

## Strikes Position Statement

Since 2018, Square Peg and Not Fine in School have been working in partnership to support parents and carers, and to raise awareness of school attendance difficulties experienced by children, young people and their families.

During that time, national absence from school has grown from approx 750k pupils (2018) to almost 1.7million (2022). Membership of Not Fine In School family support group has expanded in the same five years from 0 to 37k parents and carers, with 8k new members since last August alone.

As attendance and persistent absence moved into the national spotlight during Covid, we were pleased to see more organisations interested in and advocating for children and families, as well as recognising the need for systemic change.

Last year the Government brought the Schools Bill before Parliament, with its first reading in the House of Lords in May. In the same month, the Department for Education published guidance on Attendance to come into effect in September.

Since then Not Fine In School have seen enquiries and membership requests increase significantly. New and existing families are experiencing threats of fines, referrals to the magistrates court, and large numbers are receiving letters about the new guidance and changes to attendance management. Parents whose children have chronic illness, special educational needs, are disabled, recently bereaved, are young carers, live in poverty, are being bullied or struggling with returning to school after Covid or had mental ill health were finding themselves at the mercy of even more rigid policy and practice from their school.

In response, we launched our 3 Asks campaign in July, calling for:

1. An end to truancy laws
2. An Attendance Code of Practice
3. A mental health & wellbeing absence code

We were pleased to receive cross-bench support in the House of Lords for a compassion-focused approach to non-attendance and persistent absence. We were additionally grateful to Baroness Bennett who supported our submission to the DfE's Attendance Consultation<sup>1</sup>, which clearly evidenced the link between mental health as a key factor in non-attendance and the systems' response to non-attendance as negatively impacting child and family mental health and wellbeing.

We are heartened to see other organisations joining our call to end punitive approaches to attendance, and support our campaign to end truancy laws and stop criminalising parents. Square Peg and Not Fine In School have also worked closely with two parents whose

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.teamsquarepeg.org/post/dfе-attendance-consultation>

Change.org petition<sup>2</sup> calls for an end to fines and prosecution, which to date has amassed almost 250k signatures.

We hope the many strands of action and engagement continue to challenge policy and inform practice. We recommend that families access all avenues available in terms of engagement, participation and activism – supporting petitions, writing to their MP, raising awareness by sharing information, joining campaigns – and that families only undertake what is right for them and the circumstances they are in.

It is necessary and important to inform parents that involving their child in a term-time weekday protest event involving withdrawing a child from school in the form of a 'strike' may place them at greater risk of referral for a fine or prosecution for non-attendance.

The right to strike is a choice made by an adult employee - *'a refusal to work as a form of protest.'*

Square Peg and Not Fine In School have worked tirelessly to shift narratives and understanding around barriers to school attendance and persistent absenteeism, traditionally referred to as 'school refusal.' Our research and lived experience shows persistent absenteeism is a sign of unmet or unrecognised need and is not a choice. Our children can't, not won't, go to school.

We know first-hand the anguish school attendance difficulties cause the child and their family. We are also hearing from schools and leaders who do not want to take a punitive approach to attendance but feel national data drivers and new guidance is tying their hands. We know the solutions lie in courageous conversations, co-production, collaboration and compassion.

We know there's another way; we know many are struggling and frustrated. And we hope to ensure everyone is able to take an informed decision around any protest or direct action that does not place their child or themselves at risk of a fine, prosecution, MASH referral or other escalated measure.

Square Peg and Not Fine In School support teachers' strike action. We are pleased to note that education unions will not ask parents to keep their children off school and request parents and carers show their support for education professionals by contacting their MP, attending a peaceful demonstration and sending messages of support via online campaign portals.

In solidarity,

**Square Peg & Not Fine In School**

***We can do better. Together.***