



Monday 22 June 2020

Dear Parents and Carers

This week: focusing on the future

As the reopening for Year 10 and 12 students gets underway, with mentoring conversations this week and lessons next, I feel able to step aside from the day-to-day operational work of the school and look towards the future. I hope you can forgive me for devoting this week's letter to the future. It feels the right time to share our thinking around how the closure of schools will affect the new term in September and the degree to which we can return to those familiar rhythms of school life.

Catch Up Funding and the National Tutoring Programme

Whilst detailed information about the newly announced Government catch up funding is not yet ready, schools are naturally pleased to learn of additional support for students and schools. The Government did release a [press statement last week](#), and we now await the details and look forward to maximising its potential. In the meantime, you may wish to look at [this link to the Education Endowment Fund \(EEF\)](#). The EEF have been working closely with the Government on a National Tutoring Programme and the link provides a valuable summary of the rationale and evidence of impact of such programmes. Catch up programmes do tend to sound very exciting and purposeful, but many end with little or no impact for students because too many, in the past, have not been insufficiently bespoke or sensitive to individual contexts and needs.

Finding the right language

In that eagerness to generate momentum and pace, it is very easy for us in all schools to slip into language that intensifies the pressure that students and their families may already be feeling right now and particularly in September. Phrases that include 'catching up for lost time', 'getting back on track' or even 'recovery' may imply perfectly reasonable aspirations to return with purpose and energy to some, but may also strongly suggest to your child that they are now behind, derailed or injured in a way that is hardly helpful or constructive.

Whilst every single student will have their own experience of the lockdown and each will have their own stories of success and difficulty in terms of home learning, none of our students or families can be made to feel responsible, or to blame, for any slowing or stalling of progress in one or more areas of the curriculum.

This is why we shall avoid all criticism of students or families during the lockdown and this period of home learning. We shall think, talk and plan with a shared assumption that this has been a very, very difficult time for each one of us and will emphasise compassion and empathy. This should not stop us challenging one another but doing so with kindness and respect.

Continued...

Emotional Intelligence

We also know that we have to strike the right balance between reengaging our students in their academic journey and also meeting the range of social and emotional needs that we either know about or will present when students return. For example, many returning Year 11 and Year 13 students may feel that a return to normal studies with a greater sense of urgency is exactly what they need to address any anxieties they may have about next summer's examinations. Meanwhile, our new Year 7s are perhaps more likely to need a different start to their year with an emphasis on social and emotional growth that helps to lead them to feel part of our school; fostering that strong sense of belonging at the slight expense of an academically explosive start.

This will be a difficult path to tread in September because there is an inevitable need for us as teachers to assess our students more thoroughly, so that we can make important decisions about the direction of the curriculum. Our new Year 11s and Year 13s already know they have their first round of mock examinations in October and November respectively, but we shall also need to carry out baseline assessments amongst our new Year 7s.

Curriculum Design

In many respects there is likely to be a general pattern that the younger the students are, the fewer amendments we shall need to make to their curriculum.

- Students in key stage 3 (years 7 to 9) will return to schemes of work that have already undergone a transformation in recent years; with an emphasis on a knowledge-rich philosophy. This means that we have already thought long and hard about the core knowledge, ideas and concepts that students must possess in order to successfully tackle the next unit of work or stage of their learning.
- We already know that the vast majority of our Year 9 students have begun their new GCSEs with enthusiasm and energy. The commencement of their GCSEs came at a good time and injected a newfound purpose and momentum that we look forward to continuing next term.
- Meanwhile, Year 11 into 12 students have begun bridging courses in all schools that will lead to them being the best prepared A level students in history (given the unparalleled opportunities they have to complete significant pre reading and wider reading before their studies begin). Nevertheless, every A level subject is already planning which threshold concepts (see below) will need to be revisited in September in order to go forwards. We are mindful of the fact that Year 11 students' GCSEs were finished abruptly and that in some cases there was content that still needed to be covered or studied in greater depth. We can expect a degree of 'going backwards to go forwards' when we commence those A level studies next term.
- We await information from Ofqual around how the 2021 GCSE and A level examination series shall be amended to support Year 10 and Year 12 students around the country. Whilst we are not making any assumptions, there is growing expectation that there may be measures introduced that will ease some of the problems caused by the closure of schools and enable our next generation of GCSE/BTEC and A level students to approach those examinations with greater confidence and security. How we alter the curriculum for those two years groups next year will be greatly affected by those decisions that are being discussed right now at a national level and will be shared publically in the coming days or weeks.

Until more recently we had to prepare for several scenarios in September; some of which included full reopening whilst others were based on rotations that assumed some sort of continuation of social distancing. The [Secretary of State's announcement](#) that all schools would reopen to all students in September therefore comes as a great relief to us all. Whilst we all know that this

presumes the steadily improving national and local picture continues, we cannot emphasise how much easier our task is to begin again in September with all of the students in front of us!

Teaching and Learning

You may recall past references to our knowledge-rich curriculum being delivered through an increased focus on task design, explanations, modelling and practice. We have sought to raise the TEMPerature in our classrooms through a sharper focus on what makes the greatest difference. Put very simply, TEMP is all about creating highly purposeful classrooms that dispense with low value activities and focus on the knowledge, concepts and skills that enable students to master their subjects.

Moving forward, we see our teaching and learning becoming increasingly focussed on purposeful lesson design, activities and assessment. The lockdown and removal of traditional learning and lessons since March will, we anticipate, heighten a collective desire to make lessons as efficient and purposeful as possible.

Nationally, there is a movement towards knowledge-rich teaching and learning in response to the lockdown because all schools are thinking through how they will avoid wasting precious curriculum time and ensuring every lesson matters. Whilst we may feel some relief that we are somewhat down that road already, there is already a great deal of thought being applied to questions such as:

- What are the threshold concepts our students need from previous learning in order for them to access new learning?
- Which skills need to be revisited and practised in order to enable students to progress on to new or more challenging topics?
- Which facts must be secured and retained in order for students to think about my subject and future topics with ease?
- Which topics can be left behind and which ones must be retaught, revisited or touched upon next term?

It is easy to think about the learning journey as a conveyor belt that takes students through Years 7 to 13 without pauses or reversals. Learning looks much more like a spiral that twists and turns in a general direction of travel, but responds to the assessments teachers undertake and the decisions they then make about the next stage in the learning journey.

Excellence as Standard

Back in February, I wrote to all families (including those with children in Year 6) and invited you to take part in a consultation that we labelled 'excellence as standard'. Over thirty families came into school to participate and this accompanied a major staff consultation that ran through March and then April. *One* of the major threads running through that consultation was to reduce the time (and energy) we can waste in schools as a result of tardiness and low level disruption. The proposals sought to raise our game, collectively, and return in September with a heightened determination to be an even more purposeful school at all times and ensure that excellence is indeed standard.

Whilst that consultation began at a time when we had no knowledge that a lockdown would occur, we have chosen to pursue those same goals because what was true then it still true today. We are fairly good, but we can be better, much better.

In future letters we shall set out the changes that will come into effect next term at the right time. We want to avoid September being remembered for that time when we insensitively cranked up the expectations on low work rate in class, low level disruption, tardiness or completion of homework – but those are themes that are important and must be improved if we are to be the amazing school we know we can be next year and beyond. We want to get back, but also press on.

The World Has Turned

In my regular communication to colleagues on Friday, I also spoke of our challenge to respond to the events that have been taking place in our world, in particular the tragic death of George Floyd. Our curriculum is and will remain organic, preparing students for the world we live in now and not one we imagined even six or twelve months ago. We shall return to this in greater depth at another time but I left my colleagues with some questions for us all to consider as we devote more time to curriculum planning going forward:

- *How can the things we teach, and the things they learn, both in and out of the classroom, become more intentionally and deliberately focussed on ensuring our school does not create outsiders?*
- *How can we help mould young people to become leaders who fearlessly smash racism, sexism, transphobia, ageism, intolerance, bigotry or intransigence whenever they encounter its subtle or festering presence in our slowly improving world?*

Right here, right now

In next week's letter, I shall stand to one side and enable Mr Gent, Assistant Headteacher, to set out how our current teaching and learning practices have evolved in recent weeks and months. The introduction of live learning, principally amongst Year 10 and Year 12 students, is related to the increase in pre-recorded explanations in all year groups. Both represent some of the ways in which teaching and learning practices have adapted at CNS in recent months.

And finally...

Briefly, I wish to say thank you to those families who have responded to the Chromebook survey that is now closed for the time being. I shall be in touch with those families who responded in the next few days so please look out for that email and a summary of the next steps.

Please look out for Ms Hancock's message on Thursday which will be part of Mrs Smart's weekly Family Newsletter. Our visits to local primary schools continue with Mrs Faulkner and Mrs O'Brien being truly superb and so creative at this time. I am heading over to Middle Barton later today and Great Rollright tomorrow. A number of us are also hosting a live 'Welcome to Year 7' meeting with hundreds of Year 6 children and their families via Google Meet this coming Thursday night as well. Life goes on!

I wish you all a successful week and will be back in touch next Monday as usual.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Doherty', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Barry Doherty

Headteacher