

## Top tips for Managing Absence in Education

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### 1. Publish absence policies and procedures

The organisations who are most effective at managing sickness absence have a set of guidelines and everybody knows what they are. Even if they are set out in local authority contracts, make sure that guidelines are clearly communicated to staff.

### 2. Be consistent and visibly fair.

One of the biggest de-motivators for staff is feeling that managers or colleagues are treated differently. It can also leave the organisation exposed in the event of a tribunal.

Therefore, consider all applications for leave under the same process (including training leave, pre-planned medical leave and study leave) as well as any holiday if relevant.

Regarding sickness absence, it is especially important that leave and absence policies and procedures are equally applied to everyone.

### 3. Educate staff

The more information your staff have, the more empowered (and therefore motivated) they are likely to be. Many staff do not understand that several short term unplanned absences are far more disruptive to a class than one long period of illness where you can maintain consistent cover. Generally aim to engage and support staff, encouraging responsibility. Using the Bradford Factor can be useful to highlight this.

### 4. Automate your absence management

In more than 20 years of helping organisations tackle absence, we've learned the biggest single step you can take is to automate absence management. It reduces administration, enforces your HR policies, keeps control of staff on long term sick and gives you vital management data, all of which saves time and money.

## 5. Use return-to-work forms and interviews - every time

If staff are absent, short term intervention can often reduce long term absence. Gentle, exploratory return to work interviews can be an ally, whether done by line managers or even the Head Teacher in small schools. Consider:

- Are staff really well enough to come back (you don't want further disruption to classes if you have a long term sub available)
- Is the absence disability related? Check for protected characteristics
- Does the employee require ongoing support? What can you offer? (benefits, EAPs, in house management, expert advice etc.)
- Critically for education, is the absence related to a problem pupil/class or overwork? How can you help improve the situation?

Record the results so you can refer back, ideally in an automated system that will let you produce reports.

## 6. Differentiate between disability and other absences

New disability legislation means that employers have to consider making reasonable adjustments for disabled employees.

A disability can include things you may not have thought of such as stress, epilepsy or asthma.

It is best to record absence due to a possible disability separately, so they can be considered alongside other absences rather than as one record. This will make it easier should you need to take further action or seek legal advice later on. Seek external advice if needed (ACAS, LEA etc.)

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### 7. Stay in contact during long term absences

Maintain reasonable contact with staff on long term sick unless circumstances prevent it.

Keep them informed with staff newsletters and changes.

Also be aware when fit for work notes expire and when you need new notes. Treat the staff member like you value them and like you expect their eventual return, even if it isn't yet.

**Take professional advice where necessary.**

### 8. Offer return to work support

Coming back to work after a long period of absence can be daunting. By offering a phased return to work, such as part time hours initially, smaller workloads or extra support, your staff member will feel more comfortable. Returning 'full on' can be a shock to the system.

### 9. Avoid presenteeism

The last thing you need is for every teacher to phone in sick at once - there's always one 'sniffly Susie' that troops in when clearly unwell and infects the whole staff room (and half the pupils). Consider flu jabs, and make it clear that apart from minor colds, **if you are infectious, STAY HOME!**

### 10. Be a good manager

It can sometimes be hard for Year & Department Heads to recognise themselves as 'employers' and 'leaders', but all people-managers face the same challenges – and mid-managers need support from their managers in turn!

Leaders who engage their staff with regular appraisals, team building and 2 way feedback usually experience less sickness absence.

Overall, there is much that leaders can do to influence sickness absence at work in a positive way. Keep your people engaged, get support for yourself if you need it, but more than anything, keep the communication flowing on your team!