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15 January 2021

Dear Parent/Carer

We wrote to you immediately after the Prime Minister's announcement of a national lockdown and said we would write regularly to try to keep you as informed as possible about what is happening in our schools. Given the prominence of education stories in the media at the moment, we will also try to place some of the news stories in context and explain what they might mean for our students.

There seems to be quite a strong sense that many people are finding this lockdown more difficult than the first national lockdown for a whole range of reasons. We are mindful of the stresses and worries many people are facing at this time. As a result, we will continue to do everything we can to balance the challenge of providing the best possible education we can with supporting young people and families as they try to manage home learning again (especially given everything else people have going on in their lives at the moment).

Children of critical workers

I am sure you are aware that, across the country, most schools have more students attending school sites (as the definition of a "critical worker" has broadened significantly since the first lockdown). This is certainly the case in all of our schools. We are more than happy to support national and local work in critical industries by providing places at school for all those who need them, and we do not limit or ration the number of places available. It is important though, that children of critical workers only come to school when there is no other way for them to be safely cared for. We say this because keeping the number of people on school sites at this critical point in the pandemic is a crucial part of reducing the spread of the virus. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Remote lessons

We have been really pleased with how our remote learning has been going over the last couple of weeks, and we are grateful for the many positive comments we have had from parents and carers about how it is going. Most of our lessons in secondary schools are "live" and we are gradually introducing more live sessions in primary. This is still very new to all of us, so we are really grateful to staff for all of the work they are putting into planning and delivering lessons (and the ways in which they continue to learn new and better ways of doing things). It really is very different to teaching in person, and much more difficult than many of our teachers are making it look!

We are aware that - just like us - some children and families are finding it fairly straightforward, while others are finding it really challenging for a variety of reasons. We would like to reassure you that we really do understand this and want to be as supportive as we can. Our timetables are more rigid than during the first lockdown, but please do not worry if not everything gets done for every single lesson. We do not want to add more stress by people worrying if something doesn't work out or something goes wrong. Live sessions are recorded (so if students miss something, they can go



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back). If you can't always give the help or support you would want to your child, again, please don't worry. None of us are experts in everything, so we will just try to help as much as we can.

And crucially, you know your children best. So, if you feel that it would be best for them to take an unscheduled hour or two out because they need some fresh air, a break from a screen, to bake a cake or build a snowman, that too is ok if they are on top of most of their work. This is such a challenging situation and us all finding our way through and staying healthy - both physically and mentally - is absolutely paramount

Homework

For the next few weeks, we will not be setting additional homework on top of the work set daily in lessons. At present, most of our young people are spending around 5 hours on a screen each day to do schoolwork. We are concerned that we do not yet know enough about the impact on young people of asking them to complete more work in the evening, sitting at a screen. We will keep this under review as we find out more and will continue to try to balance our young people's educational needs and their well-being.

Feedback from students and parents

We are really interested in understanding the experience our students and parents/carers are having of remote learning. We are interested in what is working well, what difficulties people are having and any ideas for improving things further. Each school in the trust is sending a short questionnaire to all students and parents. We would be very grateful if you could spare a few minutes to complete it. We will be looking at every return to investigate how we can improve things further (for individuals or whole groups).

Free School Meals

If your child is entitled to free school meals, you should be receiving a weekly £15 supermarket voucher, arranged by your school. Given some of the negative publicity around food hampers this week, it feels like the right thing to have chosen to use vouchers. From next week, the government intends for schools to order vouchers centrally through Edenred; once this is up and running, we will switch to sending our vouchers through that scheme. Please be assured that, whatever you hear in the news about funding over February half-term, we will make sure that - one way or another - our families will continue to receive a £15 voucher for each eligible child for that week.

Exams for Year 11 and Year 13 students

You will be aware that the government announced that exams will not go ahead this summer. We are awaiting a period of consultation, once OFQUAL (the exams' regulator) releases its draft proposals. It is likely to centre heavily on some form of centre assessment, which may or may not include assessments or exam-style tasks that are set by the exam boards. We will give further information as soon as we get it. The one thing we know for sure is that students will be required to complete their courses and must continue to engage in their lessons and complete all work set, as the vast majority of our students are currently doing.



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Finally

We are under no illusions that the next few weeks will continue to be difficult. Schools remain a key part of the fight against coronavirus and we are doing everything we can to keep our communities safe and to provide the best learning we can. We are really grateful for all the efforts of our staff and for the continued great support we have had from parents and carers. We will write to you again each week to keep in touch. Wishing you and your families all the very best.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JR Uttley'.

Jonny Uttley
CEO

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Williman'.

Richard Williman
Headteacher



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