

Headmaster's Covid update 22-6-20

Dear Parents

I hope that you are all well. I am writing to update you on school matters as we enter the last three weeks of the Summer Term.

Phased Reopening

As you know, in recent weeks the Department for Education has allowed the gradual reopening of school sites across the country to more pupils. The terms of this reopening have been strictly determined by the DfE, with regard to which particular year groups have been eligible to return and how schools should manage the increased numbers within school buildings.

Gad's Hill School has remained open since lockdown began on 23rd March, catering to the children of critical workers and those considered 'vulnerable', even during the Easter and May holidays. On 1st June, we were permitted to welcome back our Nursery, Reception, K1 and Remove pupils in 'bubbles' of 15 or fewer. Then, from the 15th June, we were pleased to be able to bring back our Lower Fifth on a part-time basis – the government directive being that only 25% of the cohort should be on site at one time.

This last Monday, the DfE then updated its guidance to give primary schools more flexibility to bring back children from additional primary-age year groups, provided they could do so while meeting the same rules regarding reduced class sizes and the prevention of mixing between different groups.

That is why, from today, 22nd June, we are welcoming onto the school site children from K2 up to J5 for two days per week, in addition to the year groups and critical worker groups already in school.

I am proud that we have been able to meet the earliest possible opportunities to bring each of the year groups back and am enormously grateful to all my colleagues, both on our teaching and support teams, who have reconfigured classrooms, changed shift patterns, made their own family arrangements and so on, to be able to enact the necessary preparation at each stage.

I am also hugely thankful to our parents and our pupils for the fantastic way in which you have taken changes to the usual arrangements in your stride and have been so understanding. The fact that – so far – the return of each year group has gone so smoothly and calmly is due in no small part to your cooperation and the remarkable resilience of your children.

Unfortunately, it seems certain that no other year groups will be added to the DfE's list of those permitted to return prior to September. I am very sorry that this means the vast majority of the Senior School must remain at home for the present time.

There are, however, encouraging signs that by the start of the Autumn Term, something closer to normality may have been re-established. If this is the case, it will be in no small part thanks to our pupils, whose stay at home will have helped prevent the wider spread of this insidious virus.

There is still a good deal of uncertainty, of course, regarding the future. It has surprised many people to learn that school leaders have no earlier indication of developments in reopening than anyone else watching the same ministerial briefings. I must, therefore, also thank you all for your patience in the immediate aftermath of each announcement, which has allowed us time to read the supporting documentation and put plans in place. This pattern looks set to continue for the near future, and so I will continue to update you from time to time, including through the summer holidays, when we know more about how the next steps will look.

Holiday Club

One thing that schools are still waiting for is more direction from the Department for Education on whether Holiday Clubs are allowed to operate as they normally would. The most recent expectation from the Department was that holiday clubs would be allowed to open, but that this would depend on the scientific advice at the time, and that the guidance for providers on the required health protection measures would be released 'soon'. The Out of School Alliance is reporting from a meeting with a DfE representative that 'soon' is unlikely to mean before 4th July.

We sincerely hope that we will be able to offer something to our families who like to make use of this holiday time provision. However, given that we cannot say for certain at the moment that this will be possible, it is

best that you anticipate that there will be **no** holiday club provision this summer. The DfE have also confirmed that there will be **no** provision for critical worker or vulnerable children in schools.

If this situation changes following the publication of guidance, I will let you know. However, for reasons of hygiene – and to give a well-deserved break to colleagues who have worked throughout this period - the school site will be **entirely closed** to everyone during the week beginning 13th July.

Catching Up

The subject of considerable discussion recently in the news has been the need to ensure that children who have missed many weeks in school are afforded the chance to catch up.

I am certain that there is no educator in the country who is not concerned by the impact of this extraordinary situation on our children. Indeed, the statistics from a recent national survey by the National Foundation for Educational Research produced some worrying results: four in 10 pupils in England are not in regular contact with their teachers; a third of pupils not engaged with their lessons; and only 42% submitting any work.

A similar survey by University College London indicated that two million pupils in the UK (around one in five) had done no schoolwork or managed less than an hour a day and just 17% have put in more than four hours a day since schools closed in March.

These statistics should be held up against those of our own survey, conducted amongst parents last month. According to that survey, 86% of our Senior School pupils were working for more than four hours every day, while 96% of Junior children spent at least two hours a day on work (with about half working in excess of four hours). Almost nine out of 10 parents across the school recognised that their child could receive help from a teacher as and when they require, and two-thirds of respondents felt that the amount of work set was about right.

So, how do these statistics relate to the idea of ‘catching up’?

Firstly, parents worried about the impact of absence on performance in national assessments, such as forthcoming GCSE examinations, should remember that these are standardised tests. Exam boards set grade boundaries for their qualifications against performance in those papers, so where children across the country may have been affected by prolonged absence from school in recent weeks, this should not have a substantive effect on the number of top or passing grades that are awarded. The required score to gain that grade will simply be decreased.

Indeed, a review of the above statistics on national remote learning completion indicate that our pupils should be at something of an advantage in standardised examinations, given their additional access to work and teacher support since March.

(I should note here that the national surveys both conclude that it is the most socially disadvantaged children in the country who will suffer the most from this. In highlighting how Gad’s Hill pupils have benefitted from their Distance Learning support, I take no pleasure at all from the negative impact of coronavirus on those children in the most deprived socio-economic backgrounds, but it is right to recognise here the significant advantages which our independent education can provide.)

Other national measures of progress for schools tend to be well-intentioned but rather arbitrary. If, by talking about ‘catching up’, the Government mean, for example, ‘ensuring that primary schools meet their SATs targets’, then one could question whom the catch up is intended to benefit. At Gad’s Hill School, we do not make our Year 6s take SATs, partly due to the way in which these end-of-key-stage tests tend to narrow the field of study down to grammar, comprehension, mathematics and test-taking just at a time when a young person’s world view should be opening up to new learning horizons. I am pleased that throughout the lockdown, our Distance Learning continued to reflect as wide a curriculum as possible – and the number of superb art, DT and science projects, as well as numerous delicious-looking home bakes, that I have seen from our pupils since March, attest to the aspirational value of this broader learning.

While I am confident that our provision of Distance Learning will have been beneficial to Gad’s Hill pupils, what I do recognise is that there is likely to be some relatively significant variation between the levels of progress made by children *within* the school. There will be many reasons for this, including parents’ own work commitments, childcare arrangements, access to computers and family health. We know very well that some children have better-developed independent learning skills, while others have always gained from close support within a classroom. Some will have thrived on the opportunity to tackle work without the usual distractions of daily life, while others will have found it hard to adapt to work outside of our school

setting, where PE lessons, assemblies, break times and so on help to demarcate working hours and reduce stress.

However, I have full confidence in my teaching colleagues to be able to bring all children back towards parity within a relatively short space of time. I have already seen that much of the work set on Teams has been differentiated according to need and ability, and frequent contact with home by our form tutors has allowed colleagues to share information internally to best support each individual. When we finally have all children back on site, planning for all pupils on a personalised level will be implemented. After all, it is our teachers' knowledge of each child that is one of our school's greatest strengths, and the reason that many of you will have entrusted us with their education in the first place. Despite the significant financial cost to the school of the pandemic, as detailed in the Chair of Governor's letters to you recently, we are still committed to delivering measures to guarantee this: our commitment to creating a second form in J3 again next year, for example, significantly reducing those class sizes, or continuing to offer all GCSE options to our Lower Fours as they move into Upper Four.

I do not doubt that some of our pupils may require additional support to get their learning back to where we would want it to be this autumn and beyond, and when we have had the opportunity to evaluate rates of progress effectively we will be keen to put measures in place, but I also believe that the national catch-up required will be less, easier and more effective in a school such as ours than in many others across the country.

We do not expect that children who have worked extremely hard throughout challenging circumstances should need to continue to complete school work through this summer holiday. Indeed, considering the whole of the 2020/21 academic year will lie ahead of us come September, this could prove to have an exhausting effect on children, even if that is not felt until the Spring or Summer Terms of 2021. There are, however, plenty of less demanding but fruitful educational activities to encourage over the break, first and foremost of which to encourage reading for pleasure at all occasions. Your child's English teacher will be happy to make recommendations of appropriate fiction and non-fiction works to inspire active minds.

Black Lives Matter

Another issue, which has quite rightly been in the news of late, has been the increased attention given to racial inequality and discrimination, following the appalling and tragic death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA.

As a school, we have a moral imperative to be at the forefront of educating future generations of young adults about the extreme harm of all types of prejudice, and we have a duty to create a learning environment, which gives voice to all children and reflects and supports their own backgrounds, experiences, orientations, cultures, faiths and beliefs.

We feel this responsibility keenly, and particularly so as we are proud to see our school become increasingly ethnically diverse. 35% of our pupils currently identify as BME (against Kent County Council's 2019 mid-year population estimates of 6.6% in the general Kent population and the 2011 census figure of 17.2% within our Gravesham district).

Our behaviour management system treats any form of behaviour motivated by intolerance of protected characteristics as a serious offence, but beyond that, the key is to educate children from a young age, to promote equality at every opportunity and to develop a more sensitive awareness of what can often be our unconscious biases. Opportunities for learning about these subjects are woven into our curriculum, particularly through our SMSC programme and our assembly topics. Some of you may have been fortunate enough to see one of our Year 10 pupils, Sarah, put the issue into context for young people with a remarkable eloquence recently.

None of which is to say that we do not believe the School can contribute more to the fight against all discrimination and injustice. We simply must be society's leaders in tackling inequality and inspiring future generations to enact the same. There is more that we can do, for example, to ensure that all children feel comfortable in reporting discriminatory incidents, in making sure our curriculum goes even further in its representation of minority experiences, cultures and histories, in ensuring staff receive further training on addressing prejudice, and in addressing a national shortage of BME teachers, particularly in leadership roles. Purposeful discussion on all of these issues is ongoing within the school at the highest levels of leadership, and I welcome the views of all members of our community in how best to follow talk with action.

End of Term

The Summer Term at Gad's Hill School is usually such a busy time for all of us, packed full of events. I feel very disappointed that our newest members will not have the opportunity this June and July to enjoy their

first Sports Day. I am deeply saddened that the Removes will not get to deliver their special assembly in person, or to take the lead roles in the Junior production – a show that never fails to dazzle. For our Upper Fifth leavers, the traditional roof-signing event has had to be put on hold, although we will make sure that they have the opportunity to complete this rite of passage at some time in the not-too-distant future.

What I am keen to deliver - being such important celebrations in our calendar - are the annual prize-giving services. While some pupils missed 6 weeks on the school site, some 8 and others will have missed 12 by the end of this term, children have still been working incredibly hard during that time at home, as well as in the classroom for the vast majority of the school year. (It is easy to forget quite how much was achieved in school in the long months from August 2019 through to the end of March 2020!)

It is certainly our intention, therefore, to go ahead with (virtual) prize-giving celebrations for the Kindergarten, Juniors and Seniors during the last week of term. Our usual wide array of prizes will be awarded, and we will have speeches from our pupil and adult school leaders, as well as some musical performances – but this year you will be able to watch (I hope) from the comfort of your own living rooms.

Exact details of broadcast dates and times are yet to be confirmed, but we will share these with you shortly and we hope that you will be able to tune in to watch.

I apologise for the length of this letter, but I hope the update will have been of use. Stay safe and well and I look forward to seeing you all again before too long.

Kind regards

Paul Savage
Headmaster