

26 March 2020

It takes a whole village ...

Dear Parents and Carers

I hope this letter finds you and your family well. As I sit here in school, it is unusually quiet and I am reflecting on how this period of school closure feels so surreal now that the students are at home with you.

Many of you will remember when you came to school as prospective parents at our Open Evening that I emphasised that I feel we are here to help you educate your child and I made a big play of the quote, "It takes a whole village to educate a child". It is perhaps ironic therefore, that this period of school closure has meant that our 'village' is now dispersed, the tables have somewhat turned and the emphasis is on you to be in the driving seat of educating your child with us providing support. In my view, however, most of you now have the privilege of being able to do what we do every day.

That is not to trivialise this virus or downplay the seriousness of this society lockdown. This is undoubtedly a serious situation and it is absolutely vital that we all follow the Government guidance to stay at home in order that we stem the risk of spreading the virus.

You are, however, in an extraordinary 'home schooling' situation where we are supporting you by teachers setting online learning tasks for your children but I would also like to add my thoughts to assist you at this time. You may have been hoping for us to provide and demand hours of learning from your children, but I have deliberately not asked this of our teachers with good reason. The first is pragmatic because we are aware that this period may well last for some time and so we want the setting of work to be manageable for teachers. To this end, we have asked teachers to set work according to the usual timetable, setting subject tasks that will last around 20 to 25 minutes each. Students normally have five taught periods over the day and so if they were due to have e.g. Maths in Period 1, followed by English in Period 2, then Drama in Period 3, Geography in Period 4 and then History in Period 5, then they should be set a task in Maths, English, Drama, Geography and History for that day. You can, of course help them with this if you wish. You can get involved and extend this work if you wish by researching topics further together. Alternatively, you can let them get on with it whilst it gives you a break. This online work and the fact that we have based it around the normal timetable, will give you some structure for the day.

I would also ask that you are considerate with our setting of work because many teachers have their own children at home too and some may well get ill themselves and so if there are gaps in the provision, please only contact us if it is persistent.

The second reason why I have not asked teachers to provide and demand hours of learning every day from students is simple. Children are anxious and scared right now. They will be picking up on everything going on around them at this time and they will feel our own tension and anxiety not to mention the tensions that will be created by social media and the press.

Principal **Mr Neil McShane**

I would therefore advise you to make the most of this unprecedented period when most of you will have more time available than usual to be with your children. This is time we never usually have. Many of us with older children ask ourselves 'where did the time go' when we turn around and suddenly our children are adult and going for job interviews or going off to University. We reflect on how we wish we had had 'more time' with them as they were growing up.

Well, I would suggest to you that ironically, this period of school closure and society lockdown means that time is now. In our normal everyday lives, we are often so wrapped up in our jobs and household tasks and demands that we forget the importance of pausing and giving time, proper time and attention to the needs of our growing children. Our time and attention is often all they need. Children need to be reassured, comforted and loved right now. They always look to us as adults to assure them that it will be ok – and it will be ok. Tough times come and tough times go.

In my Open Evening speech, I also always refer to us at school wanting to help you to educate the 'whole child' and so now, we will be relying on you to take the lead on that. In the last days of last week, I'm not sure we, as a staff, did a great job of doing that because we were too shocked at the sudden realisation of closure. The school was a quiet place, a bit numb, as children and staff didn't really know what to expect going forwards. We did feel so bad for Year 11 and Year 13 students that their normal rites of passage of the Prom and Leavers' Day etc. might be gone. No one has ever experienced this before and even though many students started to think it was a great thing having at least 4 weeks off school, the reality of them having to stay at home without being able to see their friends started to dawn. The reality of their normal school routine not being in place and the need for it all, will have caused anxiety. Your children will therefore need you to reassure them more than ever.

So, please do use this time and try to enjoy this time. It is surreal but it is unexpected time you may never get again. It's a great time to watch films together, read together, do projects together, dance, play music, bake cakes, paint pictures and play board games. Make family memories. Get to know them and use the time for them to know you; tell them your stories, give them the benefit of your experience in life. It's a great time also for them to help you out and learn how to wash up, how to tidy the garden and of how to do those chores that they will one day need to do alone. Education is about so much more than certificates or GCSE grades. It has always been about learning from our elders.

I am sure there will be tensions however. Not feeling able to go out is not a usual situation for you or your children. You may see unusual behaviours from them. Whether that is anxiety, anger or protest that they can't do things they normally do, it is likely to happen. You may well see more defiance, meltdowns or tantrums in the coming weeks. This is probably to be expected in these unusual circumstances so please be prepared for it and see it for what it is. Please do, however, make sure they stay at home.

We are setting online work and also sending out work packs to those families without internet access and so please ensure your children respect the fact that teachers are doing this for them, so that they can keep learning. As parents and carers however, please don't get too worried or uptight about them possibly regressing in terms of their educational progress. Please remember every student in the country is in the same boat. We will pick up with them on their return and move them forward academically. This is what teachers are good at doing.

For us, guidance is rapidly changing and we will update you as we go. Please be aware that term technically ends on Wednesday 1 April so we will not set online work over the Easter break. At present, however, we are expecting to begin setting online work again on Monday 20 April 2020 unless things radically change. Please also be aware that the school office is only staffed from 10.30 to 12.30 at present and that teachers will only communicate by email with your children if they are using their school email account.

Principal Mr Neil McShane

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For safeguarding purposes, teachers have to ignore emails from children sent on any other email account. Teachers are also operating to normal school day times.

So, at present our 'village' is dispersed but we are still all one community and rooting for each other. Tough times come and tough times go and when they do go, I truly hope that we will all have an even healthier respect for each other, our 'village' and our society.

At the end of it all, I believe that what your children will remember most about the time of lockdown will be how they felt. So yes, please make them do the work we set but more importantly, give them your time and lavish a bit more love and reassurance on them than normal.

All my best wishes and stay safe.



Neil McShane
Principal

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