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Dear Parents/Carers,

Update on industrial action and school closure tomorrow (Wednesday 17 June)

We are writing to provide a further update on industrial action affecting The Orchard School and the actions we have taken so far.

We fully recognise the continued disruption and uncertainty this situation is causing for families, and we sincerely apologise for the inconvenience. We also want to be clear about the actions that both The Orchard School and Sandwell Council are taking to resolve the issues as quickly and constructively as possible. These are being addressed through a clear action plan and ongoing meetings with trade unions and staff.

As you may already be aware, our substantive Headteacher is currently not in school. In order to ensure sufficient leadership capacity during this time, we have secured the services of an Interim Headteacher, James Horspool, who is currently Headteacher at Meadows Special School. He will be supporting Orchard School for up to 2.5 days per week.

In addition, the Council has commissioned another experienced Headteacher, Jackie Beech (Headteacher at All Saints Primary School, West Bromwich) on a consultancy basis to work directly with staff and leaders for an equivalent of 1 day a week, on workload and wellbeing issues. This work is already underway as part of a wider programme of support.

We want to reassure you that a range of actions have also already been taken in response to concerns raised by trade unions, including pausing the proposed increase of pupil numbers, commissioned independent reviews which have resulted in clear action plans to address concerns, strengthening leadership capacity, and providing additional support from Council services. We have also attached a Question-and-Answer section in this letter which provides more information about this.

In addition to this we recognise the importance of engaging with you regularly and understand that communication to parents and carers is not as effective as we would all want. The Interim Headteacher is working as quickly as possible to establish 'Class Dojo' within The Orchard School. This online platform offers immediate communication between families and school, with options allowing individual, group or whole school messaging. Our



expectation is that the system will take 2-3 weeks to prepare, before it can start being used effectively.

In addition to Class Dojo, the Interim Headteacher has asked senior leadership colleagues in school to identify other parental engagement opportunities. This will involve gathering feedback from parents and carers to ensure that the links between school and home are strengthened in the coming weeks. This will be a 'live' process that will be continually reviewed and refined over time to maintain its effectiveness.

We remain fully committed to working in partnership with the trade unions to resolve this dispute. To date, we have met with union representatives on five occasions, both individual bodies and jointly, and discussions are ongoing. Following these meetings, we are pleased to let you know that NASUWT have agreed to withdraw their proposed action this week to allow for further discussions.

However, at this stage, industrial action is still planned by NEU members tomorrow, Wednesday 17 June. Consequently, we have had to take the difficult decision to close the school tomorrow.

We are also aware that strike action is planned by GMB members (Friday 19 June), and we will keep you updated on this and any other future dates proposed by each of the Trade Unions.

As before, decisions to close the school are not taken lightly but the safety, consistency of provision, and wellbeing of pupils must remain our priority.

We understand how difficult this continues to be for families and thank you for your patience and ongoing support while every effort is made to resolve the situation.

We will continue to keep you informed of any developments.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Grindulis
Chair of Governors (on behalf of the Governing Body)



Sally Giles
Executive Director, Children and Education Services
Children and Education Directorate
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Q&A

Why are staff taking industrial action?

Trade unions have raised concerns relating to:

- Workload and staff wellbeing
- Staffing levels and organisation
- Health and safety
- Consultation and communication
- Leadership capacity
- Staff terms and conditions in some cases

What has been done in response?

- Changes to numbers of pupils paused to allow consultation with staff and unions
- Five dispute resolution meetings held with unions
- Reviews commissioned (staffing, H&S, training) with comprehensive action plan developed and progress made on delivering these
- Interim leadership secured
- Additional Council support in place from HR, finance and education services

What about workload and wellbeing?

- Review of working practices underway
- National government resources being used to support development of staff
- Additional wellbeing support offer being developed by the council's HR service

What about health and safety concerns?

- Health & safety review completed
- Further monitoring underway and staff will be involved in a revamped Health and Safety Committee together with Trade Union representatives
- We are working in collaboration with Trade Unions to provide the necessary assurances required

Why might the school close during industrial action?

The safety, consistency of provision, and wellbeing of pupils must remain our priority.

We cannot guarantee that the specialist provision required can be delivered during strike action.