



Queen Elizabeth's Girls' School

Educating Women of the Future

Tuesday 12th May 2020

Dear Parents and Carers

I hope my letter finds you and your family well.

We have now completed just over five weeks of learning via Google Classroom. We have reviewed our operation of distance learning and teaching to ensure it is engaging our students and responding to your feedback.

I think it would be helpful for you to know that I am in daily contact with all Barnet Secondary School Headteachers and College Principals. I am also in intermittent contact with other Headteachers in London and across the UK. I am in daily contact with the DfE, Public Health England, the Local Authority and ASCL, which is an association of school and college leaders, working to advise the government on policy that impacts schools and further education. I am also in regular contact with the Chair of the Board of Trustees. Virtual Board Meetings as well as the usual diary of school department and line management meetings continue while the school is closed.

I have no doubt you will have heard from various media sources about all of the companies currently creating and offering online learning platforms; some offering free services and resources to schools and their students, others enabling video contact. Whatever provision there is from schools themselves or from external parties, it cannot ever replace the experience of being in a classroom with one's peers and an expert teacher. Part of the school's success in supporting students to regularly achieve well above expectation, stems from the strong relationships we build with our students in the classroom and with our families, to support our students, in partnership with home.

Guidance since schools closed has maintained that we should not be teaching new content during this time. We can introduce concepts for students to develop familiarity but largely, we are working on retrieval of knowledge and revision of learning by a number of means. There is understanding that every student in the UK has different home circumstances and that every school has a different demographic and therefore while current school issues are generally similar, there are still contextual anomalies. It is the intention of the Government that some students should not be advantaged while others are further disadvantaged during this period of school closure. Differences are readily seen in the ways schools have responded; some with video teaching and others like us, without. Many schools nationally are not fortunate to have learning platforms. A market has therefore been identified and it is being responded to by the Government and by private companies and industry. Clearly for schools without learning platforms, video lessons can be a quick fix and some of the new resources being created are of value alongside what we can offer through Google Classroom. However quality assurance is necessary and it requires diligent evaluation of what is available. Any useful content needs to be weaved into what our departments are delivering according to their curriculum plan.

When we were in the early stages of planning for school closure we recognised as did most schools that video contact with students would be in breach of best practice safeguarding guidelines; that remains the case. Therefore while some schools are using these facilities, we will not be. Should guidelines on this change, we will review our position.

Subject Departments are working differently within their Google Classrooms. This mirrors what happens in school. Work is being set to cover different periods of time and therefore deadlines vary. It would be helpful for teachers to support students to manage their work by advising them on how much of what has been set is to be completed at one sitting, which should ideally be the same length of time as a lesson in school. I have asked teachers to do that where they have not been already. I have also asked teachers to review provision in a number of other ways too.

Our students are all different with different home environments and contexts. We know that some are more able than others to engage with independent learning. Generally our students are conscientious and engaged with their learning. Some are less engaged with their learning even though they may be no less conscientious. Household member or family illness, financial concerns and other sources of anxiety usually and newly present, will be impeding completion of work by students. Similar impediments may affect staff households. While it is a challenge for anyone to support distance learning in ways that meet everyone's needs and suit a family's ability to allocate time to household devices for QE school work, our teachers are working incredibly hard to meet the challenge.

We know that some of our students have no device at all at home and others can no longer afford top-up internet charges or pay-as-you-go mobile phone cards. The Government has singled out Year 10 as a focus year group requiring particular support at this time as they are due to take exams next year and are less skilled at independent learning than students in Year 12, also due to take exams next year. There is a Government scheme to support schools nationally to purchase devices for disadvantaged Year 10 students (disadvantaged because they have no access to an online device). The scheme's process is slow. We might receive our allocation by June; our allocation will not meet the needs of the number of Year 10 students disadvantaged in such a way. We are also aware that in every year group there are similarly disadvantaged students.

When we come back to school as a larger community and subsequently as a whole school, there will need to be catch-up. There is no avoiding that fact. While students are at home, we cannot expect them to do more than 5 hours of work per day, as they would in school. However they ought also to be engaging in their PSHE classroom with their well-being activities and taking physical exercise during the day so five hours of curriculum work is unrealistic. Even with the best intentions, most students will not have access to a device for their sole use for so many hours during one day.

I think there are some things we could do to support students who may be feeling overwhelmed at having to manage their learning in terms of prioritising and allocating adequate time slots to it throughout the day. Such feelings will no doubt impact the household dynamic in the same way that your feelings of responsibility to support distance learning may also be an added burden during this difficult period. Of course we would want to ease any feelings of anxiety for all of our families. Recently Departments have been responding in the following ways:

- allowing a little longer for completion of tasks than they would in school
- allocating work to be usefully completed in one sitting to support students to organise themselves
- giving explicit deadlines and ones that allow for different situations students might find themselves in
- not giving hand-in deadlines for the same day work is set
- staggering days when work is delivered to classrooms
- keeping an eye on Stream in Google Classroom, hoping that students with your encouragement, will make better use of that communication system for query resolution and teacher guidance
- not uploading booklets of work as PDFs

I hope students are already noticing this change which will be a supportive step forward. Please be aware that there will be no end of year exams.

Distance learning will continue for the majority of our students until the end of this academic year. The Prime Minister's address on 10th May and DfE Guidance on 11th May, indicated that at best, Secondary Schools might be able to offer some face to face support for Year 10 and 12 students in school from some time later next half term, after 1st June. Currently this is being asked of secondary schools; it is not a requirement since schools nationally will have varying ability to respond to the request. Variables include site management to ensure social distancing, provision of effective health and safety measures for current risks, health of staff, Teacher Union and School Support Staff Union agreements with Government, the Local Authority and schools. Importantly schools will need the confidence of families that their school has everything necessary in place to minimise risk to their children.

We have of course already begun to draft a plan for gradual return to school so that when everything is agreed and in place, we can move to a gradual return to school as asked of us. We are also planning how to extend the gradual return to full return. We are working to build in flexibility so that we can respond to changing circumstances and requests of us, to extend and perhaps even, to retract provision. While there are similar issues for all Secondary Schools, resolutions to those issues can only be specific to each school. I will keep you informed as time goes on and as further clarity is received from the Government, DfE and Public Health England, on expectations of schools for the safe return of their students and staff.

With all good wishes
Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Violet Walker".

Violet Walker
Headteacher