

13.07.20

Dear pupils, parents and carers of Thomas Ashton School,

This is the hardest letter I have ever had to write. It is also my last letter that I will be writing to you. In this letter I want to:

- **give you some really important information about school and September**
- **say goodbye, and also say a huge thank you!**

As things stand right now, the government is insisting every pupil returns to school in September. Only a handful of children may not be able to return then, and that will be for health and safety reasons. And whilst we all accept that things could change in the next few weeks that might yet affect these plans, for now we are planning on a full return of pupils for the start of the new academic year, and you must be helping prepare your child by telling them that this is what will happen.

There will be a further letter from school during the holidays that will give you a lot more detail about what to expect and how school will run, but I wish to reassure you by saying, as much as possible, we want school to be as familiar as possible for our pupils, so there isn't anything that is going to be really, really different.

But there will be some changes, and whilst we know many of our children struggle with change, we are going to have to make some things different, so we will work with you to ensure your child is well prepared for their return.

Coronavirus hasn't gone away. At the moment the government thinks that if everyone continues to do the very basic things around:

- **hygiene** (washing hands, clothes and face coverings; wiping surfaces)
- and **social distancing** (keeping at least a metre apart where possible wherever we are and whoever we are with)

that this will help **reduce the spread of the virus**, and that life can get back to a 'new' normal sooner rather than later. So we must plan with these things in mind:



Start and end of the day

We will produce a plan for pupils arriving and leaving so that we don't have lots of people coming to school and leaving school all at the same time.

We will be working very closely with the taxi companies to get this plan to work for everyone who comes by taxi. Parents who drive their children to school will also have to follow the plan. Vehicles will be directed to park in a certain place and pupils will wait until they are invited into school. At home time, parents, carers and escorts remain in their cars and staff will bring the children out.

Communication with school

We cannot have the number of visitors coming into school that we used to have, and sadly, this includes parents and carers. However, that is not to say you can't, but as much as possible we need parents and carers to phone or email school (or a member of staff direct), and if necessary, an appointment can be made. We will be doing the same thing with other professionals and with other visitors to school.

Likewise, school will be contacting you in the same way. You will have experienced an increase in phone calls and emails from school already, and it is important that you help us by continuing to answer calls and emails to ensure good communication continues.

We also want you to continue using our website as a place to go for information or to ask for help. The website continues to grow and we have lots of ideas to make it even better, and we would love to have your ideas too!

What to wear and what to bring

Please check you have full uniform for your child and enough spare to be able to wash clothes regularly and ensure they come to school in uniform every day. It means you know what your child has worn to school, and you can keep this clothing separate from their other clothes.

We also ask that you think carefully about anything your child may want to bring to school. Unless it is sportswear, swimming kit, a packed lunch or something to keep them occupied on the taxi, children don't need to bring anything with them, as everything they need in class will be here as usual.

These are just two ways we can all help reduce the spread of the virus and protect others in school.

In school

You will have heard about schools working in ‘bubbles’ and we are the same. However, our bubbles will be very familiar to you. Each class works as a bubble, and each bubble sits within a bigger bubble, or zone (blue, red or yellow, except the current Y7 who will be Y8 next year but will still be upstairs!)

In class, life will be as ‘normal’ as possible, but we will be trying to ensure pupils and staff maintain a **social distance** between each other as much as we can. It will really help us if you can explain this to your child, so that it doesn’t cause confrontations in September. We understand that younger children will struggle, and we also understand that the needs of many of our children mean they need more frequent and closer contact than others, but we will still have to keep trying where we can. By reducing close contact, we reduce the risk of spreading the virus.

Breakfast club and lunch will continue to be taken in class as before, and children will be able to go outside, although there will a rota system in place to help us, so we will have to take it in turns.

The big difference will be the requirement for regular **hand washing**. Every room has hand washing and hand sanitising facilities and we will want to quickly get into a routine of when, and how, to wash hands.

We are all going to have to try extra hard to avoid or reduce situations which in the past may have led to a child going into crisis, having a ‘meltdown’ or becoming extremely angry and sometimes dangerous, leading to a situation where we have to hold a child for safety or move them to a safer place.

There is lots of talk about ‘rebuilding better’ as we create our ‘new’ normal, and this is an area we would love to see change for the better. We are working on a new system called **the ‘Thrive Approach’**, and I know Mr Doyle will tell you a lot more about over the coming weeks.

Getting back into a school routine

There are concerns about how much children may have missed with their learning, and there may be a temptation to try to make sure children ‘catch up’ as quickly as possible.

Whilst we will be delivering our usual curriculum, I can reassure you that we will be working with children at the point their learning is at, and getting children back into the habit of learning and enjoying being back at school and helping address any anxieties in the first instance, and not pressurising to make up for lost time. This will come naturally as children

get back into their school routines, and we already use interventions as part of individual learning programmes anyway, so things won't look or feel any different for your children, other than building on our use of Google Classroom and other online learning sites to help make learning more fun and accessible for everyone!

There will be an update to this letter later in the summer holidays, to help you prepare more for September, including confirmation of start dates and times, group names, staffing and so on.

If you have any questions or worries or anything you would like to share or need to share, please do not hesitate to email school, or an individual member of staff. It is really important you feel listened to, and at this time there is no such thing as a 'wrong or silly' question. We have all had to deal with feelings of anxiety and worry, and knowing the facts from the gossip or the fiction can make a huge difference to how we feel, what we say and what we do. Please ask!

And so..... it is time for me to say goodbye. I didn't want to make this letter too long, so I just want to take a moment to say a really big thank-you to you all, parents and pupils, for being such an important part of my life.

I have been so incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to be of service to you and your children (and yes, believe it or not, in some cases, to your grandparents!!!) over the past 36 years.

I spent 18 years as a teacher at Hyde High School (now Hyde Community College), and the last 18 years as headteacher of Dale Grove School, which became Thomas Ashton School in 2012.

I have so many fond memories and I will be forever grateful for the friendship and support parents and pupils have given me over the years. Thomas Ashton School is indeed a 'special' school in so many good and positive ways. School touches everybody in so many ways, and we all deserve to have the best experiences possible as our school days have so much influence on who and what we become as we grow into adulthood and beyond.

Mr Doyle will be the new headteacher in September, and he and the staff will continue to build on all the good things that are done here, and will continue to make it even better with your help.

We have all had to cope with the last four months as best we could. My biggest regret is not having the opportunity to see you all and to say a proper goodbye. I've missed you badly

and not being able to see you and to shake your hand and tell you how wonderful you are is a sad state, but in context there are far worse things that have happened.

So, we smile, because a smile changes everything – the way we look, the way we feel, the way we communicate, the way we think... and we feel grateful, for what we've had, for what we have and for what we can still yet have. We don't dwell in the past, but we look to the future. We aim high, we are honest and truthful, to ourselves first and foremost, as well as to others. We accept that mistakes are all part of the way we learn. We build our strength and our resilience to deal with life because change is a part of life, and coping with change means we can cope with life. And above all, we treat others as we would like to be treated – with respect, with dignity and with compassion.

I wish you all success and happiness!

Robin Elms