

8 December 2020



Dear Parent/Guardian

Recently I have been asked the same questions by a number of parents, so I thought I would answer these frequently asked questions for everyone.

Why is the school simply not closing before Christmas?

I can answer this one easily. I cannot close the school unless it is not possible to be open. When I closed the school earlier this term it was because I had run out of teaching staff. At present that is not the case. The Government has made it clear that schools should stay open wherever possible and, without very good reason, I do not have the authority to override this.

There is an interesting rumour spreading amongst the student body that they do not have to come in to school for the last week of term. Please can I say categorically now that this is not true.

Why are we asking whole year groups to self-isolate?

During the summer holidays the school spent considerable time planning how we were going to operate during a Global Pandemic. The Government made it clear that they wanted schools to continue to provide high quality teaching and a broad and balanced curriculum. The Government also recommended that schools, including large secondaries, operate in year-group bubbles, which is what we chose to do. We are aware that some schools are operating in 'class' bubbles instead where one class are together, in the same room, all day. However, we thought that this would be a very large compromise for the students' education for the following reasons – to do so would mean that:

- Students would be taught together in the same class all day long, meaning that we would not be able to teach in appropriate ability sets. For example, many students have a different ability for English and Maths and to be in the same teaching group for both subjects would be detrimental to their learning.
- If students were together in the same teaching groups all day long it would make being taught their option subjects in Years 10 and 11, and their Baccalaureate Specialisms in Year 9, impossible.
- Students could not be taught subjects that require specialist equipment as they would not be able to go to those rooms – such as computer rooms, technology rooms, etc – which would mean that the curriculum would have to be narrowed significantly.
- Students would have to stay in their classrooms at break and lunch so that they were not mixing with others in their year group outside.

We felt very strongly that this would be a compromise too far on the students' quality of education. By not going in this direction, we were able to ensure that for the whole of the first term – 8 weeks – all of the students have been taught properly, in the correct teaching set for their ability, for all of their subjects, in an uninterrupted manner. Year 11 and Year 13 – who are facing very important exams whilst still trying to catch up from last year – have had, so far, 13 weeks of full education in school and two weeks working from home, with a lesson provided for all of their timetable. We did create year-group zones, which explains why there is some student movement (but nothing like as much as there would normally be), but mostly it is the teachers moving to them.

The other aspect of this to consider is before school, break time, lunch time and lesson change over times. With a school with over 1600 people in it, we simply do not have the space to keep students separate. We have created separate outside spaces for each year group and we also introduced a staggered break in the morning to halve the number of students in circulation at any one time. But, when the students are at leisure at break/lunch and before/after school, they are freely mixing and, because they are students who sometimes

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forget themselves, they get too close and touch each other. In the corridors the students are required to wait, in their year area, for no more than five minutes for their next teacher to arrive – sometimes from the other end of the school. Unfortunately our corridors are, in places, very narrow and, during this time, students from the same year group are mixing.

This has been discussed, at length with both the Department for Education and Public Health England who support our position, which is similar to many schools. When we have a case in a year group it is impossible to say with certainty which students the student concerned will have mixed with, therefore it is safer to not risk further transmission and put people's lives at risk, by asking the whole year group to self-isolate and work from home.

Why are we not doing live lessons?

The school is providing recorded lessons for all lessons on the students' timetable for all year groups and all subjects. We have had some very positive feedback for this. Some parents are telling me that other schools are doing better than us because they are providing live lessons; others say that they prefer our pre-recorded lessons. Parental opinion is, therefore, not clear cut. I am not aware of any school that is doing live lessons for every subject, every year group and every lesson. By saying this, I am not trying to say that what we are doing is better than other schools, but I am saying that there are disadvantages and advantages to both systems. Our system's advantage is that our coverage is fully comprehensive. The advantage we also have is that it is fully accessible to all, at all times – in other words, it is inclusive, which is something that we pride ourselves on trying to achieve. We have been sending DVDs with the lessons recorded on to them to students without the appropriate devices. Nobody should be missing out. The other advantage of the recorded lessons is that they can be paused or replayed as many times as required to ensure that the students understand the lesson – if a student needs longer to complete something, they can take longer. The recorded lesson system also allows teachers, who are at home self-isolating, to send in recorded lessons for their students who are in school to watch, hence ensuring that these lessons are still delivered by the teacher, even when the teacher is not present.

The reasons we have, after much debate and careful consideration, continued to resist live lessons are as follows:

- Not all students can access them at the right time. Whilst most students (but not all) do have the correct devices to access live lessons, many cannot access them at the right time – i.e. the family lap-top is being used by a parent who is working from home. Whilst it is true that live lessons can be recorded and watched later, this is not inclusive.
- The advantage of live lessons is their interactivity. However, it is apparent that many students are even more reluctant to interrupt a teacher online and ask a question or ask for help than they are in lessons. This undermines that interactivity and is, again, not inclusive for students who are less confident.
- It is not easy for staff to always do live lessons at a predetermined time. For example, some staff are working from home as they are required to self-isolate – of those, many may also have young children at home that they are required to look after. The recorded lessons approach gives staff the flexibility to ensure that we are meeting our obligation to provide all the lessons, without exception.
- Live lessons can be abused. It is very easy for students to appear to be present, but to be messaging each other privately (via the online platform), perhaps even inappropriately or in a bullying/abusive manner, or to be doing something completely different without the teacher having the means of knowing.

We do actively encourage students to email their teachers if they get stuck with the recorded lessons. The flexibility that doing the recorded lessons gives our teachers, also means it gives them more time to respond directly to students who require support.

Some parents have said that the students are getting through the lessons and work set quickly. I think this is probably inevitable. If you take out break times, traveling to and from lessons, the conversations students have during the day and other distractions out of the equation, it is not unreasonable that some students are doing the work quickly. This does not mean that the work is too easy or inappropriate.

Finally, the disadvantage of our recorded lessons, of course, is that we are not able to give live feedback. We are aware of this, but:

- a) We believe the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.
- b) We have planned for these lessons to be delivered in two week blocks – and our feedback policy allows for formal feedback to happen once in every 10 lessons (which is two weeks for subjects that happen most frequently, like English and Maths).

We are, however, aware that a couple of year groups have been hit hard by self-isolation requirements and we are going to give some thought on how to improve feedback for students in these situations.

Ultimately, I am aware that we are not getting everything 100% right – but nor will any other school. But I do want to assure you – and I hope the above helps with this – that everything we are doing has been carefully thought out as to what works best for our school, our context and our students, within the constraints and guidance laid down for me by the Government.

Not long until Christmas now – let's keep working together to provide the best education we can for our students in these difficult times. Education is, in my opinion, the most important gift we can give to our children.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tracey Savage', written in a cursive style.

Tracey Savage
Headteacher