Dear parents

I hope you all continue to be safe and well as we near the end of the sixth week of lockdown. I must thank you once again for your support and patience as we all try to work our way through the challenges of home schooling, working from home and the sense of social isolation. For others of course there will be bigger challenges as you deal with the illness of loved ones and our thoughts are with those of you in this situation at this time.

There remains a good deal of uncertainty about how education will look over the coming weeks and months. As I have said previously, as Headteachers we listen to the Downing Street Briefings along with the rest of the country to find out what is going to happen to schools, we do not get any inside information or advance warning. With that in mind, we are trying to plan for the prospect of schools being at least partially closed for some time whilst continuing to provide work for boys to do at home.

**Completing work set at home**

My key message remains the same. The priorities for home schooling are:

1. Keeping your family safe and well and following government guidance
2. Looking after the mental health of your family. This includes spending time together on family activities, ensuring exercise is taken where possible and not allowing the completion of school work to become a tension.
3. Completing some of the work set, however please read on!

When it comes to completing work at home I have tried to be as realistic as I can from the start. Six weeks in and I feel that the challenges faced by parents and school staff are probably more relevant now than ever. Everyone has different working environments at home. This applies to teachers and support staff as well as parents. Some teachers with two- three young children and a partner who is a key worker are struggling to keep on top of the demands expected of them. This equally applies to parents who face issues such as a lack of technology, lack of time, lack of expertise, lack of motivation (it will be difficult for boys to remain focussed with such uncertainty) and the fact that some boys will need huge amounts of one to one support. Therefore, I emphasise again that we continue to set work not because we are trying to fulfil a set curriculum, expect boys to make the same progress as they would at school or because we are worried about our position in the league tables when they come back. We continue to set work to help provide support and structure for you, to ensure that those boys who can, continue to learn new things and to help provide a purpose for each day. The message remains the same – please do the best you can without affecting the mental health of your family by creating tension.

**Challenges of setting work**

We are well aware that all boys are now at vastly different stages of home learning for every subject as some boys have concentrated on different subjects at different times. This poses a challenge when setting future work as staff are being asked to set work for someone they have not seen for a considerable time. Year 10 parents will know we are moving to some ‘taught’ lessons next week using Microsoft Teams. This has involved considerable training for staff and hours of preparation. As I am sure you can appreciate Mrs Davis has been trying to teach staff how to teach remotely, by teaching them remotely! Understandably some staff have found the use of this technology a challenge. Once we know more about the government’s long-term strategy for schools, we may roll this out to other year groups. However, it will not become a whole school approach as it would become logistically impossible. This new approach has resulted in all boys needing a new e-mail address for technical reasons. I am aware this may have caused an issue for some accessing Show My Homework. We are working with individuals to resolve this but again please do not worry if a day’s work is missed.

It is worth drawing your attention to two web -sites currently providing online lessons for KS3 and 4. One is the well-publicised BBC bitesize – [www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize). This is where lots of celebrities are delivering ‘lessons’ in their fields of expertise. They are not directly linked to the curriculum but they can be a fun and enriching experience.

The other, perhaps less well known, is the Oak Academy who have been funded by the government to offer online lessons nationally.

<https://www.thenational.academy/>

Where relevant, our staff will be directing boys to some of these lessons. In the meantime, you may wish to have a look at what’s on offer for yourselves.

**Other challenges**

We were quick to inform the parents of boarders that all fees would be suspended from the day the boarders were sent home. This has not been replicated across other State boarding schools and has resulted in a loss of income of £0.5 million, nearly a third of the boarding budget. The school will also lose the letting income generated over the summer. We arranged for those entitled to free school meals to receive vouchers at above the government rate and continued to pay these over the Easter holidays. Students who meet strict criteria in Year 10 have been contacted and will be provided with laptops before the government have released details of how schools can claim this money. As a school we have only been able to furlough a very small percentage of staff (boarding staff continue to work) but we have agreed to make up their pay so that they do not lose out financially. This has all put considerable financial strain on the school and it is only through being part of Bridgwater and Taunton College Trust that we have been able to absorb these costs. We continue to try and chase monies owed to parents from cancelled school trips. Please be patient as many tour companies/organisations are being slow to respond and we have a reduced staff team working on this.

**Other news**

I have taken the decision to cancel Open Day. Whilst this was inevitable, we tried to leave it as late as we could in the hope restrictions would be lifted. We continue to try and keep the school moving forward where possible. We now have a number of companies who are looking to tender for the work on the swimming pool although any work may well be delayed. Before the Covid-19 outbreak the farm team had decided to move to a system of block calving which allows for a more predictable calving/milking programme and therefore it is easier to plan the curriculum. Sadly, this means we no longer need Forrester who has been sold, thankfully to the parent of a Brymore boy. Year 11 boys are still very much in our thoughts and we are all looking forward to Leaver’s service, whenever that may be. We are also aware of the uncertainty for Year 6 parents but our transition work is well underway with Brymore staff contacting staff in the various primary schools in order to start the information gathering process.

Before the lockdown we appointed a new Pastoral Manager, Penny Perry, to replace Mr Lund. Clearly a challenging time to start a new post as she has only been able to meet a few staff and no students. I am sure she will be a great asset to the school and please see a message from her below:

“I am really excited to have joined Brymore Academy as the new Pastoral Manager and I can’t wait to start working with the students. What attracted me to Brymore was its excellent ethos and how it treats all its pupils and staff, as this is the most important thing to me in the workplace. I am also passionate about being able to support students on their schooling journey, with whatever they may need, whenever they may need it.

My background is in Wellbeing & Pastoral care, previously working in Further Education with students ranging from 16-19 years old. This experience will not only help me to support students at Brymore with their day to day practices, but also support them with their next steps, post 17. I love working with young people and hope to be able to raise the aspirations of all the students so they can go on to achieve their potential and become resilient to life’s challenges. I plan to mentor, support and inspire all the students, as well as building strong relationships with parents and of course, with my colleagues also.”

Staff have been busy completing another challenge in an attempt to keep the Brymore family spirit going. Please look out for an assembly with a difference on Facebook soon.

It is at times like this that I think the true colours of an individual, team or organisation come to the fore. The effort, determination, dedication and the incredibly long hours being put in by staff to support the boys is humbling and I am so thankful that I have such a great team of people I can rely on and trust. As parents you continue to work with us which makes everything so much easier as we work together to support the boys; and of course the boys themselves have been inspirational and it is so nice to see how hard many of them are working at home helping out around the house, completing projects or completing the work set.

I look forward to welcoming you all back soon hopefully in the not too distant future.

Please stay safe and take care.

Mark Thomas