

5th January 2022

Dear Parents and Carers

I would like to take this opportunity to wish everyone a Happy New Year and I really hope that you managed a peaceful and covid-free Christmas break. As we return, I wanted to write to update you on our plans here at Great Academy Ashton for supporting the on-going face-to-face education of our students. Forewarned though, this is a lengthy and detailed letter and therefore you may wish to keep a hold of it for possible future reference. There is a lot of information in the press and on-line about the challenges we all face as schools in keeping open and ensuring that we can deliver in-person lessons. It is my absolute intention to keep school open to all students and I hope that you find this letter reassuring around the things we are doing to ensure that is the case. I have also included details over what we would do if we did have to close to some or all year groups so that you have the information well in advance.

Some of the measures that we have put in place to ensure we can stay open include:

1. **Additional Staffing Capacity.** I am currently staffing our school at approximately 115% capacity so that we can cope with increased staff absence. This additional capacity includes:
 - a. Appointing an extra English teacher
 - b. Appointing an extra science teacher
 - c. Retaining significant additional mathematics teaching capacity
 - d. Appointing extra Cover Supervisors so that any lessons that do need covering are covered by our own staff team.
2. **Securing Supply Staff.** I have secured an additional four supply teacher per day for the first 3-weeks of this term. You will have seen in the news that supply teachers are in very short supply with massive demand in light of the omicron variant impact. I pre-empted this by ensuring that we secured the additional staff from the agencies early in December for the start of this calendar year. This means that we have additional capacity to support any future staff absence due to covid transmission.
3. **In-School Testing Centre.** We have retained our in-school asymptomatic covid testing centre. Originally, government requirements was to only test students twice on return in September last year and once on return this January. I have however continued to leave in our in-school testing centre and therefore we have been able to test all students for whom we have permission each and every week so far this academic year. I am planning on leaving this testing centre in place until at least February half term. This means that we are able to identify asymptomatic cases sooner and has resulted in our whole school attendance rates being on average 3% above national for this academic year. This really is having a great positive impact on keeping our students and staff safe. However, this testing centre should work alongside home testing and not instead of. It is vitally important that all students test once per week at home alongside their once per week in school. We will be sending out text message reminders on a Sunday afternoon to prompt home testing. Please ensure that you report your results to both the government and school. The school reporting link is available here: https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=soWxfvRiCk67XrWHtp67_yWmZ3fgbZBljXQubpht2YZUMzIVSVBCMzISMERUV1IHnjRPWjZSOUY5ViQIQCN0PWcu

4. **Masks within the building.** As part of our risk assessment, unless you are medically exempt, face masks should be worn at all times within the building. This is a significant part of our risk assessment in keeping everyone safe. Tameside covid rates are currently over 2000 per 100,000 and with the impact of New Year gatherings and the return to schools still yet to take effect, it is vital that we establish this. We have plenty of face masks in stock and greet the students each day with plenty of spares. If your son or daughter does not have a face mask then we will simply give them one on arrival.
5. **Vaccination Programme.** We are scheduled to have the second round of 12 – 15 year old vaccinations on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th February here in school. This will be for all students who are aged 12 – 15 for their second vaccination, their first vaccination if permissions have changed and first vaccination if they were unable to have the first injection due them being covid positive previously too close to the last round. Please note, students will not be able to have a vaccination if it is within 12-weeks of them having tested positive previously.
6. **Home testing kits.** We have a good supply of LFD home testing kits and students can pick these up from our in-school testing centre. It is vital all students continue to test at home at least once per week alongside the in-school testing. Please encourage your son or daughter to pick up a kit.
7. **Socially distanced examinations.** This month we have a range of external Year 11 examinations, starting on Monday 10th January. In order to ensure their safe completion, we will be socially distancing the exam hall with desks approximately 2.5m apart. As part of the on-going support for our Year 11 it is vital that we are able to get the formal assessments completed and these January exams and the next round of mock examinations form a significant part of this.

Other actions that we are undertaking in order to protect “business continuity” include such things as:

- Being pre-prepared to move to a cold service for catering; essentially it takes less staff to prepare a full cold service rather than hot meals. Not ideal, however if it allows us to stay open and cater for our 1300 students it is something that we must prepare for.
- Daily LFD testing for “business critical” staff. It is not necessarily teaching staff absence that will force schools to move to remote learning, it is more likely to be our support staff teams that trigger such a move. In order to mitigate this, I have asked for certain groups of staff to daily lateral flow tests. These include our main office staff, our pastoral safeguarding staff, our strategic leadership team, our site management team and our learning support assistants.
- Increased cleaning schedules with a keen focus on handrails and door handles.
- Pausing of “mass gatherings” or increased community transmission, for example, we are moving our assemblies to be on-line and they will be shown to students in their normal classes, parents evenings will be on-line, we will be hosting parental meetings on-line and various school events have been postponed.

As I said at the start of this letter, it is my absolute priority that we continue with face-to-face learning. However, if I am not able to open to all year groups, we will immediately switch to remote learning. In the event of having to move to remote learning we will ensure that all lessons are given via Microsoft Teams. As part of the on-going management of the current position we find ourselves in, I thought it useful to let you know the following:

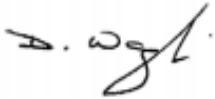
- We undertake an assessment at 4pm each day over the likely staffing levels for the following day. This would allow us to communicate with parents and carers that evening in advance of the next day. This is of course not always possible, however we will make the decision at the very earliest opportunity and communicate that to you via text, Microsoft Teams and our social media channels.
- Even if we did move to remote learning for one or more year groups, we would still run an in-school “Key Worker and Vulnerable Student” provision for that particular year group.

- If we did have to move to remote learning for some students, we would still provide lunch to those students who are eligible for free school meals and those “grab bags” would be available at reception on the days affected.
- To ensure that one year group is not more affected than another, we would initially move to remote learning for 48 hours with a review after 24 hours and then a potential move to a different year group if the staffing difficulties continued.
- Priority for keeping year groups in school will be given to Year 7 (for family childcare reasons) and Year 11 (for examination reasons). That is not to say they may not be affected however I wanted to be upfront in highlighting where our priorities would lie if the worst came to the worst.

A full “January 2022 Risk Assessment” and “Contingency Planning Framework” is available from our website if you wish to read the full list of mitigating actions.

Thank you in advance for your support over what I am sure will be a challenging, yet very exciting start to 2022. We have so many wonderful things to look forward to in school with the launching of our “Learning Modes”, the significant investment in a new school library right at the heart of school and a substantial increase in staff professional development and focus on students’ knowledge acquisition. I genuinely hope this message finds you and your family safe and well. Happy New Year.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Waugh'.

Mr David Waugh
Principal