

17th June 2020

Dear Parents, Carers, Staff and Students

Newsletter and Update for Term 6

As we approach the final four weeks of the summer term I remain in awe of how everyone in our school community has responded to the challenges of recent months. It has been a year like no other previously. It is also safe to say that we are all keen to return to some level of normality as soon as practically possible.

Return of Year 10s and Year 12s

Throughout this national crisis the school has remained open to the children of key workers and those that are vulnerable. This week our student numbers have increased further as for the first time we have been permitted to take up to 25% of students in Year 10 and Year 12. It has been a strange return with lots of changes to our normal school routines.

On arrival at school, students have been supervised when washing their hands and at other key points in the day, using external sinks newly installed across our site. Our school timetable has been heavily rewritten to ensure that students are separated and movement is reduced around the site. Social distancing of 2m has also limited the numbers in a room at a time down to between 6 and 8 children, dependent on the area. Cleaning and hygiene rituals around the school have been heavily adapted and increased in frequency. I am immensely proud of the pragmatism and stoicism displayed by students and staff alike involved in this return to school.

We have had some students in Year 10 and 12 arriving unexpectedly to school, where parents had indicated they would not be. Where this has not breached the Government's 25% limit we have tried to accommodate them. However, it is important that if you wish to send your child into school you let staff know ahead of time so that we can plan for this and ensure that students are designated different days and remain separated.

Cyber-attack on School Network

Our resilience has been further tested this week by a cyber-attack on the school's computer network. This has temporarily left us without access to computers within school and disabled access to the VLE. I can only apologise for the disruption this will have caused parents and staff. Although we are still analysing its impact, we have found no evidence that any sensitive or private data was downloaded. The matter has been reported to Kent Police and will be reported to the Information Commissioner's Office.

It should be noted that all our most sensitive information is held behind password protected firewalls and secondary security systems. The lack of access to IT systems is extremely inconvenient and disruptive for our online learning – which has now shifted entirely to Microsoft Teams. The school's internal e-mail system and web site remains fully operational and information will be circulated to parents and students about the changes to the way that work will be set.

Microsoft Teams

Our teachers are now trained in the use of Microsoft Teams, which is software for sharing information. Teachers can upload work for students to complete to a class 'channel' within which all the members of a class can have a conversation. For those that are unfamiliar with Microsoft Teams, the class channels have some similarity to a Whatsapp group or Facebook messenger, only moderated by the school and without the social media links.

Every class group in our school for every subject now has its own Teams channel and increasingly teachers are also using the platform to deliver video-based lessons. These are initially being rolled-out to older students in some subjects and where teachers are comfortable with the technology. We have overcome privacy and safeguarding concerns through ensuring that members of our community are aware of features such as being able to blur their background or attend without using video.

Students can access Microsoft Teams by downloading the Android, Apple or Windows app and logging in via their school account. Alternatively, they can access Teams via their Microsoft 365 login from the School Website.

Variation to the school day from 2020/21

We are planning our timetable for the next academic year so that we can extend the lunch hour from 40 mins to 1 hour. This will ensure that we can effectively manage the student traffic and behaviour in the canteen. Whilst it will not necessarily guarantee social distancing of 2m it will ensure that students are not crammed in tight queues and pushing between each other to get in and out of the building. We also intend on a more formal lunch arrangement for Year 7s whereby they sit down with teachers.

There is a cost to us of extending the lunch period and this is that the 20-minute break-time in the morning is lost. In an ideal world we would keep this, but it would involve extending the school day by starting earlier or finishing later. We are unable to do either of these things since the bus companies that drop children off and collect them have contracts with KCC for specific times and have been unwilling to change when contacted. Equally, we cannot risk planning to return with so many students in the canteen at the same time following Covid-19. The loss of the morning break, at least in the short term, will reduce movement around the site and ensure that we can focus all our duty staff on the lunch hour.

We are not proposing changing the length of the school day. However, we are mindful that any changes are sensitive to everybody in the school community and we will listen carefully to community members.

Where students or staff suffer from diabetes and need to briefly eat or drink between periods 2 and 3 to maintain blood sugar, we will build this into our planning. Where students and staff need to use toilets between periods 2 and 3 we will also build this into our planning. Our intention is that we will review the change to the variation to the school day in summer 2021, and should we need to amend, change back or further adapt our arrangements then we will.

A copy of the proposed changes and the original school day format is shown on the next page.

Proposed New School Day

<i>Line Up (to include handwashing)</i>	<i>08.45 to 08.50</i>
<i>Registration/Assembly</i>	<i>08.50 to 09.20</i>
<i>Period One</i>	<i>09.20 to 10.20</i>
<i>Period Two</i>	<i>10.20 to 11.20</i>
<i>Period Three</i>	<i>11.20 to 12.20</i>
<i>Lunch</i>	<i>12.20 to 13.20</i>
<i>Period Four</i>	<i>13.20 to 14.20</i>
<i>Period Five</i>	<i>14.20 to 15.20</i>

Should we need to have a separate afternoon line-up we will also add this to the proposed structure. This would be to support current government instructions that insist on social distancing and that all students must wash their hands when arriving at school and after any break or at lunch.

Old School Day (for comparison)

<i>Line Up</i>	<i>08.45 to 08.50</i>
<i>Registration/Assembly</i>	<i>08.50 to 09.20</i>
<i>Period One</i>	<i>09.20 to 10.20</i>
<i>Period Two</i>	<i>10.20 to 11.20</i>
<i>Break Time</i>	<i>11.20 to 11.40</i>
<i>Period Three</i>	<i>11.40 to 12.40</i>
<i>Lunch</i>	<i>12.40 to 13.20</i>
<i>Period Four</i>	<i>13.20 to 14.20</i>
<i>Period Five</i>	<i>14.20 to 15.20</i>

New Classroom Block

We are pleased to report that building on our new classroom block continues at pace. If driving past the school on the London Road you may have noticed the construction work being undertaken and the appearance of lots of construction traffic.

The foundations are now in and we expect the steelwork to be nearing completion by the end of the academic year. We ask that parents and carers visiting our site are mindful of the site entrance which they will pass if using our Sports Centre car park. Our contractors have committed to ensuring that deliveries to the site do not conflict with key drop-off and pick-up times of children. We expect our new building to be complete in summer 2021 after which point the old C Block will be demolished and a second new building will be put-up in its place. Mr Dickens is currently working with the architects and Kent County Council to ensure that this scheme best meets the developing needs of our school.

Phased refurbishment of areas of the school site

Governors and I are keen that our students have the very best premises available to them. To that end, we want to ensure that the older buildings left on our site, once the programme of construction is complete, are not left as 'poorer partners'. The original buildings of the Lady Capel School (which The Abbey inherited at its inception in 1983) need heavy investment and a programme of refurbishment which will need to span over five to ten years. Our immediate priority is updating the reception area in readiness for September to make it more secure and ensure that the visitors' area is separate to students. Beyond this, we will then look to fully refurbish all the toilet areas and staffroom. The vision of the leadership team is that all the pastoral services in the school will eventually be co-located in the same area of the school and include a suite of parental meeting rooms.

Awarding of predicted grades in Year 11 and Year 13

Many of the changes that we implemented to our systems around the school over a year ago were likely to have a significant impact on outcomes this summer. New behaviour systems and higher expectations across the school were having a huge effect on the results that were being forecast by class teachers for Year 11 students. This has been clear to senior staff in multiple rounds of data collection from September 2019 onwards.

We acknowledge that the shift in expectations has not been easy, nor have the new routines or rules. Yet, the difference to classrooms and the quality of teaching and learning (prior to Covid-19) has been tremendous. Teacher morale has increased markedly, and multiple staff have been to see Mr Dickens or myself to report on how much extra work they were getting through in disruption-free classrooms.

We therefore felt immense frustration that our students have been denied the right to sit their exams and achieve the grades that they deserve. Back in March I wrote to our MP, Helen Whately, to register my anxiety that the proposal to give students 'teacher predicted grades' would be separately standardised to lower the grades in schools like The Abbey. This now appears to be the case and Ofqual (the exam boards' regulator) have announced that the grades awarded to students nationally will be heavily standardised so that they are in line with results for similar students from the same school for the past three years.

We were expecting a large improvement in outcomes this summer, well beyond any performance in previous years so I am incandescent about how this may impact our students. I should add that part of the extraordinary arrangements for this summer, put in place by the Government, is a rule preventing staff in all schools discussing final Year 11 or Year 13 forecast grades submitted to the boards with students or parents, which only heightens my frustration.

When the exam grades are released in August we will be able to come to an informed decision about how much the systems put in place during Covid-19 have adversely affected our school, if at all. However, I would ask that if you are a concerned parent of a child in an exam year-group you write directly to your local MP and the Department for Education, as I have done.

Free School Meals

You may have recently heard that the Government is extending its Free School Meals voucher scheme to cover the summer holiday. The full details of this have not been shared yet with schools but you have our assurance that we will implement this as soon as we have an update.

Our finance departments have been working in the background handling all the Free School Meals vouchers for parents and carers. They have done a tremendous job liaising with parents and carers but you will appreciate that sometimes there are unforeseen delays in getting the right vouchers in parents' hands. Please can I ask that if you do have any issues with accessing your vouchers then please be patient with us as there have been numerous technical issues with the national voucher scheme and its administration. We will always ensure that, where eligible, you get your vouchers and that this is done in a timely manner.

And finally...

There are two significant staff changes that will happen at the end of this school year that I need to update the community on. The first is the retirement of Kevin Dickens as Head of School after 37 years of loyal service to The Abbey School as a member of our teaching staff. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge his unparalleled service to our school. I have lost count of the number of parents that have approached me and said that they were taught by him. He is a figure of trust in

our community and he has provided consistent high-quality leadership and counsel to multiple headteachers in our school. During Covid-19 he has often maintained the link with our most vulnerable families, and I am grateful for all that he has done. He will return from September in a reduced capacity as Director of Resources so he will remain part of our wider school.

Grainne Parsons has been promoted from her current role as Assistant Headteacher to Principal of St Edmunds School in Dover. This is a wonderful achievement for her, and we wish her all the best in her new role. She will be much missed by us at The Abbey and her impact on school-wide standards here was instrumental in securing her new post.

And finally, I would like to personally thank all our students who have continued to focus on their studies from home, have maintained contact with their teachers as much as has been possible, and have produced quality work under these challenging circumstances, many examples of which have been published on the school's social media. By the end of the summer term we intend to celebrate some of this work in a commemorative newsletter which hopefully will provide a lasting reminder for students, parents and staff of these extra-ordinary few months.

Thank you all for your continued support

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dr. Speller". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Dr Rowland Speller
Headteacher