12 October 2026

Joint trade unions' response to United Learning's proposals for its Absence Management Policy

Dear Kate,

At recent meetings, you have alerted us to the intention of the Trust to look at amendments to its Absence Management and Sick Pay Policies following feedback from school leaders.

Whilst the current draft proposes a number of changes that trade unions view as useful, such as the move to emphasise early intervention with supportive return to work meetings, the proposal to only pay Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) in the first six months of employment is something that the recognised trade unions cannot countenance.

As such, we would urge the Trust in the strongest terms to reconsider its position on this, particularly given the financial detriment this would impose on staff when they are off sick and at their most vulnerable.

It cannot go unnoticed that the UK has one of the worst statutory sick pay schemes of the OECD. SSP in the UK is so low that it is nowhere near enough to pay the bills.

The current rate of SSP is just £123.25 for 2026/27. This works out to be just £3.29 an hour for someone working an average 37.5 hours per week on a United Learning teacher's contract. This contrasts with an hourly rate of £25.76 for a teacher on the bottom of the PT scale as proposed for 2026/27 (£37,674 divided by 1462.5 hours), and £13.76 for a classroom-facing Teaching Assistant (TA) outside London.

No one chooses to get ill, but when they do, we would hope that ULT would want to know that members of staff can take the time to get better and still pay the bills to look after themselves and their families. This proposal will increase the probability that staff will return to work before they are recovered, with obvious potential implications for their colleagues and pupils.

Furthermore, access to well-paid sick leave increases the probability that a sick member of staff will come back to work after recovery.

United Learning has provided no evidence to substantiate the assertion that probationers are taking sickness absence in order to avoid probation meetings and a significant change to contractual sick pay affecting every probationer should not be based on an unsupported assertion about the behaviour of an unspecified number of employees.

As well as being opposed to the aforementioned proposal on SSP, teacher trade unions are opposed to the proposal to move the rolling sick pay year for teachers, especially given the absence of any worked examples demonstrating how the proposed scheme would operate.

This is particularly important for teachers because the Burgundy Book sick pay arrangements use a service based entitlement and a defined sick leave year and provides for 100 days' sick leave at full pay and 100 days at half pay following four years of continuous service.

The recognised trade unions have serious concerns about the proposals presented. Taken together, they would represent a significant deterioration in our members' contractual protections and could have the consequence of increasing rather than reducing sickness absence.

On this basis, we urge you to halt your proposals to pay only SSP in the first six months of employment, and encourage you instead to seek other means to ensure that United Learning is an employer of choice.

Take care,

P. J. Walters