

Never look down on anybody unless you are helping him up. Jesse Jackson

Barley Lane School

Friendship, Optimism, Hardwork

20th May 2020

People,

The debate about wider school reopening is an increasingly bad tempered one and needs some attention: we cannot reopen because we never closed and we have cared for and educated our vulnerable children and those of keyworkers and there has always been a consensus between central and local government and unions and schools to do this.

We have worked collaboratively as a team in school to grow our capacity to do this safely and that hasn't and won't change and we have done so reasonably and practicably and safely through:

- Detailed, comprehensive and dynamic ongoing risk assessment of pupil "vulnerability".
- A significant reduction in pupil numbers that focuses on those most at risk.
- A skilled and experienced staff group fit for work in that wider sense the current context demands (we have chosen to come to work and can choose not to and those at risk stay at home)
- The flexible and pragmatic use of mentoring, outreach and outdoor education backed up by a committed and skilled team home-working providing high quality remote care and education.
- In school the reduction in pupil numbers and the strength and skill of the team has resulted in a calm and orderly community and the physical space and a prevailing good order and discipline that allow us to operate "safely"; for example social distancing and encapsulated small classes are all possible in a way we all recognize we could not achieve with high pupil numbers.

What was shared yesterday with parents and carers (reproduced below) is the best summary of where we are at that I can muster but my core point in all this is about the escalation of tension and dispute between central government and our unions and professional bodies and how it doesn't in practice impact us because we are just doing what we did from the off and there was and still is agreement about safely caring for the vulnerable and the children of keyworkers. I will not be increasing pupil numbers beyond what the team on the ground tells me and we agree is reliably safe using the model set out in the bullet points above: that said the emerging risk checklists and assessments for wider school opening in June will be tackled and applied because they are inarguably an invaluable tool to test and develop our own practice because we never closed...

Michael

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Dear Parents and Carers,

Thank you all for sharing with us this past week your feelings and aspirations and your worries and concerns as we continue not to “reopen” but in-step with government guidance for special schools “*work towards welcoming back as many children and young people **as can be safely catered for***” and in step too with Devon County Council, “*Special Schools will work with families individually to agree when it is safe for each pupil to return to school.*”

We must and will do this slowly and carefully and fairly but above all safely and any changes will be small and incremental and will involve rotas and will likely include some and limited offers of off-site mentoring and outreach and outdoor education as safe alternatives to being in school and those children happy and safe at home with you can stay at home; you have and we understand that choice.

It remains the case as I have shared with you throughout that there are pretty strict limits on how many children and young people we can “safely” accommodate at one time and that very few children will be at school all day, every day for some time yet and this because the school buildings and staffing levels and experience impact powerfully on how many children can safely come to school.

There is another key element in all this; the children who attend school albeit in smaller numbers and with skilled and assertive support must still be able to behave safely: to observe social distancing; to wash their hands; to move about the school safely; to stay in their dedicated groups; to reliably do the reasonable and safe things their teachers tell them.

Since I wrote to you the unions and professional bodies who represent all of us here have made very clear their profound concerns about the wider reopening of schools and there is now an unresolved tension between supporting children and families and protecting the economy by increasing pupil numbers in schools and doing so reliably safely for everyone who comes to school.

There is still common ground here for our extended school community if together in a positive and pragmatic spirit, home and school, we all “*work towards welcoming back as many children and young people as can be safely catered for*” but that will not always be easy and in truth not always possible

Yours sincerely,

Michael MacCourt