

Our Ref: SST/HBr

Date: Monday 21st September 2020

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Re: School Update

Since the start of my tenure at The Duston School I have been truly humbled by the support that the parental body has shown for the school and the approaches that I have taken as the Principal. This has helped the senior team and I to drive the school forwards leaps and bounds. The culture of the school has been vastly transformed for the better. The 2019 summer examination series saw the school achieve a set of GCSE outcomes that have resulted in TDS being the 27th most improved school in the country. A Level outcomes from that very same summer examination series saw the school move to the top 5% of all schools nationally, with the school ranked 55th in the country and the highest performing school in Northamptonshire. Subsequently the school has been awarded three highly prestigious SSAT awards for its sterling outcomes. I truly believe that the school is one that the pupils, staff, parents/guardians, governors, members and community can now truly be proud of.

As of March I appreciate fully that the world has changed. Schools nationally were instructed to close by the government to the majority of their pupils, with a new distance learning system of teaching initiated and direct in-school support for vulnerable and key worker children put into place. In June we were able to open our doors a little wider and welcomed back our EYFS, Year 1, Year 10 and 12 pupils. The response at the time to the systems and procedures in place were overwhelmingly positive. That brings me to the new academic year. As a school we are now into the fourth week of the new academic year. I have been extremely proud of our pupils and how they have stepped up and coped with the new systems, processes and procedures that we have initiated. I have also been humbled by the volume of positive emails from parents who have praised and endorsed the nature and manner in which the school is now organised. There is a clear recognition by the majority of parents that the measures in place are temporary and necessary to mitigate the risks and challenges posed by Covid19. Equally I am also aware that a tiny number of parents have been critical of some of the approaches that we have employed.

The school has been organised in a manner that, as per previous communications, operates in line with the latest Department for Education written guidance for the opening of schools. I personally have discussed the approaches that are being taken by the school with both the Department for Education and Public Health England. Both of these bodies have praised the school for its approach, citing that what we are doing is an example of best practice. The Department for Education are sharing the approaches taken by The Duston School with schools nationally and we have already featured in a number of Department for Education case studies of best practice. I do appreciate that a particular bone of contention has been the approach to break and lunch within the Secondary Phase of the school. There is a view held by some parents that pupils are not allowed a break. This is not the case. Pupils have, as per my previous communications, been asked to remain in the same room. During break and lunch they are allowed to go to the toilet, they are allowed to talk to their peers, they can eat a snack or their lunch and they are allowed to play games and/or watch films. I have asked the Directors of Year and the Heads of House to canvass the pupils so we can purchase more things for them to do at break and lunch.

Fundamentally we have engaged in this approach for a number of reasons. Firstly, this approach allows us to mitigate risk as much as we possibly can. Secondly, this approach means that large gatherings of pupils will by and large not need to take place during the school day, which again mitigates as much as possible against the cross-contamination of the year group bubbles. Thirdly, and as already evidenced by one localised Covid-19 case within the school, we are able to pinpoint precisely which pupils need to self-isolate should a Covid case arise. As a result we are in a position where fewer pupils need to be sent home to self-isolate. To date this has meant that a small bubble, as opposed to an entire year group, have had to self-isolate. From a parental perspective I do not want to unnecessarily disrupt or inhibit your ability to go to work during the school week. Arguably, the less disruption for you the better. Educationally, I really do not want to see swathes of pupils or year groups sent home to self-isolate when we have a system in place that can, as far as is reasonably possible, mitigate against this. At its worst, I really do not want to have to close the school again to the majority of our pupils unless absolutely necessary. I am acutely aware that remote learning, irrespective of the approach, is not a substitute for being taught in a normal class setting, live and with a teacher. I do not want pupils ultimately to fall further behind in their learning.

I would like to reiterate that the measures we have put into place are for the health and safety of the entire school community which, in turn, impacts on the wider community as a whole. They are designed to mitigate as many risks against the virus as possible. Ultimately they are temporary measures and I personally do not wish nor want the school to operate in the current break/lunch time model for any longer than is absolutely necessary. To that effect I would like to request that parents/guardians now fully support the school and allow the staff and I to fully focus our energy and efforts on educating and keeping your children safe.

I thank all of the parents who have written to me personally endorsing our approach for your support and I thank you all in anticipation of your support for the necessary and temporary set of measures that we have in place. The sooner the threat of the virus abates and allows us to return to normal the better.

Please stay safe.

Yours faithfully,

Mr Strickland
Principal

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