, or where younger pupils plan to attend protests unaccompanied. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which a school authorises attendance at a climate strike, only for a pupil to come to some harm. In addition, there may be vulnerable pupils for whom the prospect of being out of school during scheduled hours triggers other welfare concerns.”

It is clear that similar or greater risks would apply to the pro-Palestine strikes.

Additionally, protests on the Israel/Palestine question, and indeed on other issues, may increase the potential for school children to be drawn into political extremism. This may occur via exposure to extremist chants or literature, or via association with groups or individuals involved in violent or non-violent extremism.

41. *Keeping Children Safe in Education* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1181955/Keeping_children_safe_in_education_2023.pdf

42. <https://www.stoneking.co.uk/literature/e-bulletins/what-schools-need-know-about-climate-change-protests-and-pupil-absence>

Regrettably, pro-Palestinian campaigns in the UK have attracted extremists. Consider the 2017 Manchester Arena suicide bomber Salman Abedi. Less than two years before that attack, but four years after he had joined Islamic forces in Libya,⁴³ Abedi travelled to London to join a Palestine Solidarity Campaign picket outside Downing Street, and then a further demonstration outside the UAE embassy.⁴⁴

A further example is the controversy over the chant ‘from the river to the sea’. One of the groups which this report demonstrates to be active in the school protests is the socialist group Counterfire. Following the Hamas attacks on Israel, but just before Israel’s ground invasion of Gaza, Counterfire produced a ‘Palestine demo special’ in October. This publication contained an image of a masked individual waving a Palestinian flag with the front-page slogan: ‘Palestine will be free from the river to the sea’.⁴⁵ There was no call at this stage for a ceasefire, and the slogan can be seen as a call for the destruction of Israel -- a country whose legality is recognised by both the United Nations and indeed the UK government. The chant has also been condemned as antisemitic, for example earlier this month by Culture Secretary Lucy Frazer.⁴⁶

To further complicate proceedings, other views certainly exist on what this chant means. For example, a Guardian article of 31 October stated that:⁴⁷

“Between the river and the sea” is a fragment from a slogan used since the 1960s by a variety of people with a host of purposes. And it is open to an array of interpretations, from the genocidal to the democratic.

The full saying goes: “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” – a reference to the land between the Jordan River, which borders eastern Israel, and the Mediterranean Sea to the west.

If a slogan is potentially genocidal, or antisemitic, allowing children to be freely exposed to it, without countervailing views, would be the very opposite of safeguarding or good practice. It is for reasons like this, that the counter-extremism Prevent duty is binding on schools. It requires education providers “to help prevent the risk of people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. This includes safeguarding learners from extremist ideologies and radicalisation.”⁴⁸

The school strikes potentially bring children into contact with extremist ideologies, with few if any counter-balancing voices. That risk should be a matter of concern for parents, educators and indeed government. Further, as activists encourage children to leave school to participate in political protests, there is a risk of the social divisions which may exist in society being amplified. There have been media reports of some schools where children in the playground have been asked ‘which side are they on’ in the conflict,⁴⁹ and the potential for divisions between Jewish and Muslim pupils, is self-evident. It is unclear how school strikes will assist binary divisions in becoming any easier.

The next section of this study considers the school strikes in some detail.

43. On Salman Abedi and Libya see Manchester Arena Inquiry, December 8 2020, p. 59 - 67 https://files.manchesterarenainquiry.org.uk/live/uploads/2020/12/08173104/MAI-Day-45_Redacted.pdf

44. ‘EXCLUSIVE: Never-before-seen footage shows Manchester bomber Salman Abedi at a rally organised by Jeremy Corbyn’s pro-Palestine group - two years before he killed 22 people’, Jake Wallis Simons, Daily Mail, 9 October 2020.

45. Counterfire, October 2023. Copy in the authors possession.

46. Culture Secretary Lucy Frazer says ‘from the river to the sea’ chant is anti-Semitic, Evening Standard, 9 November 2023, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/israel-palestine-from-the-river-to-the-sea-chant-london-anti-semitic-lucy-frazer-culture-secretary-b1118979.html>

47. ‘From the river to the sea’: where does the slogan come from and what does it mean? Daniel Boffey, The Guardian, 31 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/31/from-the-river-to-the-sea-where-does-the-slogan-come-from-and-what-does-it-mean-israel-palestine>

48. Department for Education: Guidance, The Prevent duty an introduction for those with safeguarding responsibilities, 7 September 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-prevent-duty-safeguarding-learners-vulnerable-to-radicalisation/the-prevent-duty-an-introduction-for-those-with-safeguarding-responsibilities>

49. Children ‘saying they hate all Jews’ in playground rows as anti-Semitism rises, Ewan Somerville, Daily Telegraph, 20 November 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/20/children-hate-all-jews-anti-semitism-playground-israel-gaza/>

The School Strikes

The opening school strike in Bristol: 3 November 2023

Weekly ‘School Strikes for Palestine’ have been organised in Bristol since Friday 3 November 2023. The first strike on 3 November had been preceded by a large ceasefire rally in the city on Sunday 29 October, with the Bristol Palestine Solidarity Campaign organising a march from the city’s Shah Jamil Jame mosque in Easton to College Green.⁵⁰

The next day, on 30 October, the Bristol Post published details about a forthcoming school strike and cited Save the Children’s claim that “More children have been killed in Gaza in the last three weeks than the annual number killed in the world’s conflict zones since 2019”.⁵¹ Rooting the planned protest in the 2020 school climate strikes, the paper continued:

*Like the school strikes that took place several years ago for climate change inspired by Greta Thunberg, the plan is for pupils to miss a day of education to peacefully protest against the conflict in Gaza.*⁵²

The Bristol Post stated that a WhatsApp group, ‘School Strike for Palestine’, had hundreds of members, and the newspaper linked to a Facebook events page for the strike.⁵³ The Daily Mail reported that hundreds of children would skip school to join the strike, explaining that the event called on youngsters to “protest for the thousands of Palestinian children killed + injured by the Israeli Military strikes”; and Bristol’s four Labour MPs would be asked to “demand an immediate ceasefire”.

A Department for Education spokesperson stated: “Children should be in school. While we recognise these young people should be able to peacefully express their views, we do not condone them missing out on their education.”⁵⁴

Account by a parent of a striking pupil: Rozey Din

Prior to the demonstration, some parents sent a template letter distributed by organisers to head teachers, outlining the reasons for their children’s absence.⁵⁵ Rozey Din, a parent of boys aged 8 and 11, rooted her support for the protest in her opposition to racism, and what she saw as a discrepancy between how her children’s school had responded to the conflict in Ukraine, with its response to that in Gaza. Ms Din explained that while she was not aware of racism as a child, her children are aware “of the discrepancies between how the world treats people of colour despite their British identity”. She continued:⁵⁶

50. In pictures: Thousands line Bristol’s streets to call for Gaza ceasefire <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/gallery/pictures-thousands-line-brisstols-streets-8867263>

51. GAZA: 3,195 Children Killed in Three Weeks Surpasses Annual Number of Children Killed in Conflict Zones since 2019, 29 October 2023. <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2023-press-releases/gaza--3-195-children-killed-in-three-weeks>

52. Yvonne Deeney, School pupils in Bristol to go on strike over the thousands of children killed in Gaza, 30 October 2023.

<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/school-pupils- Bristol-go-strike-8869184>

53. School strike for Palestine Bristol 3 November 2023 https://www.facebook.com/vents/1362486174385146/?acontext=7B%22ref%22%3A%2252%22%2C%22action_history%22%3A%221%7B%5C%22surface%5C%22%3A%5C%22share_link%5C%22%2C%5C%22mechanism%5C%22%3A%5C%22share_link%5C%22%2C%5C%22extra_data%5C%22%3A%7B%5C%22invite_link_id%5C%22%3A%200703209725467%7D%7D%22%7D

54. Frankie Elliott, Hundreds of children in Bristol are set to take part in a ‘School Strike for Palestine’ which calls on MPs for the city to ‘demand an immediate ceasefire’, 3 November 2023. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12705167/Children-Bristol-School-Strike-Palestine-MPs-ceasefire.html>

55. Yvonne Deeney, Bristol ‘school strike’ for Palestine: Parent explains why she supports protest, 3 November 2023. <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/bristol-school-strike-palestine-parents-8878518>

56. Yvonne Deeney, Bristol ‘school strike’ for Palestine: Parent explains why she supports protest, 3 November 2023. <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/bristol-school-strike-palestine-parents-8878518>

They are disappointed with their school and the eldest he doesn't get it, he doesn't get why the people who are supposed to protect us and look after us are allowing children who look like him, who believe in the same things as him, to be bombed. For my kids it is a really big deal because they saw their school's response to Ukraine and they've seen their school's response and the wider world's response to Palestine.

My son was really upset that Suella Braverman called his march that he went to last week in London 'a hate march'. My parents are from Pakistan but we have family friends who are Palestinian and we also have Jewish friends in Bristol who are against it because they know it's genocide.

We're very clear with our children that this is not a Jewish-Muslim thing. It feels like there is another agenda, Israel is just starting to wipe out Palestinians. There's a balance between education and protecting them. In our family we are starting with a very left-wing message that humanity comes first and culture, colour, religion - that all comes second.

Ms Din supplied a photo of her older son prior to the protest.



The Bristol Post report also suggested there was limited risk of sanctions being applied towards parents: "The organisers of Bristol strike say they have been informed by some schools that although it would count as an unauthorised absence there would be no risk of a fine as it is only one day."⁵⁷

'School Strike for Palestine': organisers

On 3 November, hundreds of school children and parents from the Bristol area gathered for the rally at College Green. The University of Bristol's student newspaper, Epigram, described the event as organised by 'School Strike for Palestine' with the support of Bristol Stop the War Coalition, Bristol Palestine Solidarity Campaign and the Green Party. Palestinian flags were distributed, and placards and banners called for an 'immediate ceasefire' in Gaza. Pupils from local schools and differing age groups -- from reception to sixth form -- took turns to address the rally

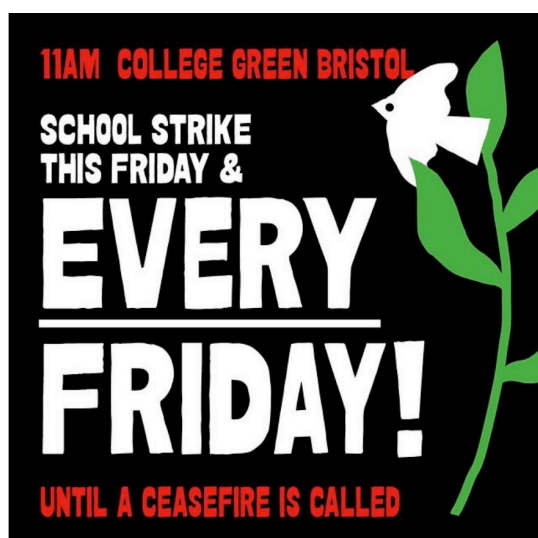
57. <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/bristol-school-strike-palestine-parents-8878518>

on a PA system. Noor Khashaba from Friends of Palestine, a student-led society at the University of Bristol, also spoke. ‘School Strike for Palestine’ said they would hold demonstrations outside City Hall every Friday until MPs call for a ceasefire.⁵⁸ Organisers also delivered a petition to City Hall demanding a ceasefire, and campaigners tied ribbons to railings in the colours of the Palestinian flag to represent children killed in Gaza.⁵⁹

‘School Strike for Palestine’: The campaign’s resources

On the social media site Instagram, ‘School Strike for Palestine’ provides various campaign resources including guides to action and promotional images.⁶⁰ As the early posts on this site appear to refer to Bristol, rather than national events, this appears to have been set up by campaigners in that city, although by 16 November it was listing national strikes, with the slogan: “Lets gather in our thousands.... in our millions we are all Palestinians.”⁶¹ There is also a Facebook page, based in Bristol, although this has seen very limited posting, suggesting other avenues are used for organising.⁶²

The images below are all taken from the Instagram site:



58. Milan Perera, Hundreds of Bristol pupils take part in a ‘School Strike for Palestine’ rally, 3 November 2023. <https://epigram.org.uk/2023/11/03/hundreds-of-bristol-pupils-takes-part-in-a-school-strike-for-palestine-rally/>

59. Yvonne Deeney, Hundreds of pupils protest in Bristol to demand Israel-Palestine ceasefire, 6 November 2023 (updated article). <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/live-hundreds-pupils-march-through-8880374>

60. <https://www.instagram.com/schoolstrikefor-palestine/>

61. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CzuVt-BysVRA/>

62. <https://www.facebook.com/schoolstrikefor-palestine> At the time of writing the last post on the site is dated 13 November.



The resources section of the school strike for Palestine page provides a link to a template letter⁶³ for parents to send to their school if their child is joining the strike.⁶⁴ The letter states:

Dear [insert head teachers name],

I am writing to inform you that [insert child's name] will be taking part in the Bristol School Strike for Palestine this Friday at College Green, and will be absent from school for the day.

As the situation further intensifies, I am deeply concerned that our leaders are gravely failing a vulnerable and disempowered civilian population by enabling a deliberately disproportionate attack.

63. <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/18322428268100679/>

64. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1B_QAZuqwCIKjAZqYbMd-GaWNI47N8S-hGDizSTeMBE/edit

We wish to protest peacefully, with the intention of showing solidarity with the people of Gaza, with particular focus on the 1 million innocent children, over 3,000 of whom have been killed in the last 3 weeks.

Whatever our faith or politics, as parents and carers, we wish to unite for the preservation of human life and collectively demand an immediate ceasefire.

I will gladly support [insert child's name] in catching up with any work they might have missed.

I have found the following links useful but welcome guidance and suggestions from the school in navigating age appropriate conversations regarding war and conflict.

<https://www.unicef.org/parenting/how-talk-your-children-about-conflict-and-war>

<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2022/how-to-talk-to-children-about-war>

Warm wishes,

[Your name here]

It is in the resources area of the Instagram site that weblinks to more controversial political organisations appear. Under the heading ‘Palestinian solidarity support for young people’, the groups and web links listed include CAGE and Prevent Watch.⁶⁵ CAGE styles itself as a human rights NGO, but as recently as September 2023, the then Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, reminded the House of Commons in her update on the implementation of the independent review of the counter-radicalisation Prevent strategy that “public authorities such as the police, should not fund or work with those who legitimise extremism, such as CAGE or MEND—Muslim Engagement and Development.”⁶⁶ In 2018, Sir Mark Rowley, the then Assistant Commissioner of Specialist Operations for the Metropolitan Police and National Lead for Counter Terrorism Policing, condemned both organisations in a speech at Policy Exchange. In his comments Rowley expressed concern that some organisations are fostering a grievance culture:⁶⁷

we continue to see and hear so-called representative bodies speak out in such a way to create and exploit grievances and isolation, by:

- being equivocal in condemning acts of terrorism;
- undermining efforts to safeguard the young and vulnerable from radicalisation, and spreading disinformation about national security and foreign policy.

65. <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/18322428268100679/> Screenshots also follow on the pages below.

66. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-09-07/debates/00649BF1-8C4E-4BEE-9939-7E4600039CDA/PreventIndependentReview#contribution-38121803-EC4A-45EA-A0F5-A238B3C6CE1B>

67. Sir Mark Rowley, Extremism and terrorism: the need for a whole society response, The Colin Crampthorn Memorial Lecture, Policy Exchange, 26 February 2018, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/events/the-colin-cramphorn-memorial-lecture-by-mark-rowley/>

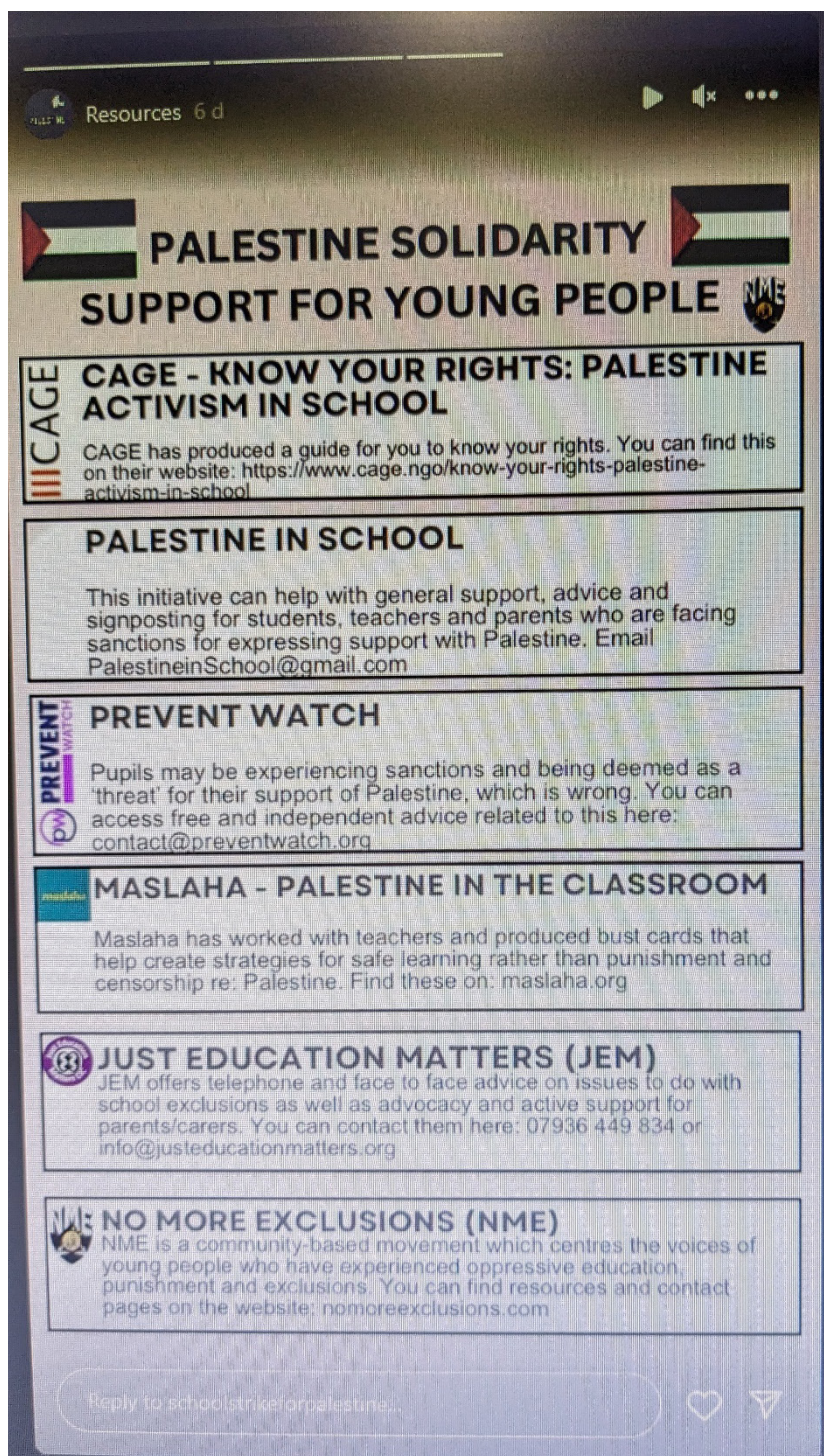
Rowley observed “Leaders of MEND have claimed the UK is approaching the conditions that preceded the Holocaust seeking to undermine the State’s considerable efforts to tackle all hate crime and making an absurd comparison with state-sponsored genocide,” while he also criticised CAGE saying “Their representatives have also sought to whip up ridiculous claims that all Muslims are “terror suspects” in the eyes of the authorities. And they famously described the “Jihadi John” suspect as a “beautiful young man”.⁶⁸

The school strike resources guide also linked to Prevent Watch,⁶⁹ a campaign group, like CAGE, opposed to the government’s Prevent strategy. Here it should be noted that schools in England and Wales have a statutory duty to uphold Prevent.⁷⁰

68. Sir Mark Rowley, Extremism and terrorism: the need for a whole society response, The Colin Crampthorn Memorial Lecture, Policy Exchange, 26 February 2018, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/events/the-colin-cramphorn-memorial-lecture-by-mark-rowley/>

69. <https://www.preventwatch.org/about/>

70. Prevent duty guidance: Guidance for specified authorities in England and Wales, 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64f8498efdc5d10014fce6d1/14.258_HO_Prevent_Duty_Guidance_v5c.pdf



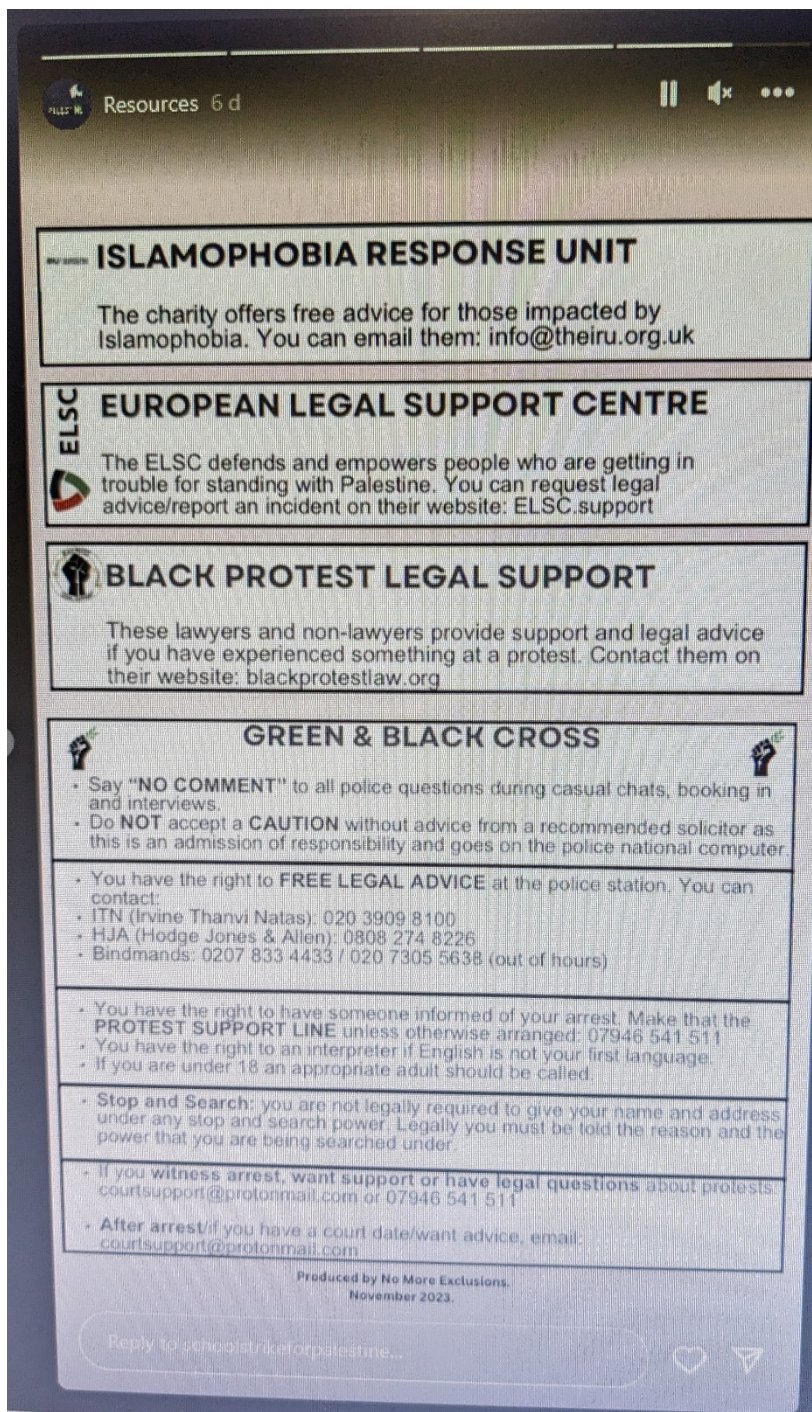
Also recommended is the Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU).⁷¹ While this organisation operates its own website,⁷² the IRU was established by MEND.⁷³ MEND was condemned (above) by the Home Secretary earlier this year, and Sir Mark Rowley in 2018, is another organisation which campaigns against Prevent.⁷⁴

71. <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/18322428268100679/>

72. <https://www.theiru.org.uk/>

73. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=3361098490656071

74. See for example: <https://www.mend.org.uk/time-for-prevent-to-be-scrapped/>



Education authorities should be wary of political campaigns that are putting children in contact with organisations which agitate against the statutory duties that schools are legally bound to follow.

The School Strike for Palestine Instagram also provides what it describes as ‘A guide to language and meanings at Palestine protests’ (some images are copied below):⁷⁵

75. https://www.instagram.com/p/CzcEkaas930/?img_index=1

CEASEFIRE

Ceasefire is an agreement to stop any violence, usually whilst a way is found to end any attacks permanently.

APARTHEID

Apartheid is a system for keeping people from a different race, nationality or belief separated, and not treated equally.

GENOCIDE

Genocide is the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a group of people based on their nationality, race or beliefs.

OCCUPATION

Occupation is the forced takeover of one states government, military, police and land by another.

BLOCKADE

Blockade is the act of sealing off a place or area, to prevent goods or people from entering or leaving.

TERRORISM

Terrorism is using violence to achieve political goals by creating fear in people.

OPPRESSION

Oppression means being treated badly or without justice - people who do this are called oppressors.

WE WANT OUR CHILDREN TO GROW UP RESPECTING EACH OTHERS RIGHTS & STANDING UP FOR THOSE WHO'S RIGHTS ARE BEING DENIED.

WHEN WE STAND UP FOR THOSE WHO AREN'T BEING TREATED FAIRLY, WE SUPPORT ALL CHILDREN. IF WE CHOOSE TO BE NEUTRAL, WE DON'T.

A further guide is provided – entitled: ‘How to Talk to your Kids about What’s Happening in Palestine’ (some pages are copied below):⁷⁶

1. MAKE TIME & LISTEN

Give children the space to talk when they want to – even if you’re in the middle of something.

Encourage them to tell you what they know, how they feel and ask you questions.

2. TAILOR IT TO THE CHILD

Older children may need more details, while younger ones may be satisfied just by understanding that sometimes people hurt others.

You know your child best. Keep calm and begin with simple information, answering questions honestly with age-appropriate language.

Watch their reactions, and be sensitive to their level of anxiety. Remember that it’s OK to not have the answer to every question.

3. VALIDATE THEIR FEELINGS

Be sure to acknowledge their feelings and assure them that whatever they are feeling is natural. It’s important not to minimize or dismiss their concerns.

Show that you’re listening by giving them your full attention and remind them that they can talk to you or another trusted adult whenever they like.

76. https://www.instagram.com/p/CzD3P2JMXP-w/?img_index=1

4. REASSURE THEM

Remind them that this is not their problem to solve and that they are safe from any danger. Remind them adults all over the world are working hard to stop any attacks and find peace.

They shouldn't feel guilty playing, seeing their friends and doing the things that make them feel happy.

5. GIVE THEM A WAY TO HELP

See if your child would like to participate in taking positive action. For example, they could start fundraisers, write letters to local decision-makers, create drawings or poems for peace, or join a protest.

Children who have the opportunity to help can feel like they are part of the solution instead of feeling helpless.

Second school strike in Bristol: 10 November 2023

Initially there was limited national media coverage of the school strikes. One of the few to report on events in Bristol was GB News, which stated that “a collective of legal campaigners and parents” called on youngsters to “protest for the thousands of Palestinian children killed and injured by the Israeli military strikes”.⁷⁷

The channel's south west of England reporter Jeff Moody noted children who joined the protest were various age groups, “from reception right up to sixth form”. He went on to record:⁷⁸

Many of the parents said to me, look, they hadn't actually asked permission. They just literally emailed the school this morning and said 'My child isn't coming in today'. And they said they're not quite sure whether there'll be any repercussions from that, whether there might be some sanctions or even some fines. Parents can be fined quite heavily if their children miss school.

As with any demonstration, there were slogans, songs and speeches.

77. <https://www.gbnews.com/news/school-children-strike-palestine-protest>

78. <https://www.gbnews.com/news/school-children-strike-palestine-protest>

Here we enter into more controversial territory, with one child shouting: “From the River to the sea, Palestine shall be free.” Here it should also be noted that while this particular chant is arguably evidence of extremism, some of the logos and slogans utilised by campaign groups are of a very similar nature. Notably, the logo of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign itself erases Israel (within the widely accepted 1967 borders) from the map and replaces it with Palestine. Consider the example below of the Bristol branch of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign.⁷⁹



Reports also raise questions about the extent to which some of the children present understand, or could be expected to understand, the political issues at hand:⁸⁰

It’s questionable as to what the children knew and what the children believe because they were very young indeed, some of them. And they were chanting slogans from bits of cardboard that were presented to them.

Such arguments should raise concerns for parents, the local education authorities and indeed government, as school children are being drawn into political activism when they should, legally, be in the classroom.

The media also spoke to a woman it described as a strike organiser: China Fish, of Parents for Palestine. She was asked what had spurred her to carry out the strike, and replied:

It’s only one day. We feel that this is a really pertinent time and really important time that we use our voices in any way we can. Now that almost 5,000 children have been killed by Israel since the 7th of October, as parents and children, we all feel so concerned that we need to help stop any more killings of children.

According to GB News, China Fish added that the pupils taking part are ‘very well informed’, they are taught about the Middle East, and their opinions are their own.⁸¹ At the start of a GB News video of the demonstration, Ms Fish can be seen dancing.⁸²

There is limited information available about China Fish’s political lineage. An advert for a benefit evening for a charity named Medical Aid for Palestinians reports that in 2013, China Fish visited Gaza as a member of ‘Circus to Palestine’.⁸³

79. <https://www.facebook.com/bristol.psc/>

80. Harvey Gough, Children heard saying ‘from river to sea, Palestine will be free’ as they miss school to protest, 10 November 2023. <https://www.gbnews.com/news/school-children-strike-palestine-protest>

81. Harvey Gough, Children heard saying ‘from river to sea, Palestine will be free’ as they miss school to protest, 10 November 2023. <https://www.gbnews.com/news/school-children-strike-palestine-protest>

82. GB News, 10 November 2023: <https://twitter.com/GBNEWS/status/1722982162264142157>

83. <https://teifidancer-teifidancer.blogspot.com/2013/09/benefit-concert-for-medical-aid-for.html>

Ilford: school boycott on 3 November 2023

School protests have not been limited to strikes. Novara Media reported that around 300 17-18-year-olds at Beal High School in Ilford boycotted an assembly with local Labour MP Wes Streeting on 3 November because of Labour's position on the conflict.⁸⁴ Due to the protest, only 20 'year 13' students attended, and younger pupils had to be drafted in to make up the numbers. One student told Novara Media that "as a year group, we wanted to show our support to those in Palestine"; and because Keir Starmer does not support a ceasefire, "collectively we showed our position by not attending". A parent said that the "genocide in Gaza" is "politicising young people like nothing has before".⁸⁵

The Novara Media report further raised the potential connection between the earlier climate strikes and agitation in support of Palestinians. It quoted 16-year-old Amina Rahman, who had been at the Bristol protest and stated that "The climate strikes have been going on for a while, but this has been going on since 1948, since the Nakba". Ms Rahman thought it was time there were school strikes for Palestine, and expressed the hope the strikes in Bristol would trigger a mass movement, with young people across the country leading autonomous strikes and walk-outs. She said that "People like Greta Thunberg, [...] she got the whole world to listen. We're gonna keep on trying. We're gonna keep on doing it."⁸⁶

It is interesting to note how Amina Rahman characterised events in Bristol: "Yeah, it was organised by adults," she explained, "But it was led by me and my girls."⁸⁷

'School Strike for Palestine': Stop the War Coalition (STWC)

Perhaps the most important player in assisting and developing the 2023 school strikes has been the STWC. This section provides some history of that organisation, as well as detailing how they have encouraged and helped to organise protests in support of a ceasefire, and the wider Palestinian cause, this Autumn.

STWC was formed in September 2001 after a meeting organised by three leading members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) – Lindsey German, John Rees and Chris Nineham.⁸⁸ That event brought together over 2000 people opposed to the US response to 9/11, with speakers Tariq Ali, Jeremy Corbyn MP, Liz Davies (Socialist Alliance) journalist George Monbiot, John Rees (SWP) and Helen John (CND).⁸⁹ The movement quickly expanded to include Muslim voices, most notably the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) -- who became the joint organisers with the SWTC and CND of the giant 15 February 2003 march against the invasion of Iraq.

One of the tactics which emerged in the run up to that march was school strikes; indeed, the official history of the STWC devotes several pages to the school strikes which occurred in 2003. After noting the work of the Socialist party in organising local strikes, the STWC took a lead:⁹⁰

84. Clare Hymer, School Students Walk Out of Shadow Minister's Assembly Over Labour's Position on Palestine, 7 November 2023. <https://novaramedia.com/2023/11/07/school-students-walk-out-of-shadow-ministers-assembly-over-labours-position-on-palestine/>

85. Clare Hymer, School Students Walk Out of Shadow Minister's Assembly Over Labour's Position on Palestine, 7 November 2023. <https://novaramedia.com/2023/11/07/school-students-walk-out-of-shadow-ministers-assembly-over-labours-position-on-palestine/>

86. Clare Hymer, School Students Walk Out of Shadow Minister's Assembly Over Labour's Position on Palestine, 7 November 2023. <https://novaramedia.com/2023/11/07/school-students-walk-out-of-shadow-ministers-assembly-over-labours-position-on-palestine/>

87. Clare Hymer, School Students Walk Out of Shadow Minister's Assembly Over Labour's Position on Palestine, 7 November 2023. <https://novaramedia.com/2023/11/07/school-students-walk-out-of-shadow-ministers-assembly-over-labours-position-on-palestine/>

88. Stop the War: The story of Britain's biggest mass movement, Andrew Murray and Lindsey German, London: Bookmarks, 2005, p. 48 German, Rees and Nineham all subsequently left the SWP in its 2010 split, and formed a new organisation, Counterfire.

89. Murray and German, 2005, op cit, p. 47

90. Murray and German, 2005, op cit, p. 179

To ensure that this action was not fragmented, with different groups calling demonstrations on different days, the Coalition finally convened a national conference of school students to discuss how they could participate in the anti-war movement.

That element of organisation certainly worked – STWC recorded 8 actions by teachers against the war, and a whopping 60 at schools across the country.⁹¹ While not all were strikes – actions included occupations and lunchtime protests – they form part of the collective memory of the anti-war movement in this country.

By 2023, technological developments allowed for a degree of online organising that would be the envy of activists twenty years earlier. STWC was able to provide readily accessible information and resources for those campaigning on Gaza. A section on how to organise a school strike, is reproduced in full below, taken from the STWC website.

How to organise a school strike:⁹²

- Gather a group of dedicated parents/teenagers in your area and create a WhatsApp group.
- Fill out this Google form and we will try and put you in touch with others in your area.
- Pick a central location in your area to have a rally on Friday morning.
- Create an announcements WhatsApp group with admin-only posting rights. Add other organisers as admins, and use a join link to share widely so others in the area can join it. Set the group description (template below) with the details of your strike, and use this group to let people know about the details of the strike and to share the resources below.
- Fill out this Google form to let us know about your school strike so we can help you with a graphic & poster, advertise it nationally including making a Facebook event for you, put you in touch with local activists and help/advise with anything else.

Resources:

- Template letter to send to your school: We've been assured by those working in schools that whilst this would count as an unauthorised absence, a child can have up to four days in a row unauthorised and would need 10 in a short amount of time to be fined. Please do check your own school policy.
- Template WhatsApp group description: Use this template for the group description in the admin-only announcements WhatsApp group for your area.
- Template press release: Use this template press release to update with details of your school strike and send to local press.
- Download your Ceasefire Now! Poster.⁹³

91. Murray and German, 2005, op cit, p. 193-4

92. <https://www.stopwar.org.uk/events/school-strike-for-palestine/>

93. School Strike For Palestine: <https://www.stopwar.org.uk/events/school-strike-for-palestine/>

In addition to the above promotional literature, in mid-November STWC released a list of areas holding school strikes – with one on 16 November in Tower Hamlets, to be followed by multiple locations on 17 November.⁹⁴

Thursday 16 November

Tower Hamlets: 12pm Whitechapel Town Hall

Friday 17 November

Bristol: 10am, College Green

Manchester: 10am, St Peter's Square

Harrow: 10am, State of Katie, Station Road

Redbridge: 10am, Ilford Town Hall

Glasgow: 11am, George Square

Burton: 2pm, St Paul's Square

School strike in Tower Hamlets: 16 November 2023

The first school strike outside of Bristol took place on 16 November. The local news website *East London Lines* reported 400 primary and secondary school students in Tower Hamlets walked out. The protesters walked from Tower Hamlets Town Hall to the Labour Party's Bethnal Green office, and called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Tower Hamlets Mayor, Lutfur Rahman of the Aspire Party,⁹⁵ addressed pupils outside the Town Hall, telling them: "It is heart-breaking, it is devastating, it is terrifying what is happening in Gaza."⁹⁶

That evening the school strike was followed by a demonstration, largely comprised of adults, outside Labour's Bethnal Green office, which was directed at Rushanara Ali, Shadow Business Minister and MP for Bethnal Green and Bow.⁹⁷ She had abstained from the ceasefire vote in the House of Commons on the previous night. An audio recording of chants at the protest, published on the *East London Lines* website, consists of a man leading the crowd in its chants, which include: 'Rushanara Ali, shame on you', 'ceasefire now,' 'occupation no more,' and the much more controversial 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free'.⁹⁸ The report added that "Banners pointed to the organised effort by Tower Hamlets Palestine Solidarity Network. Students from several schools in Bethnal Green including Mulberry Academy were known to be in attendance."⁹⁹

94. The webpage which held this information has now been replaced by a new page, with the refreshed page advertising protests for 24 November 2023. A pdf of the page advertising demonstrations on 16-17 November is in the authors possession.

95. Aspire is the governing party in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. It describes itself as 'aspiring for stronger communities and a fairer future.' <https://twitter.com/AspireParty>

96. Rupert Birkett-Eyles and Kate Balding, GAZA CONFLICT: Hundreds of Tower Hamlets children in 'School Strike for Palestine', 16 November 2023. <https://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2023/11/gaza-conflict-hundreds-of-tower-hamlets-children-in-school-strike-for-palestine/>

97. Jem Barth, Protesters gather outside Labour MPs London office after Gaza vote, 16 November 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/nov/16/protesters-gather-outside-labour-mps-london-office-after-gaza-abstention-vote>

98. Rupert Birkett-Eyles and Kate Balding, GAZA CONFLICT: Hundreds of Tower Hamlets children in 'School Strike for Palestine', 16 November 2023. <https://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2023/11/gaza-conflict-hundreds-of-tower-hamlets-children-in-school-strike-for-palestine/>

99. Rupert Birkett-Eyles and Kate Balding, GAZA CONFLICT: Hundreds of Tower Hamlets children in 'School Strike for Palestine', 16 November 2023. <https://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2023/11/gaza-conflict-hundreds-of-tower-hamlets-children-in-school-strike-for-palestine/>



Groups of protesters gather in front of Tower Hamlets Labour party offices Pic: Rupert Birkett-Eyles

A protester at the evening demonstration was also quoted on the importance of the earlier march: “The school march was very important because the young people are aware of what’s happening in the world and will not be taken in by the lies and smooth talking of people like Starmer.”¹⁰⁰

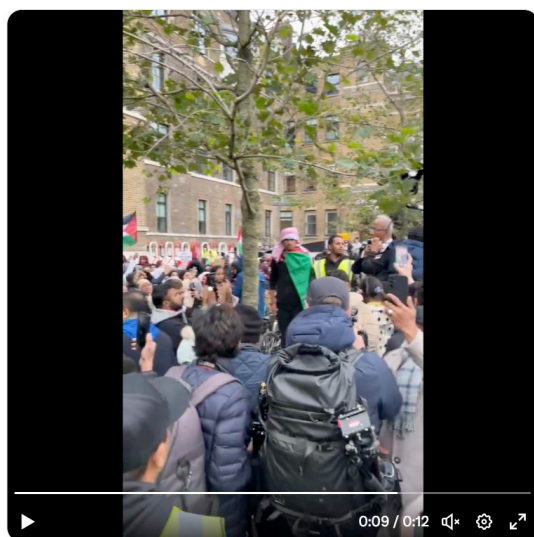
STWC Official: Shabbir Lakha

One of the protesters in Bethnal Green who enjoyed significant presence on social media was Shabbir Lakha. His profile on the X social media platform states that he is a STWC officer, as well as being a People’s Assembly activist and a member of Counterfire.¹⁰¹ When the SWP split in 2010, three of its leading members – Lyndsey German, John Rees and Chris Nineham helped form Counterfire. All three remain prominent in the STWC.

Shabbir Lakha tweeted fulsomely on the 16 November protests:¹⁰²

 **Shabbir Lakha**
@ShabbirLakha ...

At least 300 students have walked out of school in Tower Hamlets right now to protest for Palestine. What a brilliant sight.
[#SchoolStrikeForPalestine](#) [#FreePalestine](#) [#CeasefireNOW](#)



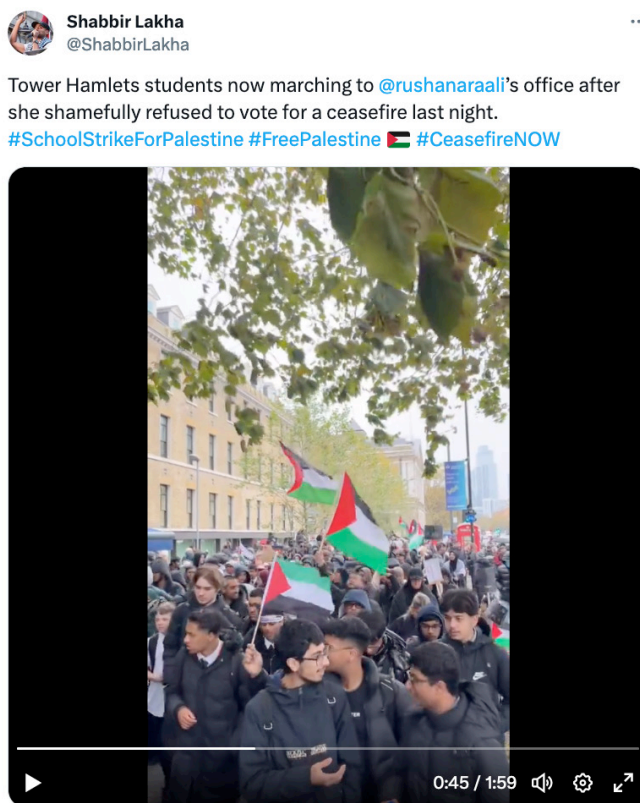
12:53 PM · Nov 16, 2023 · 238K Views

100. Rupert Birkett-Eyles and Kate Balding, GAZA CONFLICT: Hundreds of Tower Hamlets children in ‘School Strike for Palestine’, 16 November 2023. <https://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2023/11/gaza-conflict-hundreds-of-tower-hamlets-children-in-school-strike-for-palestine/>

101. <https://twitter.com/ShabbirLakha>

102. Shabbir Lakha, 16 November 2023: <https://twitter.com/ShabbirLakha/status/1725135010808705136>

His tweets included images of the young people marching to Rushanara Ali's office:¹⁰³



1:16 PM · Nov 16, 2023 · 636.1K Views

At the evening demonstration, he claimed to have been prevented from speaking by the police.¹⁰⁴



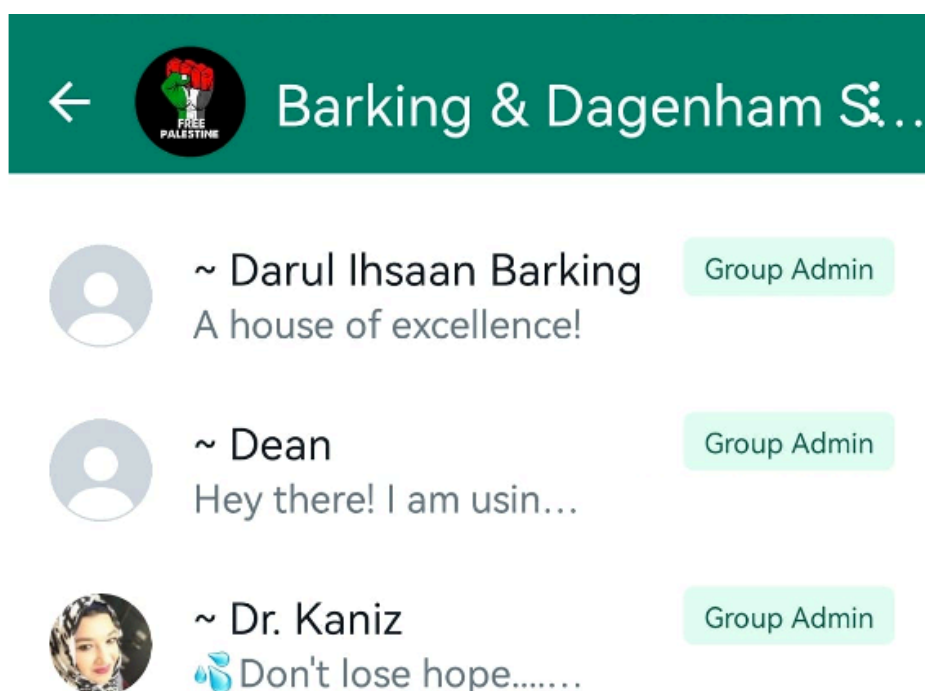
5:55 PM · Nov 16, 2023 · 101.8K Views

103. Shabbir Lakha, 16 November 2023: <https://twitter.com/ShabbirLakha/status/1725140770661806214>

104. Shabbir Lakha, 16 November 2023: <https://twitter.com/ShabbirLakha/status/1725210963186454950>

Local WhatsApp Groups

Referenced in the protest guidance from STWC has been the importance, for those organising school strikes, of WhatsApp groups. We are aware of such groups in Birmingham, Barking & Dagenham, Hackney, Newham, Redbridge and Waltham Forest. Here organisers disseminate messages in order to plan and prepare for protests, but also some further additional messaging may be found. While many organisers are simply known by first name only, sometimes a full name, or a name and organisation is given – for example the Barking & Dagenham school strike WhatsApp group has the Darul Ihsaan Barking,¹⁰⁵ a local mosque and registered charity, as one of its organisers.¹⁰⁶

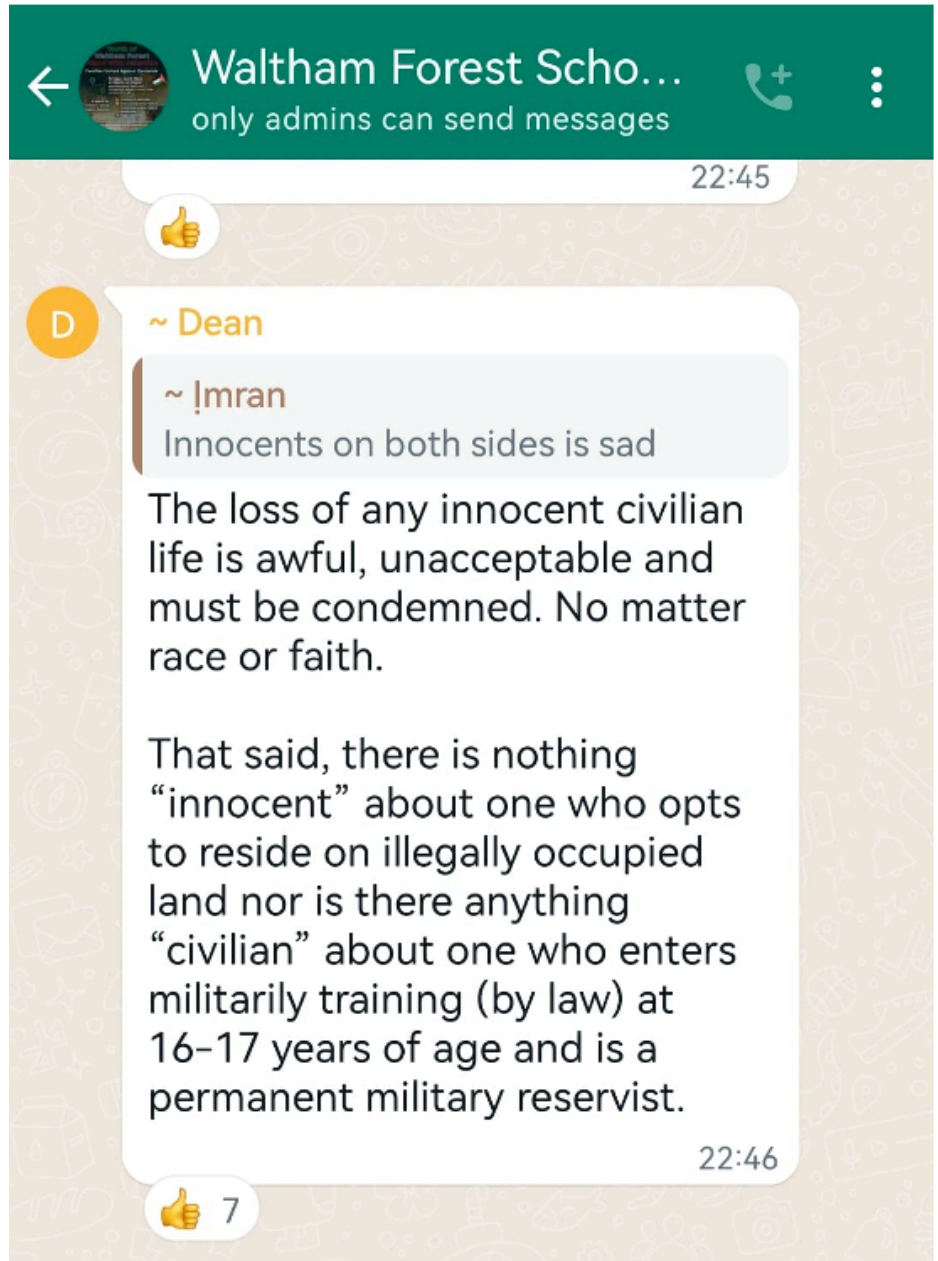


There are also examples of political debate on the groups, albeit from very much one side of the equation.¹⁰⁷

105. Barking & Dagenham schools strike WhatsApp group, screenshot in the authors possession.

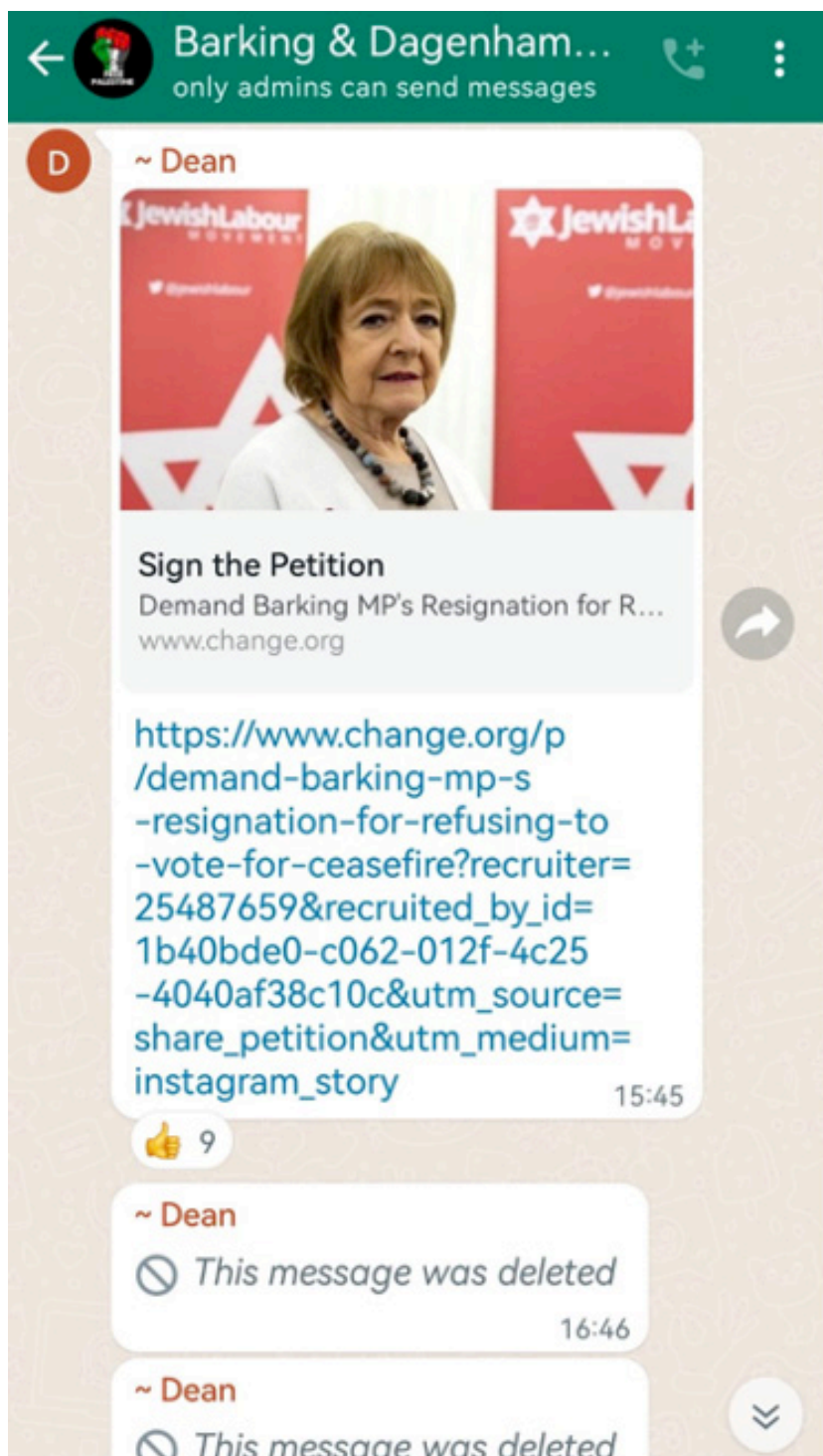
106. <https://darulihsaanbarking.org.uk/contact-us/>

107. Screenshot from the Waltham Forest Schools strike WhatsApp group, copy in the author's possession.

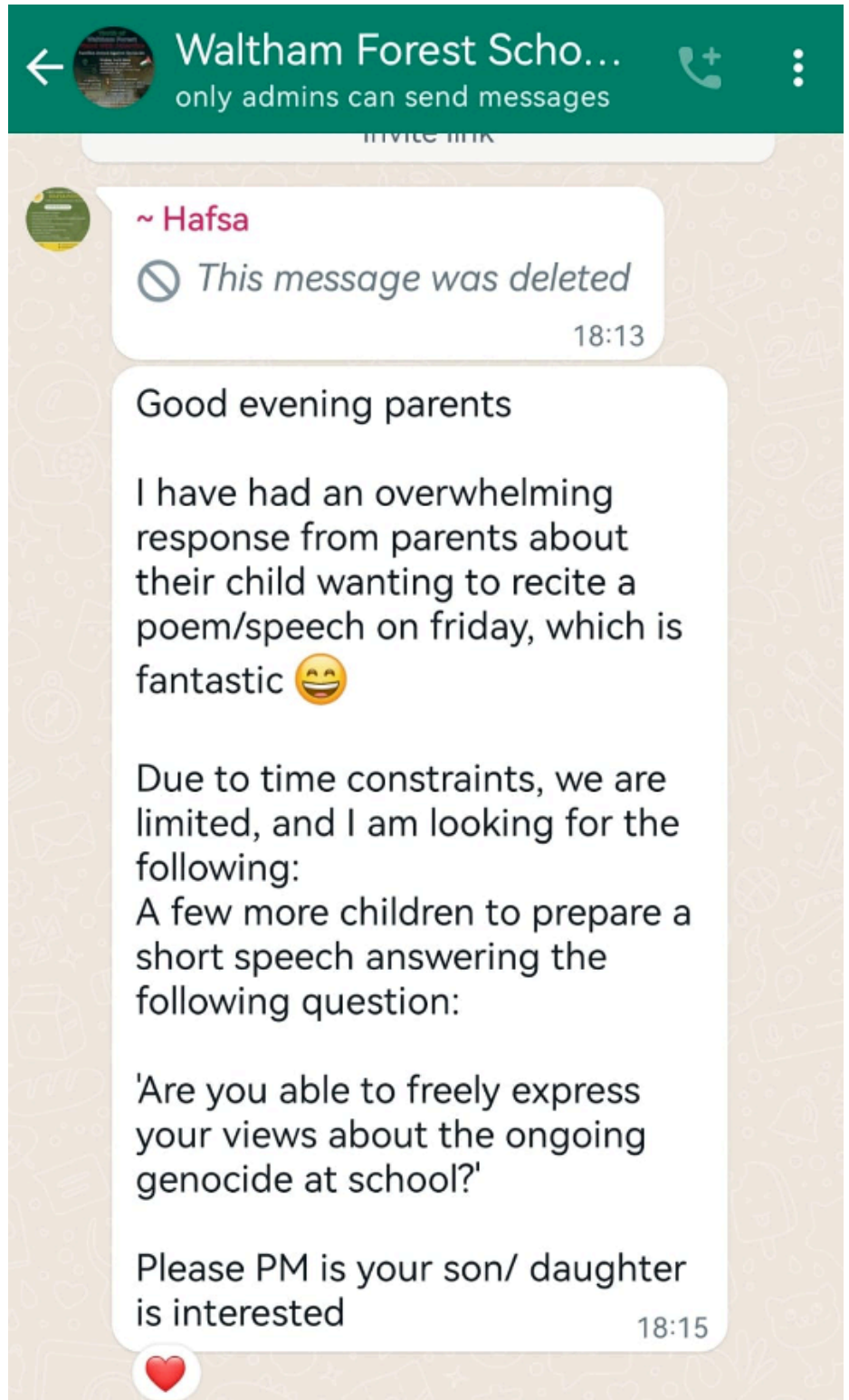


In the Barking & Dagenham, group, as well as the school strikes public aim of promoting a ceasefire, details of a petition calling for the removal of Margaret Hodge, the Labour MP for Barking, have circulated:¹⁰⁸

108. Barking & Dagenham schools strike WhatsApp group, screenshot in the authors possession.

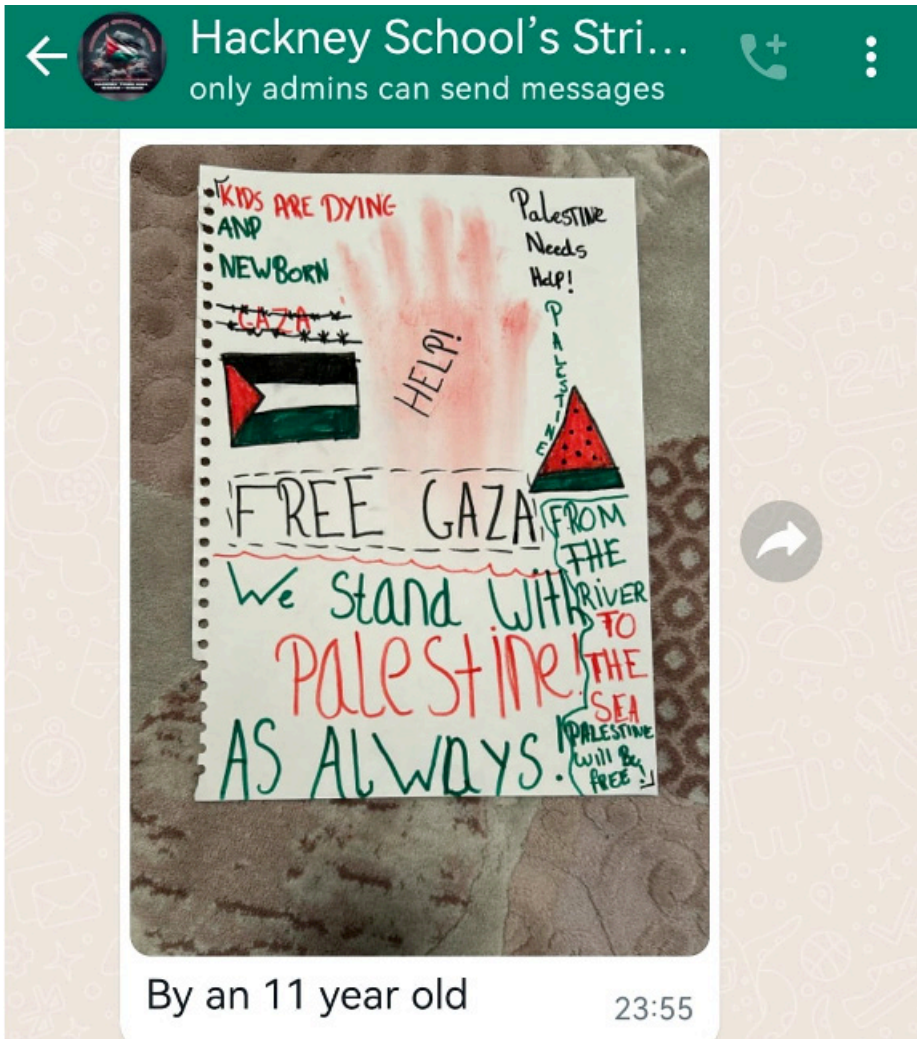


In that group the speeches to be given at the protest are framed in a very distinct manner, with children asked to answer whether they can talk freely about the 'genocide' at school:



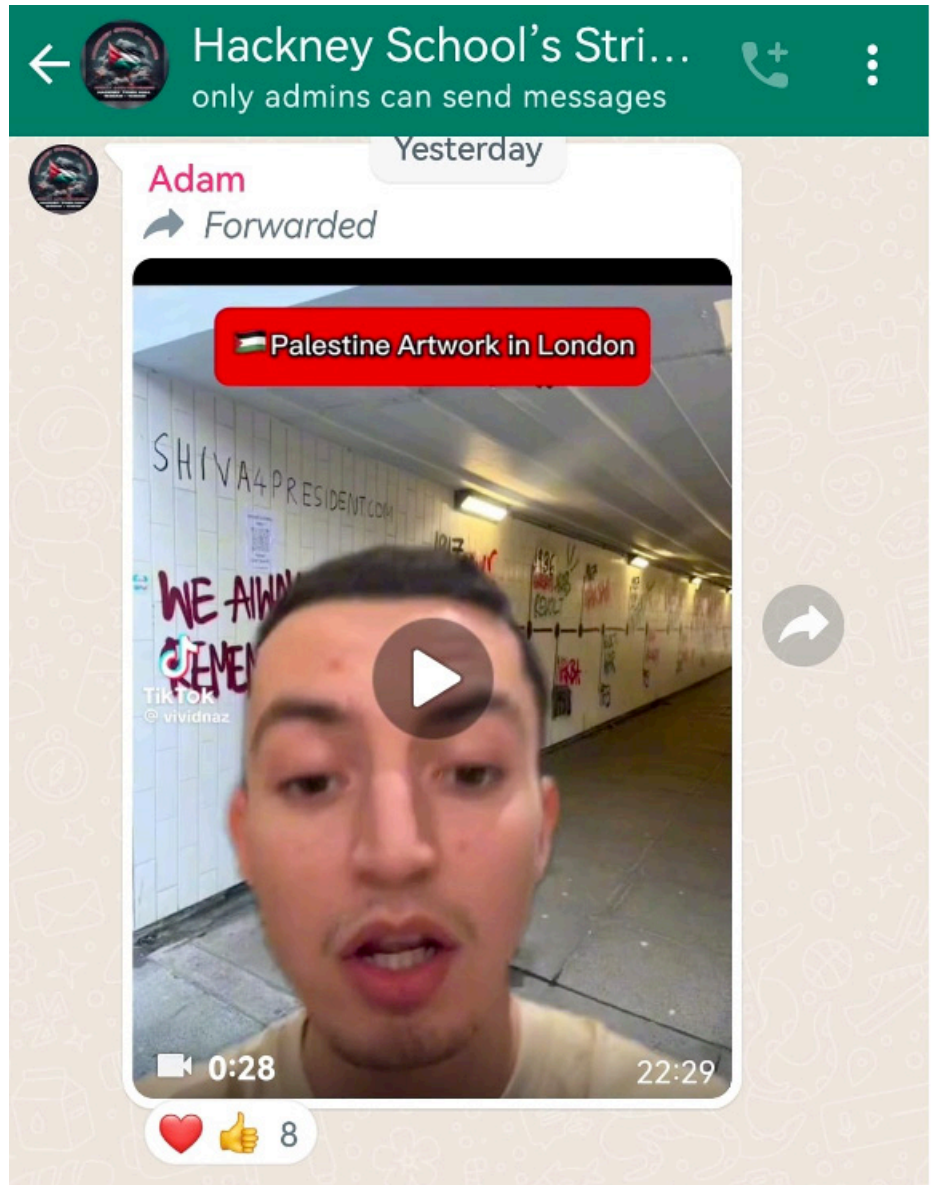
The school strike in Hackney on 24 November 2023 saw children leave school and picket Hackney Town Hall. Before that, photographs of material that were being prepared for the demonstration were circulated on the Hackney Schools strike WhatsApp group.¹⁰⁹

109. Hackney School strikes WhatsApp group, 23 November 2023, image in the authors possession



In another post on the group, a video was uploaded showing illegal graffiti in support of the Palestinian cause, from an unnamed underpass in East London:¹¹⁰

110.Hackney School strikes WhatsApp group, 23 November 2023, image in the authors possession



The Hackney demonstration on Friday 24 November raises additional questions about this campaign. The numbers at the demonstration were not huge, perhaps a hundred or so, and some parents appear to have been present. The protest is largely Muslim, and pictures show some very young children are demonstrating on the town hall steps, perhaps as young as seven or eight. There are few if any young people in their mid-late teens, the very age when young people are beginning to question the world and potentially begin to take part in politics or campaign groups.¹¹¹

The presence of such young children does raise questions as to what extent individual children are present of their own volition, having weighed up the issues at hand, or whether they are potentially being taken to these protests by their parents or other members of the community? Can a child of seven or eight make a free choice not to be in school in order to attend a political demonstration?

In a video, published on the social media channel of the 5 Pillars

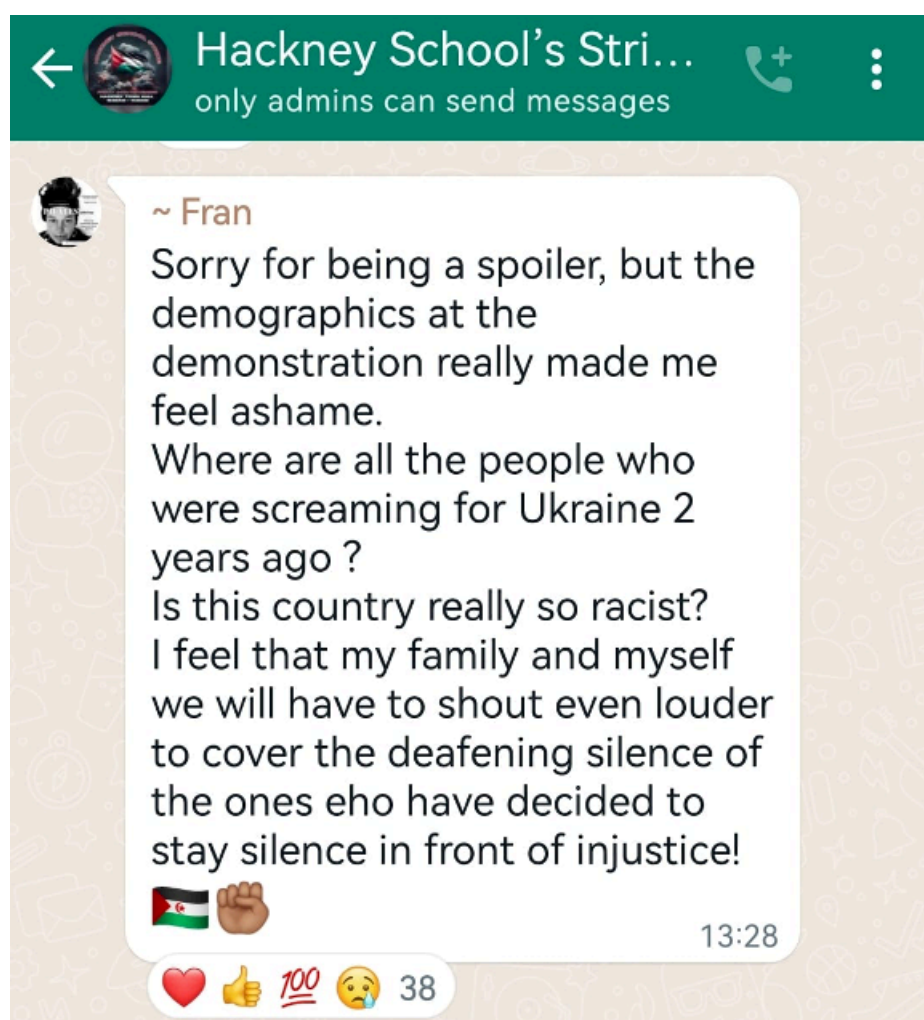
111. See for example <https://twitter.com/social-istworker/status/1728004577234944038/photo/2> and https://twitter.com/skippy_Oh/status/1727992518585811098

Islamic news service, two women in niqabs hold the microphone and give a speech against this ‘genocide’ before leading the chants of ‘from the river to the sea’.¹¹²

A further 5 Pillars video from that protest shows that while children speak into a microphone on the town hall steps, directly below them is an adult male with his own microphone. When one young person breaks down in tears, he interjects and states:¹¹³

You can see the effect this is having on our children, what the government’s doing, what Rishi Sunak’s doing, even Hackney Town Hall is doing. They’re supporting terrorism, they are the real terrorists, they’re funding the killing of Palestinian children.

Following the protest, the distinct demographic nature of the demonstration was raised, something a member of the Hackney WhatsApp group expressed shame about, putting it down to racism:¹¹⁴



112. <https://twitter.com/5Pillarsuk/status/1728015672695763442>

113. <https://twitter.com/5Pillarsuk/status/1728020463018713233>

114. Hackney School strikes WhatsApp group, 24 November 2023, image in the authors possession.

Conclusion

No one should object to school pupils involving themselves in politics, or taking an interest in current affairs, including attending protests. The key thing is that this should not happen in school time. There have been plenty of protests at the weekend. Put simply, there is no good reason for children to be protesting Monday to Friday in school hours.

This report has demonstrated that our education system, already weakened by a decline in attendance, faces a new challenge – school strikes by some pupils, who having walked out of school, then join political protests on the Israel/Palestinian question. Sadly, the social covenant between parents, schools and indeed wider society – that schooling was an inherent good which required daily attendance by children, appears to have been significantly weakened by the rules and regulations, including school closures, which followed COVID. Attendances, which had not recovered to their pre-COVID standard, risk falling further if a culture of absenteeism is allowed to take root. We must push back against any development which seeks to worsen this already troubling trend.

It is also clear that the febrile nature of the Israel/Palestinian question, and the agitation around it by activists groups, raises a particular challenge to the education system. The need for schools to maintain political neutrality, to introduce ideas in a rounded manner, and to prevent children being potentially exposed to extremist ideas or groups, remain as important as ever. Society cannot reasonably claim to be upholding such practices if it allows children to leave places of study during the school day and join protests in some cases organised by groups who declare ‘Palestine will be free from the river to the sea’ – a slogan widely considered to call for the destruction of Israel.

As we have detailed above, the education authorities can do more to tighten procedures on absence, and also to conduct a full investigation into precisely how children come to be absent from school, and the process by which they became aware of, and then ended up joining a protest held on the high street. The school strikes, and the broader controversy which has followed the Hamas attacks on Israel, raise a series of difficult questions for our society, and ones which impact significantly upon the education sector. Whatever the views individual children or parents may have on these questions, it is vital that they are approached with key principles such as the safeguarding of children in our schools, paramount. Our children must continue to be taught how to think, ahead of what to think, especially when political activists come knocking to encourage them to leave their places of learning.

Appendix: Bristol

This Code of Practice on attendance from Bristol City Council is presented as an example of a local Code of Practice.

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/395-bristol-education-penalty-notice-code-of-conduct-september-2018/file#:~:text=A%20Penalty%20Notice%20may%20be%20issued%2C%20as%20an%20alternative%20to,in%20any%2010%20week%20periodiv>.

Bristol City Council

Local Code of Conduct



Penalty Notices for truancy and excluded pupils found in a public place during the school day in accordance with: The Education (Penalty Notices) (England) Regulations 2007 (as amended)

Updated September 2018

1. Rationale

- 1.1.** The Education (Penalty Notices) (England) Regulations 2007 provide for the operation of the Penalty Notice scheme under Section 444A of the Education Act 1996 and Section 105 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. The Regulations require that each local authority must draw up a Code of Conduct which sets out measures to ensure consistency in the issuing of Penalty Notices. This Code of Conduct is designed to ensure Penalty Notices are issued consistently across Bristol.
- 1.2.** This revised code has been issued following consultation with all state funded Bristol schools.
- 1.3.** Penalty Notices are an alternative to prosecution. They give parents the opportunity to discharge their liability for an offence under section 444 Education Act 1996, or section 103 Education and Inspections Act 2006, by paying a penalty.

2. Issuing Penalty Notices for Bristol Pupils

- 2.1.** The local arrangements in Bristol are that all Penalty Notices will be issued by the City Council on behalf of all schools¹ situated within the city, and alternative education providers used by Bristol City Council to educate statutory school aged pupils. Penalty Notices are issued by the Council using an appropriate database, to prevent the issuing of duplicate notices.
- 2.2.** A co-ordinated approach will be taken to ensure that a Penalty Notice will not be issued in cases where a prosecution is contemplated, or has been commenced by the Local Authority.

3. Circumstances where a Penalty Notice may be issued

3.1 Irregular school attendance

- 3.1.1. If a child of compulsory school age who is a registered pupil at a school fails to attend regularlyⁱⁱ at the school, his parentⁱⁱⁱ is guilty of an offence. (Section 444 Education Act 1996)
- 3.1.2. Regular and punctual attendance of pupils at school is both a legal requirement and essential in order for students to maximise the opportunities available to them.
- 3.1.3. When a pupil's attendance meets the criteria for a Penalty Notice, the expectation is that schools will make a Penalty Notice request to the Local Authority, unless there are reasonable grounds for not doing so.
- 3.1.4. A Penalty Notice may be issued, as an alternative to prosecution, where a pupil has accrued a minimum of 8 unauthorised absence sessions in any 10 week period^{iv}.
- 3.1.5. A Penalty Notice should be used as a sanction where there is a reasonable expectation that its use will secure an improvement or change in pattern of absence.
- 3.1.6. There will be circumstances where it is considered that a Penalty Notice is not appropriate. This may be due to a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to: (a) repeated offences indicating that Penalty Notices are not bringing about a change in behaviour, for example, repeated unauthorised term time leave; (b) the high level of unauthorised absence, including extended unauthorised term time leave cases; and (c) the complex or long standing nature of the particular case. In such cases, the Local Authority may decide not to issue a Penalty Notice, but instead consider instigating a prosecution under Section 444(1) or 444(1A) of the Education Act 1996.
- 3.1.7. Where a school has concerns about the attendance of a pupil, there is an expectation that the school will have made the parent/s aware of the concerns about their child's attendance and the parent/s have had the opportunity to address this. Parents should be aware that if they do not make use of support offered and improve their child's attendance to an acceptable level, this may result in a Penalty Notice. The school will need to show that they have warned the parent/s that they are at risk of receiving a Penalty Notice or other legal sanction. This should at least be evidenced via the sending of a warning letter.

3.1.8. Penalty Notices should not normally be requested where poor attendance is symptomatic of complex family circumstances; in these circumstances the school should take a holistic approach to the issue, and involve other agencies as necessary. The exception to this would be where parents fail to engage with support offered by the school/other agencies. Again, the school will need to show that they have warned the parent/s that they are at risk of receiving a Penalty Notice or other legal sanction.

3.1.9. Where a parent or carer chooses to take their child out of school for a period of leave which has not been authorised by school e.g. taking a holiday in term time, evidence of an individual warning is not a requirement. Instead the school should ensure that it has made the parent/s aware:

- that term time leave of absence is not an automatic right;
- of the school's expectations around parents making and the school granting leave of absence requests; and
- that unauthorised term time leave may result in a Penalty Notice.

Evidence that the parent has been warned could include, but is not limited to: articles in school newsletters; information on the school's website; home-school agreement; school attendance policy; or written evidence of the refusal in the form of a letter, or a section completed by the school on a term time leave of absence request form.

3.2. If an excluded pupil is found in a public place during school hours

3.2.1. If a pupil is excluded, their parent has to ensure the child is not present in a public place in school hours, without reasonable justification, during the first five days of each and every fixed period or permanent exclusion. Where the exclusion is for five days or less, the duty applies to any of the days to which the exclusion relates. (Section 103 Education and Inspections Act 2006.) A school is not deemed to be a public place for the purposes of this legislation.

3.2.2. The school must have followed the Department for Education's statutory guidance for exclusions, which will include warning parents of this provision and the days to which it applies.

3.2.3. If a pupil receives a number of fixed term exclusions and the parent allows the pupil to be in a public place more than twice, the parent may be prosecuted for any third and subsequent occasion that occurs within any 12 month period.

4. Maximum number of notices

- 4.1 A maximum of two Penalty Notices will be issued to a parent in respect of any one child in any 12 month period.

5. Payment of Penalty Notices

- 5.1. The arrangements for payment are detailed on the Penalty Notice.
- 5.2. The penalty is £60 if paid within 21 days, rising to £120 if paid between 22 and 28 days (as at the time of writing. The Penalty amount and related timescales may change in line with legislation changes). **Payment cannot be made in instalments.**
- 5.3. Payment of a Penalty Notice discharges the parent/carer from liability for the period of the offence to which the Penalty Notice relates.

6. Non-payment of Penalty Notices

- 6.1. Non-payment of a Penalty Notice within the prescribed time period may result in prosecution by the Council for the offence to which the Penalty Notice relates.

7. Withdrawal of Penalty Notices

- 7.1. The circumstances when a Penalty Notice will be withdrawn are detailed on the Penalty Notice.

Definitions

- i. 'Schools' means all Department for Education registered educational providers situated within the City of Bristol, for pupils of statutory school age, not including independent schools.
- ii. In April 2017 The Supreme Court gave its judgment on the meaning of what is meant by 'attend regularly' at school for the purposes of section 444 of the Education Act 1996. The Supreme Court decided that "regularly" meant "in accordance with the rules prescribed by the school".
- iii. For the purposes of education law, section 576 of the Education Act 1996 defines a 'parent' as:
 - all natural (biological) parents, whether they are married or not;
 - any person who, although not a natural parent, has parental responsibility for a child or young person (this could be a step-parent, guardian or other relative);

- any person who, although not a natural parent, has care of a child or young person. (A person has care of a child or young person if they are the person with whom the child lives and who looks after the child, irrespective of what their relationship is with the child.)

Throughout this document, references to 'parent' mean each and every parent coming within the definition (whether acting jointly or separately) and should not be taken to only apply to 'parent' in the singular.

- iv.** '10 week period' means a continuous period of 100 school sessions (which would usually be 50 school days). Days when the school is not in session are not counted (i.e. Inset Days, Bank Holidays, School Holidays and Weekends). The 100 school sessions could span two different terms, or indeed, two academic years.



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