

17th April 2023

Dear Parents and Carers of Meadowfield School,

We have been asked to write to you in my capacity as Chair of the Kent Association of Headteachers. Our association represents all school leaders in Kent, across primary, secondary, special and alternative provision and across both the maintained and academy sector.

It is very unusual for us to engage directly with parents and carers in Kent in this way, but after careful consideration we feel that it is necessary. We want to share with you an evident change in the ways that some parents and carers are engaging with schools since the pandemic. After a number of concerns were reported by colleagues we conducted a survey of our members. It is clear that there has been a shift in the ways that a significant minority of parents and carers communicate with schools and make complaints about provision. These include:

- More parents taking to social media to be critical of schools and their actions, without first having raised their concerns with the school.
- Parents more frequently complaining to myriad agencies (local MPs, Ofsted, KCC, governors) before schools have had time to respond to and address concerns.
- Parents making serious allegations online about bullying and peer-on-peer abuse without reflecting on their own child's role in an incident.
- Parental conduct when contacting schools more often being abusive or threatening.
- An increase in the naming of individual members of staff on social media posts, which are critical of the school and/or that named individual.
- Parents being very critical of schools to their children, causing in turn children to inappropriately question the actions of staff in schools.
- A greater number of persistent and vexatious complaints.

It is important that we recognise, and express our gratitude for, the fact that the vast majority of parents and carers who have children in attendance at our schools go out of their way to maintain good relationships with us and that they use appropriate channels when they have concerns. We are very grateful to you for this.

School leaders all want to maintain the best possible relationships with parents and have no desire to be critical of parents. All leaders and governors recognise that schools must be able to be challenged and that parents have a right to question decisions about what happens to their child. No school leader wants to be in conflict with their parent body. However, school leaders have explained that these developments are having a significantly negative impact on them and their schools.

It is difficult to be definitive about why this change has happened and there are many possible reasons: parents feeling anxious about children returning to school, parents feeling more able to question what schools do after having seen remote lessons at first hand, parents having been encouraged by the then Secretary of State to complain to Ofsted about remote learning if they were dissatisfied. Whatever the reasons, the evidence is clear that this shift is real and significant.

While it is important that parents' voices are heard and that there are clear mechanisms for their views to be shared with schools, those schools and their staff also have a right to be protected from parental conduct which is unreasonable. Some of the behaviours reported by parents would not be tolerated in other public-sector spheres such as GP surgeries, hospitals or police stations. Equally, complaints and concerns being aired in these ways is time-consuming, adversarial and does not lead to better relationships between parents and school, and better outcomes for pupils.

There is clearly a balance to strike here. Parents must have recourse if they are concerned about their child's education or welfare. Equally though, school leaders are entitled to be protected from persistent or vexatious complaints and claims being made about them or their schools with scant evidence to back these up. We are therefore taking this unusual step of writing to all parents and carers across the county to request that you follow the published complaints procedures that all schools have in place, and to avoid if at all possible the sorts of behaviours outlined above. We do recognise, of course, that this is already common practice for the vast majority of parents and carers, for which we are grateful.

Yours sincerely

Mr M Walters
Chair, KAH Executive Board
Executive Principal, St Anselm's Catholic School, St Edmund's Catholic School, Ursuline College

Mr C Norwood
Chair, KAH North Board

Mrs D Hines
Chair, KAH East Board

Mr J MacLean
Chair, KAH South Board

Mrs A Crittenden
Chair, KAH West Board

On behalf of the Kent Association of Headteachers