

Our ref: PJS/DKP

31 December 2020

Dear Parent/Carer

Apologies for the radio silence, however as I'm sure you're aware the situation has been changing and therefore planning has become very difficult. Some over-exuberant headteachers are now on their third iteration of the letter, but I thought it was better to send one when things were clear. I think things now are as clear as they're going to be at least, although over the course of re-drafting this letter this morning things have changed again!

In summary the return to school dates - as of today - 31.12.2020 are:

Monday 4 January
Monday 11 January
Monday 18 January

Key Worker Provision only: home learning for all
Year 11 and Key Worker Provision: home learning for
Years 7-10
All students to return

I met with a team of senior leaders on Tuesday to plan the roll out of the testing, with the intention of contacting you on Wednesday to gain consent in order to hit the ground running at the start of term. Unfortunately, just as we had finished our four-hour planning meeting speculation began ramping up in the media that the situation would change. It now appears that we have a week to prepare the testing to begin on 11 January, although it is uncertain about whether we are able to test before that date – we await clarification. There are webinars scheduled on Monday and Tuesday to give us information around the process, until that point we may struggle to answer any detailed questions. We will be sending out consent forms early next week and then scheduling tests. This is a voluntary process however (kits dependent) we intend to offer all our students the opportunity to have the recommended two lateral flow tests. When we send the consent forms we will send all details about the process so that you are able to make an informed decision.

Over the course of next week we will be running the Key Worker School, preparing for the testing, doing additional planning for the remote learning and possibly testing our Year 11 and Key Worker students (if allowed). As mentioned in the letter at the end of last term, we will start with standard home learning but will spend the week planning for more interactivity and variety for the following week(s). The main portal of communication will be Teams for all year groups. As we were not expecting to provide home learning for Year 11, the resources for Year 11 will be available after 11.00am on Monday.

You will remember at the start of term I undertook a survey about parental access to home technology, so we could assess how effective any live sessions would be. As you would expect there was a real mixed response and it's important that if you are lucky enough to have a device for each member of your family, that you don't forget that some households are trying to manage one device between everyone and those students can't lose out on their learning as a result of it.

My scepticism about Zoom lessons has only increased having read and heard the responses of teachers (mainly in the independent sector) who conducted their home learning like this. The overwhelming experience seems to be that it was an ineffective way to learn and students had to be re-taught everything that was taught on Zoom. In contrast, the vast majority of our students learnt well over lockdown and teachers have found they have, in the main, retained what they learned. If you've had many Zoom meetings yourself, you will know that fatigue and disengagement set in rather quickly. We appreciate the need to engage with students, but our priority is effective learning, not entertainment or online babysitting. Whilst we want to increase the interactivity between school and home in the next home learning phase, we are sure that wall-to-wall Zoom lessons in front of a screen is not the way to go.

One of the successes of our previous home learning was in that final last half term when we introduced a little variety and I think this is the key to keeping students engaged. At the start of lock down the students were pleased to miss school, but very quickly the novelty of those first few weeks wore off and once they got back very few students were approaching the impending closure of schools with anything but disappointment and dread. We will be experimenting next week with different forms of home learning to launch on Monday 11 January, but at the moment I'm thinking it will be a mix of small group on-line sessions, videos, tutor group meets, some teaching sessions, broadcasts and independent study. The key is to provide students with a varied diet and our aim would be to provide at least one 'live' or interactive element each day for each year group.

Alongside agreeing protocols and styles, we will have to timetable the sessions to ensure that families with only one device don't have too many clashes which is unfair on the children. At this stage I'm not sure what the timetable may look like, but I'm hoping that we can give some sense of structure to children and make this next incarnation of home learning feel a little different again; as important as the learning is the sense of community and connectedness that children feel and to ensure they feel supported, albeit from afar.

I appreciate the details are a little vague at the moment but we are really working with scant information and there is still some clarification required from the government. I am confident that we will be able to deliver the testing effectively and produce a new version of the home learning which is educationally valid.

I wish you all a happy new year and I hope you and your families are keeping safe.

Best wishes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P Jenkins', written in a cursive style.

P Jenkins
Headteacher