

Wednesday 1 April 2020

Dear Parents / Carers

I hope this finds you and your loved ones safe and well.

I am writing to you during this unusual Easter break, having taken some time to reflect on the events of recent weeks and the challenges we are collectively facing. We know that it is not easy for many at the moment; some parents are not only trying to work from home, but are trying to support their children with their home learning, look after their emotional wellbeing, and manage family commitments at the same time. As this extraordinary, unparalleled situation has unfolded, and as events have rapidly developed, we have endeavoured — alongside our colleagues in the Dartmoor Multi Academy Trust — to help our students and their families navigate their way through these unsettling times; through the uncertainty, confusion, and stress that many will inevitably and understandably be feeling.

School may have stopped, temporarily, but that doesn't mean that learning will, or, indeed, that it must. And whilst we don't know precisely how long schools will remain closed, we do know that we are not alone. We may have little control over this virus beyond doing everything we can to support the national collective effort to beat it, but we do have control over how we choose to deal with it. And I hope that through our actions in recent weeks we have been able to reaffirm our commitment to you and your child(ren):

- We have supported several families who had to make very difficult decisions in light of the coronavirus and associated risks before the temporary closures of schools was announced by HM Government.
- Since the temporary closures of schools was announced by HM Government, we have helped our students keep focused on their learning, promoting a consistent day-to-day structure and routine, and ensuring that they have been — and continue to be — provided with appropriate learning activities following their curricula at home.
- We have provided all our families, and families of schools within the trust and wider, with a curated set of links to a range of other, free, educationally high-quality online resources to use at home with their families.
- We have ensured that our children eligible for free school meals have been provided with hampers of good quality, locally sourced food, with the generous support of Waitrose, Co-Op, Lidl, Ellis' Bakery, and Farmer Luxton.
- We have supported many students without access to the requisite technology at home by preparing and loaning out laptops and securing internet access for the duration of our temporary school closure.
- We have kept the College open for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers in support of the country's collective efforts to reduce the spread of the virus.
- We have supported our Y11 and Y13 students and their families in understanding the implications of HM Government's decision to cancel all examinations and assessments this summer, and have endeavoured to ensure that they are kept fully up to date in a very unclear and uncertain time.
- We have endeavoured to keep in touch and maintain regular contact with students and families, to let you know that we are here to support you all as best as we can, and to keep you up to date with a rapidly changing situation, providing clarifications, guidance and advice.

But we want to make sure that we continue to support you and our students as best we can, and as the developing situation demands. We want to make sure, therefore, that we keep in close contact with you. We want to make sure we know about how you and your children are, about how the home learning is going, and about what we can do more, or better. To this end, we have created two short surveys — one for parents and carers to complete, and one asking much the same questions of our students. These surveys will be invaluable for us in monitoring the support we are giving and in helping us ascertain if there is anything more we can be doing to support you as families in this difficult time.

I would be very grateful if you could complete the survey (one for each of your children) and ask your child(ren) to complete their survey before 23:59 Saturday 4 April, when the survey will close. Please use the links below or those provided in the accompanying email. The surveys should only take around 2-3 minutes to complete. Please note that we will probably repeat the surveys over the coming weeks, to allow us to monitor any new issues should they arise as the situation develops further.

- Keeping in Touch Survey: Parents and Carers
<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=kG0HO7J4vUqeBclPJiicRjnwSebDr4NDqtvBush-3nFURFdDWTBYT1BRUzZSTThNNIVLNVZTQOpPTC4u>
- Keeping in Touch Survey: Students
<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=kG0HO7J4vUqeBclPJiicRjnwSebDr4NDqtvBush-3nFUMEw0OU83S1owQzg0VEZJN1RNVDRFWTQ2UC4u>

Mental Health and Wellbeing

As we all continue to help reduce the spread of the virus, by ensuring that we comply with the measures introduced on 23 March by HM Government to stay at home and away from others (i.e. social distancing — see the relevant link at the end of this document), it is important that we take time to ensure that we are looking after our own mental health and that of our loved ones.

We have, as I hope you are aware from my recent letters, collated on our website a range of resources and avenues for support to help parents and carers talk to their children about coronavirus www.okehamptoncollege.devon.sch.uk/parentsandcoronavirus.html. Beyond this, your child may find www.kooth.com helpful — a confidential British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy accredited web based service that provides ‘a safe and secure means of accessing mental health and wellbeing support designed specifically for young people,’ that includes age-appropriate and clinically approved articles, forums, discussion boards and the opportunity to have a text-based conversation with a qualified counsellor.

In addition, I would like to point you in the direction of the recently published advice from Public Health England about looking after our mental health and wellbeing, and that of our families, while staying at home, as well as the advice and guidance provided from Place2Be, the children’s mental health charity that provides counselling and mental health support and training to UK schools.

- PHE Guidance for the public on the mental health and wellbeing aspects of coronavirus
www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing
- Place2Be Advice on looking after your family's mental health while staying at home
www.place2be.org.uk/about-us/news-and-blogs/2020/march/coronavirus-advice-for-families-staying-at-home/

Free School Meals

Further to the updates in my recent letters, you may have heard that HM Government have confirmed their 'national voucher scheme allowing [students eligible for free school meals] to continue to access meals whilst they stay at home' for the duration of temporary school closures, during term time. (See the link provided at the end of this letter for specific detail.)

These weekly shopping vouchers, however, are currently only available for use in a limited number of supermarkets, which at the moment would prove restrictive for our families. There are also some glitches with the online portal that schools must use to secure the vouchers. We will therefore continue to provide families of our children eligible for free school meals with a hamper of good quality, locally sourced food, until the issues are addressed, when we will review the situation and liaise with families.

I thank you again for your continued support in these extraordinary times. Please do adhere to the advice from HM Government, and continue to regularly monitor this advice, using the links I provide again on the page that follows. We continue to look forward to the day when we will be able to re-open fully and welcome our students back.

Again, I hope you and your loved ones keep well over this Easter period. Stay safe, stay at home, and look after each other. And again, please do not hesitate to contact us should you need.

Yours sincerely,



Derrick Brett
Principal