



Newent Community School and Sixth Form Centre

Striving for Excellence

Principal • Mr Alan Johnson

Telephone: 01531 820550

Community Enquiries: 01531 828916

Sixth Form: 01531 828915

Watery Lane, Newent, Gloucestershire GL18 1QF **www.newent.gloucs.sch.uk** **Email:** admin@newent.gloucs.sch.uk

8th January, 2021

Dear Parents and Carers,

I would normally start my first letter in January by wishing you all a Happy New Year. It is not that I don't want to, please believe me when I say that I really do want this year to be much better than the last for all of us but just days into the start of term it is already far different from what I was expecting. I am so sorry that it has become necessary to only have the school open for vulnerable students and those children of critical key workers as we were all moved into another national lockdown. I was so proud of how well all of your sons and daughters were coping with school life before Christmas in their year group bubbles, and so proud of the tireless efforts and energy of every member of staff at our school. It is with real sadness that we will only see many of their happy faces and smiles on a computer screen for the coming weeks.

New guidance to meet the challenge of Covid-19 is coming into schools thick and fast. I will continue to write to you at the end of each week in an effort to make sense of the rapidly changing world we are all living in. With that said, please understand that the government continues to release information to national newspapers before affected communities. All school leaders in every school get exactly the same information at exactly the same time as you do. As ever please address any anxiety, questions or concerns directly to myself or a member of my team. We will respond to each change and each challenge as soon as humanly possible. Please avoid posting information that may cause further worry to families on social media. I have grown increasingly concerned over the last year about how toxic social media has become not just in this country but worldwide and I would urge everyone of you not to fan the flames of the stress, strain and anxiety that we are all living under at this time. Definitive information will be available at the end of each week in my weekly Principal's Letter. All weekly correspondence since March 2020 is archived on the school website in case you missed a briefing (or enjoy my ramblings).

Distance Learning

Please pass on my congratulations to your children on the way in which they have calmly transitioned back to Distance Learning over the course of this week. As during our last period of lockdown we are continually working on ways in which to improve the provision for our school community. You will have received a further MILK message today outlining our increased use of Microsoft Teams to deliver live online sessions to our students.

I am however acutely aware of the continuing digital divide within our school community and hope that some of the strategies detailed below will further support engagement in our Distance Learning provision.

Mobile Phone Top up scheme

I have included a link to a new government scheme that temporarily increases data allowances for mobile phone users on certain networks. This is so that children and young people can access remote education if their face-to-face education is disrupted.

<https://get-help-with-tech.education.gov.uk/about-increasing-mobile-data>

If you have any questions, require data support or Wi fi access please email finance@newent.gloucs.sch.uk

Mobile devices

The school has been allocated a further fifty IT devices in addition to the ten that we were allocated last year. We are currently working through a process to allocate these fifty devices on a priority needs basis.

Using Xbox or PlayStation to access Distance Learning

I have attached instructions on how you can access Distance Learning resources on your Xbox or PlayStation from home including access to school emails and Microsoft Teams.

BBC Links for Secondary Education

As well as the excellent Bitesize resource the BBC is increasing its educational provision from Monday 11th with further televised content available for all age groups.

<https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2020/bbc-launches-biggest-education-offer-ever>

Omegle

I will finish my section on IT with unfortunately another warning about a far less savory use of technology. Please be aware of the potential dangers of allowing your children to use Omegle or indeed any similar App. It is an app that encourages young people to connect with strangers. It is being billed as great way to meet new friends, even while practicing social distancing. However, when a young person uses this software, they are connected to someone else at random to talk one-on-one through a webcam and live videos. Unfortunately, it has come to my attention that the Talk to Stranger functionality of Omegle is being used by unscrupulous individuals as a tool to groom young people.

Free School Meals

If you can remember back to the very first lockdown our amazing finance team got a robust Free School Meals voucher scheme up and running in just two days! We continued to operate this scheme for months without issue until the Government replacement was finally up and running. It is my understanding that the contract with the national provider has come to an end. Therefore, I am reinstating our FSM voucher scheme immediately as I cannot countenance children going hungry until a national solution is found. Our support for families entitled to free school meals will be broadened to include a limited option of a FSM food parcel instead of a voucher for those families who are shielding. If you have not received a telephone call, and we are aware we have had to leave a number of messages, please contact the finance office via email finance@newent.gloucs.sch.uk.

Key Worker and Vulnerable Learners

When the Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged the nation to stay at home in a bid to protect the NHS he made it clear that only the children of key workers and those that they deemed to be vulnerable were to attend school in person to truly reduce numbers and spread of the virus.

I completely understand that parents who are working in jobs that aren't considered as key roles may be facing difficulties with child care right now. The fact that all children are not in school causes immense stress in some families but it is very important that as a nation we are able to prioritise support for the very people on the front line of getting us all out of this awful situation. Therefore, it is critical that these school places are only used when absolutely necessary. As someone who has spent his life working with a different group of teenage children every hour, every day, for over thirty years, I know that they can be difficult to motivate at times but we must all try our best to protect the NHS in every way we can. One of them is by ensuring that this critical support is always available to families who really need it.

Exams Update

As you will have seen in the news it was announced that GCSE and A Level exams will not go ahead 'as normal' this summer. I know that Mr Phillips wrote briefly to parents and students following this announcement to express our understanding that this may cause significant concern and anxiety. I also want to reassure you that we will do everything we can to make sure that no student from Newent Community School and Sixth Form Centre is disadvantaged by this development.

Unfortunately we have received no further information on this important issue but we will continue to work with exam boards, the Department for Education and Ofqual. As soon as there are any developments I will write to all students in our examination year groups with relevant information. I strongly echo and support the Ofqual message to students which is to 'please continue to engage as

fully as you can in your education'. You must keep working on MILK tasks and engaging with our online lesson provision.

We are currently in the process of collating information from our December Mock Examination period, but please rest assured that no one piece of information would ever be used as a judgement on overall student performance.

With the dramatic change to the start of the school year we will be reviewing our Termly Calendar, including the previously published dates for Parents' Evenings. I will provide a further update in my next weekly letter.

Wow, a lot of information to get through and we have only been back four days! I would like to end my first letter of the New Year with some outstanding news. Four of our students who entered the Gemba Google AI Kit Competition before Christmas have each won a Google Artificial Intelligence kit! Well done to Melody Stone, Usman Jeeva, Jonathan Pennicard and Halimah Patel.

Regards

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Alan Johnson', written in a cursive style.

Alan Johnson
Principal