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Learning, Achievement, Faith & Fun!

NEWSLETTER 289

Friday 15th May 2020

THANKFULNESS IS THIS TERM'S CHRISTIAN VALUE IN FOCUS.

Thankfulness is one of the values we will be focussing on this term. The apostle Paul tells his readers to be thankful in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 18). Even during lockdown, can we find things for which we can give thanks? Yes!

Dear Parents and Friends,

I hope this email finds you and your loved ones well.

The sole purpose of this newsletter is to share with you our thoughts and plans for reopening the school. It is a long read because the issues are both complex and serious. There is a link to a survey at the end that requires a response from parents in Years R (Reception) Year 1 (Y1) and Year 6 (Y6). There are only 3 questions. The more responses we get, the better we can plan and the safer your children, and the staff, will be.

I am indebted to the parents of North Nibley who posed questions (you know who you are!), the staff of the school, my colleague Head Teachers, unions and other advice found online.

Q What are you doing to make the return to school safe?

A Mr Batchelor writes:
In line with many head teachers I have reservations about the government's 'road map' – even though it is conditional upon 'the 5 tests'. My stance is identical to the one expressed here by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT):

“NAHT has told the government clearly and directly that these proposals, as they currently stand, are likely to prove impractical and unworkable in most schools. NAHT members confirmed this was the case in a snap-poll carried out on the evening of 11 May (70% said they did not think it would be feasible to welcome back pupils in years R, 1 and 6 from 1 June and 97% said they did not think it would be feasible to welcome back all primary aged pupils for a month before the end of the academic year).

We have been particularly critical of the suggestion that it might be possible to bring all primary pupils back for a month before the end of term. Unless there is a dramatic change in circumstances in the coming month, we do not believe this will be possible.

We believe that the chances of the necessary conditions being met are exceptionally low.

We have also repeatedly questioned the scientific evidence on which these decisions have been made and the lack of specific evidence on the risk to staff, parents and the wider community. We are continuing to ask the government to engage with us on this issue."

Mr Batchelor writes: Governors, staff and I are working our way through 48 points of guidance and 16 pages of a draft action plan, which we received yesterday (Wednesday). There are 51 practical considerations to be acted upon and risk assessed. Only when we, as a staff and governor team, are satisfied will we decide if we can re-open. Parents need to be aware that reopening is not without risk. Our task is to reduce the risks wherever we can.

Q How can the government expect younger children to social distance?

A The Department for Education (DfE) write: "One of the protective measures we can take to reduce transmission is to have smaller group and class sizes. We know that, unlike older children and adults, early years and primary age children cannot be expected to remain 2m apart from each other and staff. In deciding to bring more children back to early years and schools, we are taking this into account."

Mr Batchelor writes:

There is NO EXPECTATION that any child in primary school is able to social distance (2m apart). Although we will emphasise the importance of social distancing, with older pupils, contact with peers, within a teaching group, is inevitable. Reception children will be allowed to play together and will be using shared resources.

Following DfE and union advice, our plan is to have mini-classes of no more than 15 children. All groups would arrive at different times (through different gates, even), play separately and at different times, eat their lunches in 'their' mini-class group and room, and be taught by fewer members of staff. Every effort will be made to prevent cross-contamination between these mini-classes. The maximum group size of 15 means we could be teaching Year 1s in two different groups (since there are 18 in this Year). If sufficient Year 1s return, a mix of Class One and Class Two Year 1s could be taught by a either Miss Tyers or a Teaching Assistant, under the guidance of a teacher, for the remainder of the school year.

Q Will children be compelled to wear face coverings at school?

A The DfE Write: "No this will not be required. We will publish further advice on protective measures in schools in the coming weeks." Mr B adds – "Those falling ill on site will be required to wear a mask."

Q Do you know if a parent can choose not to send their child to school if they are concerned that it's not safe? I know you and all the amazing teachers will do every to keep them safe but I am concerned the size and layout of school would make that impossible.

A The DfE says:
“children and young people in eligible year groups are strongly encouraged to attend (where there are no shielding concerns for the child or their household), so that they can gain the educational and wellbeing benefits of attending.”

The NAHT (Head teacher’s Union), state:
“strongly encouraged” is not the same as attendance being mandatory and the DfE has been clear that parents will not be fined, and schools will not be held to account for attendance figures during this period.

Mr Batchelor writes:
“A significant challenge to us is the stipulation the groups should not number more than 15. We have 18 Year 1s, so our planning at present will result in 5 mini-classes (Reception, Year 1A, Year 1B, Year 6 and separately Key Worker’s children (from other year groups). That’s 5 classrooms, requiring the deployment of staff in 5 directions, not 4. Of course, we don’t know if all Year 1 pupils are planning to return. It is therefore really important that parents of children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 complete the survey at the end of this letter. This will help us.

Q Will children return ‘full time’ or part time / part of each day or part of a week?

A Mr Batchelor writes:
My preference is to re-admit whole year groups, full time, when it is safe to do so. (Actually, my preference was to avoid splitting families (some at school, some at home) but the Government’s announcement has precluded that option). I say ‘full time’, but actually we will have staggered start times and end times to avoid groups of parents gathering in close proximity. Different groups using the same rooms on a rota basis (mornings then afternoons, or part of the week) risks cross-contamination from the environment. Of course we will be highly vigilant with our cleaning and hand washing regimes.

The NAHT (Head teacher’s Union), state:
Our “understanding is that the DfE would prefer schools to prioritise bringing back individual year groups on a consistent basis because it will reduce the number of contacts and help those parents return to work, whereas alternating days or weeks is less likely to achieve this. However, if the individual circumstances of a school mean the use of rotas even within a year group is unavoidable, we recommend schools try to avoid split day rotas as this is likely to increase the number of parents, staff and pupils coming into contact with each other on a daily basis and reduced opportunity for cleaning etc. A week on, week off approach is likely to be more manageable.”

Q Will Reception and Year 1 still get free school meals?

A I believe all children in Reception and Year 1 (plus any Key Worker children in Year 2) are entitled to ‘Universal Free School Meals’ and must be offered a meal. However, the requirement to keep

mini-classes separate necessitates a staggered lunchtime with no guarantee that meals could be kept at a safe temperature throughout the longer break. We will therefore offer packed lunches only. Older children (Year 6 plus key worker children attending) can also choose to have a packed school lunch for the usual cost. All children not choosing a Caterlink meal will need to bring a packed lunch.

There is some confusion over the different types of Free School Meals. I have written a separate letter since I am very aware that due to the changing economic circumstances of many families, this may be of interest and a source of significant help to you. Certainly, it is of significant financial value to your child and the help they can receive in school.

Q Have you received an estimated timeline as to when each year group is 'expected' to return to school? Obviously Reception, Y1 & Y6 are first (I believe), but in what order do the year groups return after that? Do you know?

A Mr Batchelor writes:
We have not been in receipt of any major news in advance. I learn what plans have been set for us by watching the Government briefings on TV. After that comes the guidance – many hundreds of pages of text, with daily communication telling me which of those pages have been updated. There is often a significant delay between the news and the guidance.

For clarity, R, Y1 and Y6 MAY return from 1st June IF I and the Governors deem that the school is sufficiently – and safely – prepared. This includes the premises, new routines and adequate staffing. Or we might delay if we are not convinced. Or we might open to only one or two of those three groups, with priority being given to the younger children, and phase in the others in these three groups.

We have no idea thereafter; Government's "ambition" is for children to have a month in school before end of term (17th July). IF that means 17th June, how will we know if the pandemic spike is going up again as a result of school openings - is that sufficient time for the data to show any trends, given the period when one can be infected but not show symptoms? There are many unknowns.

Q What are the expectations in terms of education vs childcare if pupils start to return?

A The DfE has said relatively little on this issue, although it does refer to the educational benefits of pupils returning to school. A lot will depend on the numbers we have returning. It is therefore really important that parents of children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 complete the survey at the end of this letter. Much will also depend on the issues we find ourselves dealing with. Some children may present with needs based around bereavement, mental health or behaviour. There will be issues relating to the different amounts of progress children have been made whilst our teaching has moved 'online'. The staff here know

their pupils best and will determine the most appropriate approach.

It is very clear that any return will be a long way away from 'education as normal' and schools will be having to manage issues such as split classes and small groups. It is unrealistic to expect schools to immediately return to the national curriculum in its entirety and there is no expectation on schools that they should do so.

Schools and teachers will also be considering what reintegration activities and well-being support pupils might need initially, taking into account the experiences their cohort will have had.

In many cases, schools are likely to consider that a gradual return to 'the curriculum' will be appropriate and actually easier to manage given the safety guidelines produced by the DfE.

However, this is an individual choice for schools and there will be no inspection or audit of schools' approaches at this time.

Q Will you be able to continue to provide home learning for pupils not attending school?

A The NAHT write: "The government guidance refers to schools using their 'best endeavours' to provide home learning. This is an important phrase. There is no obligation or statutory duty on schools to continue to provide home learning in any specific way if and when pupils start to return."

Mr Batchelor writes: This is a significant challenge for North Nibley Primary, and all smaller schools with mixed age groups. Clearly our Class 2 and Class 4 teachers cannot be expected to do both, and parents, who have been overwhelmingly positive about our recent efforts, now need to scale back their expectations. With an additional 'class' (see above) and some staff unavailable for work (for reasons of shielding vulnerable people in their household) we will be stretched. At this moment in time I cannot confirm the continuation of 'online school' for any year group. Any model we adopt in this next phase needs to be sustainable as it could be that significant numbers of pupils remain at home for the foreseeable future. It is therefore really important that parents of children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 complete the survey at the end of this letter.

Schools will want to be very mindful of the feasibility and workload implications for staff when it comes to balancing school and home provision.

We are thinking carefully about how to balance these competing demands. Where certain year groups are attending, we may be able to consider a light-touch approach to providing ideas for activities at home. For example, this might be an overview of the focus for the week with some specific suggestions for activities that can be done.

Q Are children of key workers that have been kept at home now being encouraged to return to school prior to June 1st?

A Mr Batchelor writes:

One of the purposes behind the reopening of schools from 1st June is to allow workers back to work. Prior to June 1st...

If key worker shift patterns require it, yes. But...

If you can work from home, do so.

If you cannot, school is here for your children.

My understanding is that key workers should not have been refusing work on the basis of child-care needs.

The DfE says:

“children and young people in eligible year groups are strongly encouraged to attend (where there are no shielding concerns for the child or their household), so that they can gain the educational and wellbeing benefits of attending.”

Q Will Superstars still offer 'wrap-around' care?

A Superstars will not be able to maintain the segregation of 5 separate groups. They are looking forward to a September restart, subject to conditions.

Q How can we help? (OK – I made this one up!)

A The single biggest thing parents of Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 can do RIGHT NOW is complete the survey, which I have posted HERE –

<https://forms.gle/A5zGz4Xs3dZRREC89>

To progress our plans any further I need **answers by TUESDAY 19th MAY AT 12:00 noon**. Please share your current thinking. You can revisit the survey if you change your mind, but I need something to start with. This will help us to keep your children and our staff safe.

If you want to find out about the 48 points of guidance, I've posted them here:

<http://www.northnibley.gloucs.sch.uk/reopening-school/>

Details of the Government's reopening of schools can be found online via the below link.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers/reopening-schools-and-other-educational-settings-from-1-june>

REMINDERS -

PARTIAL OPENING FOR CHILDREN OF KEY WORKERS

Key Worker and vulnerable children provision will continue as it is currently. Please note, this has to match your shift patterns.

You can book sessions at school for when there is no alternative, by sending a TEXT to 07939443778 (and include your children's names!) Wherever possible we expect places to be booked by 2:00 p.m. the day before. We anticipate your child-care needs may change daily, therefore it will be important to book places on a day-by-day basis.