

26th November 2021

Dear Families,

I am writing to update you regarding COVID-19 and the next few weeks.

The Directors of Public Health across the South West met yesterday and agreed, that given the rates of COVID-19 in the South West remain the highest in the country, it is appropriate to maintain the current additional COVID-19 response measures within Somerset schools.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases amongst our children are not as high as the week before last half-term, though we have seen an increase in winter colds, cough and sickness. We are continuing to act as an Amber school and will continue with all the following additional routines:

- That we follow and promote up to date guidance on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19.
- That we continue to work with test and trace and Public Health England acting on their advice.
- That we maintain cleaning regimes and reintroduce focused cleaning of high use areas during the day.
- That we keep occupied spaces well ventilated.
- That we use appropriate PPE when dealing with a potential infection outbreak.

On top of this we will also continue to:

- Suspend assemblies until further notice.
- Ensure that lunch times continue to be staggered and year groups given distinct seating areas.
- Ask that Staff wear face coverings in corridors and communal areas.
- Ask that any close contacts of confirmed cases of COVID-19 identified by NHS Test & Trace book a PCR test and whilst awaiting test results, undertake a daily LFD test and only attend school if this is negative. The daily LFD testing is at the parent or guardian's discretion for primary age children.
- Continue to ask that parents/carers wear face coverings when on the Academy site.

Where we have really struggled this term is with our staff testing positive and having to isolate alongside those being unwell with more general winter illnesses. This has, of course, put huge pressure on the Academy for a number of reasons:

- There are higher than average cases across Mendip and therefore supply teachers are hard to get to cover absence.
- There is increased pressure on staff well enough to be in, to ensure that we cover important safeguarding and health and safety elements, as well as keep up with teaching and learning expectations.

- In some cases, we have asked that children in certain classes do not come in until they have had a PCR. A MASSIVE thank you to parents and carers for their understanding when we have contacted you regarding this.
- Staff have needed to be flexible and this has had a knock on impact on one of the most important elements of running a good school – consistency and continuity. Especially as we are trying hard to keep staff safe in the same year group where possible.

I have sought further advice from Public Health and, as I write, I am still concerned enough about our community at the Academy to confirm that we will not be putting on any Christmas performances. Even if we did class performances of 30 it would mean over 60 people in the hall, a huge amount of practicing and over 25 performances to schedule as well as the following concerns:

- Christmas performances need high numbers of staff to ensure that children have the time and space to learn their lines and parts – in a normal year this takes weeks to do. It is a monumental task even without COVID-19.
- Staff spend a huge amount of additional time preparing resources (stitching costumes, creating back grounds and making props), this becomes unmanageable if you do not have the staff to do this.
- With the number of performances that we usually put on, from Nursery to Year 6, the hall is in constant use and as it is strongly advised that we limit mixing year groups it would be almost impossible to timetable and give each year group enough time to practice their performance.
- There has been a strong steer from Public Health to stop all assemblies and I cannot see how a Christmas performance is any different.
- Finally, and most importantly to everyone's safety is that our CO₂ readings show a huge change in air quality when children are singing – currently with windows open, all rooms have good air quality (CO₂ readings below 800) when singing happens these readings can quickly become poor with readings of over 1500. This creates a high chance that infection can be passed on, especially with long, repeated practice periods.

We have looked at other options including putting something on where we would invite only one parent and have no singing. But with very limited numbers allowed in the hall and the number of additional performances needed, I have decided that it would put such additional pressure on staff as to make an already very challenging year even more difficult. I also wonder what purpose the performances would have without song? That is why as a whole staff we have decided to focus on the children just having fun in school and making what they do in that last week as Christmassy as possible. Christmas is always such a special time in school for so many of us and it is sad to have to do this but I believe that it is the right thing to do given our current context. Our thanks go to Friends of Brookside who are helping us with extra activities to add to our timetable.

Thank you for your understanding on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Walton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Brian Walton