

SOUTHEND HIGH SCHOOL FOR BOYS

ACADEMY GRAMMAR SCHOOL

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Headteacher: Robin M Bevan MA MEd PhD FRSA



May 21st, 2020

Dear Parents,

This letter is in three sections. I have chosen to include, first, an extended introductory comment, reflecting my views as Headteacher, which I hope will provide some helpful context for our planning as a school.

The second section contains a succinct statement of our plans for the week beginning June 1st. This is followed by some elaboration regarding our provision of remote learning.

Please read each section carefully. Please discuss the letter with your son or daughter.

Kind regards

Robin M. Bevan
Headteacher



Commentary

The public debate regarding the wider re-opening of schools has become highly polarised: in the case of some media reporting, irresponsibly so.

The core issue is public safety. This can be examined by considering the risks to children, to adults working in schools, to families but also the extent to which school opening – at a time when transmission rates are still relatively high ($R=0.7$ for the East of England 21-05) – may contribute to a second wave of infection. There are secondary issues regarding the economy, the wider welfare of children and families, and the continuity of academic education.

Some commentators, indeed some parents, are already taking a view that schools should move as swiftly as possible to accommodate as many children as possible. Others are deeply worried and would not want children back in classrooms until the Autumn.

As a general rule, it is fair to say that the more certain anyone becomes regarding either of these diverged opinions, and the more strident their statements, the more likely it is that their view is – at best – incomplete. Informed judgements arise from a balanced consideration of the evidence and perspectives.

There are good reasons why parents will have different opinions. The experience of lockdown for some has felt like a ‘phony war’ with no apparent or immediate reason for the scale of restrictions or the reluctance to re-establish normal life. In contrast, for some of our families, the last few weeks have been harrowing. There have been stark examples of the premature loss of close relatives, well before old age, and with limited opportunity to console or grieve. Amongst our parents are those who have seen the impact, on the front line, in care homes and hospitals.

These experiences and perspectives are compounded for those with higher risk vulnerabilities, underlying health conditions, or who are members of those communities – with African, Caribbean or Asian heritage – that have significantly higher rates of mortality.

For schools that are looking to open more widely, there are considerable logistical challenges, if physical distancing is to be sustained and social mixing restricted. At Southend High School for Boys, we have a very limited number of classrooms that can accommodate half-sized classes with pupils spaced at 2m intervals. Our corridors are less than 2m wide and the lunch queue would, without adaptation, stretch to ½ a mile! These are all surmountable. We can adapt our processes and procedures, on site, to readmit some pupils for some of the time, in small groups assigned to one specified teacher; but not everyone, nor even whole year groups.

However, in bringing pupils in to classrooms they don’t normally use, in groups that don’t match their timetable options, with teachers who may not be a relevant subject specialist, we must also ask questions about what kind of provision – during a period of continued constraints on social distancing – maximises educational progress. Remote learning continues to be instrumental here.

Some media outlets have suggested that the profession and teacher trade unions, especially the National Education Union, have been obstructive in working towards the wider opening of schools. The position of the NEU is public, readily available on their website and indicates nothing other than a reasoned approach. First, they clearly state that they want schools to be fully open as soon as possible, as soon as it is safe. This is a view that will be shared by all.

The NEU has then indicated that there are five preconditions that should be met, before schools extend their provision. These have been supported by the British Medical Association (BMA) and are easily summarised. Schools, in their view, should not open more widely until:

- infection rates have declined and are on a sustained downward trend;
- adequate testing ('test, track and trace') is in place;
- there is protection for vulnerable colleagues, pupils and family members;
- clear guidelines are published for the levels of physical distancing and social mixing in school communities; and
- the scientific evidence informing decisions is published.

The first four of these are widely accepted and have few detractors. The last one is highly relevant to academy schools such as ours.

As Headteacher of an academy, I am also the 'responsible person' (in Health & Safety law) ultimately to be held to account, up to and including potential prosecution, if I do not provide a safe working environment for employees. Clearly any such duty extends to the environment for all on site. It is exceptionally difficult to make an informed judgement about how safe it is to open schools more widely, when the evidence base is not being shared. It is not sufficient for Government ministers simply to assert, in TV interviews, that *"teachers and pupils will be safe at school"*.

Scientific knowledge is incomplete, but the insights are becoming increasingly apparent. Children are known to be infected at similar rates as adults. Children appear, mostly, to be less prone to significant illness arising from that infection. The extent to which children infect others is not well established; but it is known – internationally – that: some schools and colleges have become infection hotspots after re-opening; the transmission rate (the R value) has increased in communities that have re-opened schools; and closing schools, in the first place, contributed significantly to limiting the spread of the virus.

It is right to look to see how other countries have approached the wider provision of education, during the pandemic: how and when they have opened their schools more widely. Denmark has been a leading example; but their schools have more space, their class sizes are much lower, their death rate considerably below the UK, and they re-opened much later after peak infection. Germany and France have only partially opened schools and are doing so, very much, on a regional basis. Spain and Italy – the two countries with the nearest comparable rates of infection and mortality – are leaving their schools closed until September.

Perhaps the worst possible mistake in this serious crisis would be to think that the virus will somehow 'behave differently' just because of British resolve or determination. This is not a time for Dunkirk spirit, or misplaced notions of heroism, but for informed and balanced decision-making.

Robin M. Bevan

Plans for the week beginning June 1st:

At the time of writing, the Department for Education has yet to publish final guidance for the wider opening of secondary schools. As and when that advice is available, we will work swiftly to consider its implementation.

It is also clear that any extension of our existing provision depends on the Government confirming that their own five key tests have been met. They do not intend announcing this until May 28th.

In these circumstances, and given that any extension to our provision will require both detailed logistical planning and also a full risk assessment, we are not yet in a position to detail the nature, form or extent of any additional offer on-site. It is now definite that any wider opening will not take place until sometime after June 1st.

I will write to parents at the earliest convenience, but not until I can be sure that our plans are appropriate for all concerned.

Southend Council has confirmed publicly their support for each school developing an individual response to wider opening, recognising the variations in context between institutions.

Our plans will need to consider: transport and journeys to/from school; classroom sizes and building space; access to and quality of cleaning; staffing levels; physical distancing; social mixing; welfare support and our curriculum offer.

In the meantime, remote learning will be sustained in full and our on-site provision will continue for the children of key-workers and others in the various specified vulnerable categories.

Naturally, other questions relating – for example – to the contract bus services administered by the CSSE will remain with a similar level of uncertainty for some days, and possibly weeks.

Progress with remote learning.

At the time of closure, we adopted a model of remote learning that was intended to be immediately operational, sustainable, and effective.

We knew that our pupils would not all have uninterrupted access to computer equipment, nor that they could reasonably be expected to be on-line for extended periods at fixed times. Our task-setting needed to allow for different home circumstances, different patterns of working and different levels of IT access.

We also knew that teaching staff would be familiarising themselves with new ways of working, and that some would be managing remote learning alongside childcare or looking after vulnerable family members. Our expectations needed to be realistic for a range of home-working contexts.

Over 5000 lesson-matched tasks have now been posted.

We are continuing to review the activities that are being provided and continue to explore alternative uses of technology, within the constraints of pupil access and sustainable workload. We know that feedback is important and that pupil collaboration is both socially important and educationally effective.

This week colleagues sampled a cross-section of the tasks that had been set. *“Mostly, there was a great range of activities, both PC based and away from a device. A range of apps are being exploited, including test functions on SMHW, Kerboodle, ClickView, OneNote and MS Forms, as well as one or two other department specific sites or apps. Feedback is in evidence and a number of tasks (I counted 5 across 22 tasks) are encouraging or facilitating interaction between pupils.”*

We have colleagues who are innovating with presentations, collaborative exchanges and feedback. We are aware of the more dynamic features that online technology provides. It is, however, inappropriate to assume that the most advanced and engaging of these approaches can always be adopted for every activity.

We are also looking to develop peer mentoring during lockdown. The plan is to open subject specific ‘help desks’ on Microsoft Teams, which will be manned by volunteer students in Years 11 and 13, and moderated by LSAs. Sometimes when students are asking questions, there is a delay before teachers are able to respond. This will provide an almost immediate response from older pupils who will be on a rota. We may extend this provision to offer more individual support for some learners.

We are, quite literally, all learning together.