

21st May 2020



King Henry VIII Senior School
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Headmaster: Jason Slack BSc, MA Ed

Dear Parent,

The end of the Half Term is almost here and in some ways it seems such a short time since I was writing a similar communication before we broke up for Easter. Whilst we will remain open for the children of 'key workers' next week, most staff are looking forward to some time away from a screen and the intensity that online learning can involve. I am sure that many children feel the same way.

End of Year Exams

It was always an ambitious plan to have our usual 'exam week' delivered remotely. I couldn't be prouder of the way in which pupils and staff have confronted the challenge and made the most of the opportunity, in very different circumstances to those we usually encounter for exam week. There couldn't have been a worse time for Microsoft 'Forms' to encounter problems (that extended across Europe) than the first exam of the first morning of exam week! Thank you to everyone who persevered during this time (you will recall that perseverance is an 'intellectual characteristic' that we have previously emphasised). Maintaining as close to 'normality' as possible has been a significant aim of our approach to 'lockdown'. Having the usual rhythm of 'revision – test – review' at this stage of the academic year has had more holistic benefits that reach beyond academic attainment. Parents and pupils that have battled with ICT issues and the inevitable anxieties during this last week have my gratitude. It is important to understand that we must accept exam arrangements have not been as robust or reliable as usual. Organising desks in classrooms, with strict rules of conduct and invigilators to enforce them has not been possible. However, I believe that the outcome is not as important as the process on this occasion. It is important for future development and attainment that pupils have gone through a process of planning and revising (and the subsequent review of areas of weakness). This will be important in future years when exam outcome will have much greater significance. Please be reassured that teachers will be understanding of pupils whose performance is not in line with class work achieved during the year, or consistent with previous performance in exams. We have all coped with a lot in the last few weeks and it is a huge achievement to have had such a positive exam week.

Year 12 and Year 10 'Face to Face Support'

In my letter last week I explained that I would contact parents with further information about any potential 'face to face' contact between pupils in Years 10 and 12 and their teachers.

Not surprisingly, the phrase of 'face to face support' has been interpreted in lots of different ways. Many of us hoped that it would mean a re-opening of our school to these year groups. However, in the preliminary guidance issued at the end of last week, the Government put a number of restrictions on how schools can operate. These include pupils working in small groups (of no more than 15) and staying within this 'bubble' of people. Although there can be a small number of changes of teacher within a bubble, pupils may not change groups. It is this bubble restriction that makes doing any interpretation of face-to-face teaching almost impossible. Pupils in these year groups mix widely through lots of different option subjects and teaching sets. Keeping within bubbles would have the consequence of pupils being in lessons for subjects that they don't study, and being taught by teachers that they don't usually have.

I suspect that re-opening for lessons delivered in a traditional manner was not something that the Government envisaged, but our initial hope was to facilitate something resembling a normal school day. The online learning provision that we have developed has been very positively received but we are all aware that children are missing the social side of school and other parts of school life. Sadly, anything close to a 'normal school day' seems unlikely in the near future. Any school experience in the coming weeks will be very different for children hankering for the environment that they remember in a world before social distancing. I believe that the Government guidance had greater consideration for pupils who are unable (or unwilling) to access or engage with online learning. These children are currently receiving little or no online tuition.

The Government have promised some further guidance for secondary schools. This was initially promised for Monday of this week. It was then postponed to Tuesday, ... and then Wednesday. I'm writing this letter on Thursday morning and we have been told to expect the guidance this afternoon. Although we are less than two days away from the half-term break, this advice has yet to be published! When I know more, school will be able to plan accordingly, and I will share our plans with you as soon as possible. Any plans will be based on the following principles:

1. We want to return. Debate in the media of reports that some teachers are reluctant to return is not something that I recognise among staff at King Henry VIII School.
2. The safety of pupils and staff remains paramount. Maintaining safety within our community whilst accommodating the complex logistics of how schools operate may be the reason that expected guidance has still not been received.
3. We are reluctant to implement any changes that compromise the educational provision currently benefitting pupils in other year groups.

It is looking likely that online learning will continue for pupils in Years 10 and 12 for the foreseeable future, as was stated in the initial Government guidance. I appreciate that many of you would like your son or daughter to return to school as soon as possible and hoped that the Prime Minister's announcement indicated that this would happen this term. The details that were released subsequent to his announcement indicate that this was not something being promised.

Pre A level Teaching for Year 11

I have been contacted by many parents who have been very positive about this provision. As much for the structure and purpose that it is providing for their children as the quality of the learning. This teaching will continue after the Half Term break. The current arrangements of timetabled lessons and independent work being set by teachers for completion outside of lessons will be maintained.

Finally, I would like to thank parents for their continued support of the school. All of the positive comments that I receive regarding our adaptation to online learning are very much appreciated and it is a pleasure to pass these on to hard working staff. I hope that next week brings some opportunity for a break from our 'new normal' and the good weather that has been promised can be enjoyed by you and your family.

Yours sincerely,



J. Slack
Headmaster