

Newsletter – October 2020

Welcome to the first newsletter of this session. Normally we would issue our first newsletter of the session in September but there have been inevitable delays due to COVID and the challenges facing us all in light of the pandemic.

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COVID Update

The school has been fully operational for over eight weeks now and, despite the inevitable changes that have had to be put in place, a sense of normality emerged fairly quickly. It was great to see our young people back into a routine and engage with their teachers and their peers in the learning process so well. At the moment we cannot offer much of the additional provision that makes our school so rich and vibrant. For the time being there can be no extra-curricular clubs; school trips are very limited at the moment and we are very limited in terms of visitors coming into the school to offer curricular enrichment for our pupils. We will not be able to have parental consultation evenings this session. This includes year group consultations whereby parents/carers meet their son/daughters teachers to discuss individual progress in their curricular subjects and also evening events such as our S1 Open Evening; our S2-3 Personalisation & Choice Evening and our S3-4 and S5-6 Course Choice Evenings. We are currently exploring ways of delivering these in alternative formats and we will contact parents/carers about this in due course. As things stand it is highly unlikely that we will be able to facilitate our Christmas concert and Christmas dances and we will need to find alternative ways to deliver our Remembrance Assemblies in November and our Holocaust Memorial Assemblies in January. Indeed, we cannot have year group assemblies with pupils for any reason. This is proving challenging, especially for our year heads and thus we need to deliver important school messages via other methods such as through ICT or deputies going around individual classes to speak to pupils, which is clearly much more time consuming. It also reduces our ability to get our year groups to bond as year groups, especially our new S1 pupils. Notwithstanding these restrictions our young people are nonetheless fully engaged in their learning and doing well.

The changes that we have had to operate include separate entrance and exits for year groups and split intervals and lunches for S1-3 pupils and S4-6 pupils. This is working well, as most things are. In

the main, the vast majority of pupils are compliant with the Scottish Government requirement to wear face masks in schools when they are in busy communal areas such as moving between classes when the corridors are usually very busy with pupil traffic. A few weeks ago I issued a letter asking that parents/carers ensure that their children have a mask and/or face covering before they leave for school in the morning. This is very important and I would ask you to reinforce this necessity with your child. In the first two weeks after the announcement by the Scottish Government on face coverings we issued over 1000 masks, due mainly to youngsters forgetting their mask. There have been days when we have run out of masks completely. A simple solution is for youngsters to have a scarf - this would suffice as a face covering and as we approach the winter months there is every likelihood that many will be wearing scarfs in any case. It is also very important that pupils fit their masks on properly and keep them on when in communal areas. Too many pupils are pulling them down to talk to other pupils in social areas, busy corridors and also on public transport where we have had a few complaints from members of the public due to our pupils not wearing face coverings on public transport. We would appreciate all parents/carers discussing these issues with their children and reinforcing the importance of keeping others safe through wearing a face covering.

Pupil absence is now returning to what we would normally expect in any other year. During August and September we experienced very high rates of pupil absence, as did most schools up and down the country, due to understandable parental concern about possible COVID symptoms. This meant that many pupils were self-isolating whilst they awaited the results of a COVID test or were self-isolating as a member of their family had tested positive. A number of pupils had been contacted by track and trace and told self-isolate. We have in place systems to ensure that when pupils are told to self-isolate that work can be provided for them so that when they return they are not behind their classmates. This has been a very time consuming and challenging task but as the numbers start to decline it becomes easier to manage and implement.

New S1

Our new S1 cohort did not have the benefit of a proper transition from P7 to S1 due to lockdown. Despite this they have settled very well and are already proving to be a lovely year group who are contributing very positively to the school. The feedback from class teachers has been hugely positive on the pupils' attitude to learning and this is the most important thing that we can ask of them. It has taken them a bit more time to find their way around the school but this is fully understandable as they were deprived of the visits that usually take place across May and June prior to starting in August. We would normally have a guidance welcome evening for S1 parents to allow them to meet their child's guidance teacher who will be the most important person in their child's school life during their time here. As has been intimated earlier, we cannot have these types of events this year but we have managed to free up the guidance staff from some of their timetabled class commitments to ensure that they have the time to purposefully engage with all year groups, but especially S1 pupils and to get to know them well in the first few weeks. To help with this we provide two periods of PSE in the first 5-6 weeks so that there is twice weekly contact between young people and their guidance teacher. We have also asked guidance staff to make contact with all S1 parents/carers and introduce themselves to you and explain what they can do to support your child when they are in school.

Auchengillen

To help our S1 pupils get to know each other better we have been fortunate to be able to take them on a one-day residential trip to Auchengillen Outdoor Centre. This is not quite the week long residential trip we would normally offer but it has been of value in helping them bond with class mates in their wider house groups and also have fun whilst developing key skills for learning, life and work. This week (Monday-Thursday) all S1 have been going in house groups to participate in archery, climbing and raft building. Feedback has been very positive and all youngsters do appear to have had a great day away.

Staffing

We have a few new staff with us this year and we extend a warm welcome to them:

- **English** – Miss Reid (will start on 1 November)
- **Maths** – Mr O'Toole, Mr McInnes
- **Modern Languages** – Ms Kerr
- **Geography** – Miss McGowan (NQT)
- **History** – Dr Ross (NQT)
- **Biology** – Ms Paterson; Ms Oliver (NQT); Ms Carrigan (NQT)
- **Chemistry** – Dr Metivier; Dr Tippen (NQT)
- **Physics** – Dr Coltman; Ms Warnock (NQT)
- **Design Technology** – Ms Kinnear (NQT)
- **Health Food Technology** – Ms Walls; Mrs Cullen
- **Physical Education** – Mr Campbell; Ms Kirkwood (NQT)
- **Business Education** – Mr Friel (NQT)

All new staff have settled in very well and are already making a very positive contribution to the school.

As well as our new teaching staff we have two new **SDS careers advisers** – Rona Kinsman and Ruth Bell. Rona will be in school on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday and Ruth will be in on a Thursday. They will work with our senior pupils in the first instance as they, along with our guidance staff, focus on helping secure positive destinations for all of our potential school leavers, though they do engage with younger pupils as well.

We have a new **school counsellor** with us two days a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) – Joanna Herman-Waddell. Our counsellor plays an important role in ensure the health and wellbeing needs of our pupils are looked after through listening and supporting young people who may, for example, have significant anxiety issues. Most referrals to our counsellor will be done through our guidance staff. If you have any issues or concerns about your child that you feel might be helped by a referral for counselling you would need to speak to your child's guidance teacher in the first instance. We operate the service on a needs must basis

SQA

Last year was a particularly challenging year for our senior pupils when SQA exams were cancelled for the first time ever. I will not go over the issues that arose in light of the SQA's decision to use a particular algorithm but rather focus on the positives for our young people. After the SQA reverted to teacher estimates we received what we had been tracking over the course of the year. This was as follows in terms of the high line messages that the Scottish Government looks at:

- S4 5+ at National 5 = **71%** (this is on a par with the average over the past five years)
- S5 5+ Higher Grades = **50%** (this is the highest on record)
- S5 3+ Higher Grades = **70%** (this is the highest on record)
- S5 1+ Higher Grades = **87%** (this is the highest on record)

Of course, there will always be an element of suspicion or doubt cast over the veracity of these results. In response, I would make clear that we had been tracking these results closely over the session and the S5 results were wholly merited as they were a very able cohort. They demonstrated this with their results in S4 where very high numbers achieved 6As at N5 or 5As and 1B at N5 – very good predictors of success at H Grade; their S5 tracking report in light of October assessments was extremely positive and their prelim results were much stronger than any of the previous five years. We are very proud of the endeavour shown by our pupils across the whole of last year and they were rewarded accordingly. Well done to all of them

Learning loss

By the time of lockdown in March 2020 our S4 pupils had completed their National courses and our S5 and S6 had largely completed their Higher Grade and Advanced Higher Grade courses. The real issue and concern will be for our S4-6 pupils this year as they have missed quite a bit of work. We put in place a comprehensive range of work for pupils to engage in throughout lockdown and many of our young people did engage well. This cannot replace the value derived for class teaching in schools so there has been a degree of learning loss for all pupils and this will be most acutely felt by our senior pupils.

We issued a survey to all pupils related to learning loss and we have engaged with all departments across the school to get their perspective of which pupils they feel have suffered most learning loss due to lockdown so that we can put in place a range of bespoke targeted interventions to address the issues with those pupils. We have devised a programme of universal provision for all to deal with aspects of learning loss. In S1 and S2 we delivered programmes on meta-cognition (learning how to learn). In S2 we used the elective programme to deliver learning loss programmes in key areas, whilst in S3 we will be taking pupils from core subjects (PE, PSE or RE) to facilitate catch up in those areas identified by pupils as areas of most concern e.g. English and Maths. In S4 we have already taken pupils out of PE for a time to allow catch up whilst in S5 we have used the elective periods for catch up purposes. There's an element of robbing Peter to pay Paul and we recognise this but we are focusing our efforts on where our pupils and teachers say the greatest need is.

We will be devising new approaches that will extend home learning regardless of whether there is another lockdown; a move back to the planned blended learning model of 1/3 of a week per year group that was due to happen in August or whether we remain open for all pupils full time.

As you may have heard from the Deputy First Minister on Wednesday 7 October, he has agreed with the findings of the Priestly Report and decided to cancel N5 examinations for 2021. We will await updated guidance from SQA on how we assess our pupils who are studying N5 qualifications. It would appear that assignments have been cancelled. These take the form of written reports that are researched and written up in school but then sent away to be marked centrally by SQA. If this requirement is removed then it saves a lot of time which can then be used to ensure more teaching takes place and make up for some of the learning loss that occurred during lockdown. With no N5 exams there is no requirement for S4 pupils to go on study leave so we can start our Higher Grade courses earlier.

We will still need very rigorous assessment for those pupils studying N5 qualifications. In most cases pupils who achieve well in National 5 qualifications in S4 tend to go on to study Higher Grade qualifications in S5. We want all pupils to succeed at a level that is most appropriate for them so we must be absolutely sure that they have a chance of achieving success with Higher Grade qualifications by ensuring that the qualifications in National 5 accurately reflect a young person's ability and progress in the qualification.

Supported study

We have been given funding by East Dunbartonshire Council to offer a comprehensive supported study programme for S4-6 pupils. This will start towards the end of October or early November and will run through until March 2021. Further details will be issued in due course. We will open supported study as a universal offer, though we will issue letters to those parents/carers where we feel young people would benefit most from attendance in certain subjects across the few months when supported study will be on offer.

LA Launch

For our S1-3 pupils we offer a programme called LA launch, which runs on a Monday, Tuesday and Thursday from 3.30 – 4.30pm. This is a programme which allows young people access to computers if they need them to complete homework. It affords young people the chance of a quiet space to complete any homework tasks that might be pending. Some young people can use LA Launch to collaborate with their peers on work that is due for their teachers. There will always be a teacher available to help and support people who may need it. Further details about LA Launch will be issued shortly.

PE

As you will perhaps be aware, the Scottish Government has indicated that, for the time being, PE activities should remain outside. This will become more problematic as we approach the winter months. If there is no change in the guidelines and the weather outside is not conducive to outdoor participation we would need to have more classroom based lessons in PE. Let's hope that there is some movement on the guidelines in due course.

Prize Giving

We carried out a scaled back prize giving ceremony on Thursday 24 September. Despite this it was great to see so many of our pupils receive recognition for their efforts over the 2019-20 session. Alas, all of last year's S6 pupils could not attend as they are not allowed into the school as they would now be classed as external visitors. It's highly likely that many of them will be away at university/college or are working full-time and thus could not have attended anyway. We are looking at alternative ways whereby they will be able to receive their trophies. Our S6 still have to collect their yearbooks so we will look to combine both of these to be picked up. We will contact the ex-pupils about this shortly. We hope to upload some photographs to our website in due course.

Captaincy Team

On Tuesday 22 September Ms Robertson, year head for S6, and I interviewed 14 S6 pupils for school captaincy positions. The quality of the young peoples' application forms and their interviews were first class and it was incredibly difficult to cut the numbers down from 14 to 8 as all 14 would have merited a position. The successful applicants and thus our captaincy team for this session are:

Helena Crofts, Emily Giffen, Nina Logue, Alexandra Marshall, Kiendi Searle-Mbullu, Murray Seggie, Samuel White and Clare Yule.

Show racism the red card

On Wednesday 7th and Thursday 8th October we worked with an organisation called 'show racism the red card' as part of Black History month. The organisation worked with our S3 cohort to help celebrate diversity and to reinforce some of the school fundamental values of inclusion, respect, tolerance and compassion. The event was a real success and our young people learned a lot on an area that is very much in the news at the moment.

Outdoor education

From the end of October, we will be working with Glasgow Kelvin College to deliver an outdoor education programme to enable selected young people to develop their skills for learning, life and work. The pupils will be participating in small groups to develop their communication skills, team-working and self-awareness through activities such as kayaking, canoeing, rafting, raft-building, stand up paddle boarding, climbing, orienteering, outdoor bush craft and dry slope skiing. Through these activities pupils will also pick up some wider achievement awards such a Sports Paddle Award, First Aid Awards and the John Muir Award. This is an excellent opportunity for pupils and details for those selected will be issued in due course.

School refurbishment

I am pleased to let all parents/carers know that the council's plans to provide a 4G pitch with floodlighting facilities on the site of our existing grass rugby pitch has been approved at the council's planning committee. This will mean that our PE provision will be much enhanced during school and after school. Work is due to begin on the new pitch imminently. There are also a number of other school improvements taking place over the coming months and I will keep parents/carers up to date on any new developments when it is appropriate to do so.

Parental Engagement

A number of our teaching staff are currently engaged in looking at ways to improve our parental engagement strategy. Three years ago, when we employed an external company to carry out a parental survey into a wide range of areas of our provision and our communications with parents/carers was seen as very positive and appreciated by them. We recognise that times have moved on and technology plays a much greater role than it did even from three years ago, so we felt it appropriate that we look at this area with a view to improving our communications with parents/carers. We will engage with our parent council and thereafter the wider parent body on this issue over the coming months. There are essentially five areas that will be looked at:

1. We will look to refresh and simplify the school values so that it easier for all parents/carers to see what we are trying to achieve.
2. We will look at inward communication and how this can be streamlined and improved upon. It is recognised that the guidance teacher is the first port of call for any issues or concerns that parents may have in relation to their individual child so this is more related to how we respond to wider and more general requests. A survey will be issued to gauge a parental perspective on how they would want this delivered.
3. We will look at outward communication and how this can be used to give parents/carers a more detailed understanding of some of the work that we do; how and why we do it and the positive impact of this work upon their child. For example, why and how we engaged with the Rights Respecting Schools Award programme; what we did to receive our Vision Schools Scotland Award; what was involved in being awarded and re-accredited with the Sports Scotland Gold Award and what is involved in our School of Rugby programme.
4. A fourth area we will look at is how we engage parents/carers more in the learning process with their child.
5. The final area for review is how we develop new technology to best meet the needs of our pupils and our parents/carers.

As you will appreciate this is a significant amount of work we are undertaking but we feel if it helps more of our parents/carers understand what we are trying to achieve as a school and gives a better insight into how we try and achieve this it will certainly be worth the effort.

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