



JULIAN'S PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Dear Parents/Carers,

I am sure that you are aware that this week the Secretary of State for Education finally clarified the Government's position regarding the full opening of primary schools for a month before the end of term. He has accepted that most schools, (particularly primaries), do not have the capacity, in terms of both physical space and teachers, to welcome back all children.

In the last few months we have been asked to respond, usually at very short public notice, to circumstances we could scarcely have imagined as we entered into 2020. Over the past few months we have been tasked with the complete redesign and reorganisation of our classrooms and other learning spaces in the school to ensure it was safe for a phased return of our children. Following several incarnations of risk assessments, this has meant emptying classrooms of furniture to enable social distancing, sectioning off areas of the playground and outdoor spaces, the introduction of hand sanitizing stations as well as acquiring sufficient PPE for staff. Revised timetables have been drawn up to allocate staff to these smaller groups, alongside opportunities for them to continue to provide work for – and monitor online learning. We were, of course, fully committed to doing all of this and thank the governing body and you, the parents/carers, for your support in delaying the start until this was in place and the school was as safe as possible, following guidelines, for your children to begin to return.

We understand that this situation is far from ideal and is frustrating for us as a school, yourselves and more importantly your children. You and they will have many questions about the future, some of which we cannot answer ourselves at the moment, but we are currently making decisions and arrangements to try and facilitate learning both in and outside school.

One of the key considerations, for us in bringing children back into school, has been capacity and I know that this has been an issue for some of our parents/carers, particularly in the EYFS. As a very large school we are often dealing with greater numbers of children – both in Key Worker groups and cohorts. This has led to significant challenges for us and we have had to say that we were not able to bring in Reception children at this time. Although the majority of parents/carers have supported the school's position, it is evident that there are a number of parents/carers who disagree. I have outlined below our reasons for not bringing Reception

and Nursery in at this stage, so that you are all fully up to speed with the challenge of wider opening:

Capacity – The Key Worker/vulnerable children group has increased to 70+ this week. We expect that this will continue to rise and will settle to between 80-100 children, based on the increased number of requests from parents/carers. If we combine these pupils with the numbers in Y6 and Y1, we would need approx. 60 staff to cater for the bubbles and that would leave us with little capacity to continue to provide home learning for Y2, 3, 4 and 5 whilst also introducing YR. This is a real logistical and practical challenge which we are working through. If we adhere to groupings of 8 as the second set of guidance recommended, we will need 19 separate groups for Reception and 6 for the Nursery - a total of 50 staff to teach these groups alone with 2 adults per group; in addition to the 10 groups in year 1, 6 groups in Year 6 and 7 groups of key worker children. If we adhere to groups of 15 as recommended in the initial guidance, we will need 10 separate groups for Reception and 6 for the nursery, in addition to the 10 in Year 1 and the 6 in Year 6 and 7 in the Key worker group. This will mean we would need 76+ staff. Given that over 75% of parents/carers in our school are undecided and /or opting to send their children back to school, we have to work on the basis of fixed groupings with virtually full capacity, as we will be unable to "chop and change" once the children come back. We need also to be mindful of the groups who are not returning to school and the need to expand the virtual teaching which will involve additional teaching staff. At the moment we do not feel that we have the capacity to do this.

Size of Groups in the EYFS - Guidance around EYFS has been conflicting. Two separate pieces of guidance were released by the DFE - one for the return of Primary aged pupils and another for children in the EYFS. The first mentioned groups of 15 and the second mentioned groups of 6-8 with a maximum of 16. A third piece of guidance relating to the EYFS was later released mentioning groups of 13. "Bubble" sizes of the government's recommended size of 6-8 would mean there would be too many groups to staff and manage. If we run on the basis of groups of up to 15, 10 groups may be more manageable, working on the part time model we've set up for Y1 and Y6, but would be dependent on numbers of key worker children and by how many they increase over the next two weeks. We are still getting clarification on this, but are working on the planning assumption that Reception groups may be smaller rather than the rest of the school.

Pedagogy – The children in the EYFS learn by social interaction and by playing together in a mix of free flow and guided activity. By bringing the children back now, we would be offering them a poor, socially distanced in-a-school-but-not-really-school experience for a number of weeks before the end of term. Children's well-being is a priority. We have a duty to ensure that the return to school is meaningful, that the children return to a familiar setting with familiar adults and a curriculum similar to the one that they are used to and are able to thrive in.

Having said all of this we are constantly reviewing the situation and if we can bring Reception in some capacity, we will try our best to do so. Once numbers of key worker children have stabilised and we have a better idea of numbers in Years 1 and 6, we will be in a better position and will communicate any change going forward with you. We shall review the situation and amend our plans if we can.

Another issue of concern for some parents/carers has been home learning. As a staff we all feel concerned for the children who remain at home. We know that the vast majority have

been keeping up with their learning in the virtual classroom, but this can never replace the experience of physically being at school. If we were able to bring everyone back safely, believe me, we would do it. By the time you receive this all children should have had a phone call from your class teachers. Thank you for all your positive comments to teachers. It has meant a lot to the staff who have been working hard to maintain provision for the children as well as working in school with key worker and vulnerable children. We have expanded J2e to include prerecorded stories and voice overs for some teaching, so that children hear their teacher's voice and have some connection, albeit limited, with their teachers, who we know are very important to them.

We are intending to offer "zoom class group meetings" going forward but will not be able to offer daily video lessons at this stage. Some parents/carers have expressed their unhappiness at this and I have received some emails which have suggested that the school is being remiss in not doing so.

As lifelong educators and professionals we pride ourselves in providing the very best education for all of the children in the school and it saddens us that some people should think otherwise. Any decision we have taken as a school has been carefully thought through and we would therefore like to share some of the reasons for this with you:

1. The classroom experience cannot be replicated by a live video lesson

Methods of teaching have changed significantly over the last 20 years and those strategies which have been researched as highly effective cannot be utilised via a video. The model that some of us as parents/carers are used to, of teaching and learning of the teacher talking to us and telling us stuff also does not match our research driven approach to teaching and learning in our school.

2. Pressure on parents/carers through the pandemic

We were very aware that many parents/carers and children were finding the situation very stressful initially and we did not want to put any pressure on families to engage on any particular day or feel pressured to undertake a certain amount of/or type of home learning. Families needed to find a way that works for them and their situation through this pandemic without any additional stress. We did consider that video lessons might be easier for some parents/carers, instead of working with their children directly, however this is not always the case. And, as soon as the Oak National Academy and the BBC started to create video lessons, information was shared with you on how to access the resources, if helpful.

3. Safeguarding concerns

It has been suggested that I personally am taking a stricter view on guidance and have over emphasised the risk of video lessons. Sadly, safeguarding must be the focus of all of our decisions. "Live" video lessons can potentially be high risk to children, staff and families. I am aware that other non-school organisations have been using video sessions during lockdown. However, with no disrespect to these organisations, they are very different.

4. Engagement and access for all

Many children do not have access to high quality internet or an appropriate device to access to live video lessons. Many of our children are reliant for example on using their parent/carers

phone. Some children do not engage with video lessons and therefore would not gain from this experience. We sadly cannot afford as a school to provide internal hubs and devices to all those children in need. The Government scheme is very selective and would not cover our families who would need support. We pride ourselves in ensuring that all families can access the education we provide, which is why we have been providing learning packs, supplying stationery and are starting a loan system for laptops for families who need them etc.

5. Teachers role through this pandemic

Our staff have been working really hard and coping amazingly through the pandemic. They have been creating home learning activities, which do not solely rely on computers, are interesting for the children, give you some choice and have also recommended further ways to support your children. They have been replying to emails and the children's work and photos sent in. Many of them have been coming into school and working with the Key Worker children and trying to make their experience in school fun and exciting as everyone else is at home with their parents/carers. They have also been supporting many families who have had significant challenges during lockdown. They have been helping us plan for the new demands and requests of schools and some have been packing/organising food boxes for those who would benefit from them. In the past four weeks we have distributed 600 food boxes. And, for many of our staff, they have had their own children at home, so they have been parents/carers just like you. Some also have had to cope with other personal situations including bereavements or illness that have been caused by the pandemic and some have been supporting members of families and friends who are extremely clinically vulnerable. Therefore, for some teachers it was not practical or sustainable to be leading video lessons and I have a duty of care to them as well as your children.

No local school, to my knowledge, has moved towards using daily live video sessions. All schools within the SLSP for example with whom we work very closely are delivering online learning in a similar way to us as a school.

As yourselves, we await the next announcement from the Government to find out the arrangements for September. Thankfully the number of new infections and deaths from COVID – 19 continue to fall almost daily at present, so we are hopeful that September may bring the opportunity for a normal start to the school year but we can only, like you, keep our fingers crossed at this stage.

As the situation changes so rapidly at present, it is difficult to predict how things will unfold over the next few months, but we will be communicating with you as soon as decisions are made. There is talk of the two metre distancing rule being halved to help schools re open, the setting up of makeshift classrooms and a "massive catch up operation" for pupils which will be announced next week. There is a real degree of uncertainty now about September with the recent announcement that schools will not now be open to all pupils before the end of the academic year. With the end of term just six weeks away we urgently need the Government to provide as much clarity as possible about their plans for September and beyond – including anticipated constraints that schools may face and the likely impact on tests beyond the summer. We are hoping that we will get that clarity sooner rather than later. We will need to plan ahead, possibly for several scenarios, so time is of the essence.

Thank you for your unerring support over the past couple of months as it has made a very difficult situation much more manageable. If there is anything else, we can help you with at this stage then please feel free to contact us at school – email is best for obvious reasons.

Please continue to contact class teachers directly if there are any issues about a specific piece of work and/or something that the teacher needs to know about your child.

We hope that you all continue to stay safe and well!

Best wishes

Alison, Becky and Sam