



Orchard and Shepherdswell
Academy
Together we will achieve

24th March 2020

Dear Parents/Carers,

Coronavirus update following school closure to most pupils

I do hope that this letter finds your family safe and well. Please forgive me for not writing to you at the end of last week – you will appreciate it was a very busy, stressful and emotional time for all of us.

As you know, last Wednesday we were instructed by the government to close the school to as many children as possible from yesterday (Monday 23rd March). **School is now closed to most pupils until further notice.** It was heartbreaking walking into the hall these past couple of mornings and being greeted with an empty space where usually there would be at least twenty smiling faces saying good morning whilst eating their breakfast. It is going to be very hard to get used to this in the near future. As per our previous letters, the Whitemoor Lakes residential trip for Year 3 has been cancelled and the Year 4 residential trip to the Frank Chapman Centre has been rescheduled to the Autumn Term.

Something which has made me exceptionally proud to be Orchard's Headteacher in these past few weeks has been the calm and purposeful manner in which our school has continued about its business of delivering an education to your children. Despite the anxiety, disruption and tension all across the country, until Thursday Orchard had a 'business as usual' feel. Even on Thursday and Friday, the few children that were here reacted amazingly. I imagine it was a bit scary for the children coming to school not knowing why many of their friends were at home, but despite this they conducted themselves wonderfully.

I need to say a big **thank you** to all of you for being so patient and understanding with me and my colleagues last week. It was a very stressful situation but many of you were really kind to us – even when we were having to give you information very last-minute. I can't tell you how much that meant to all of us. Whether it has been nice messages on Facebook, leaving donuts for the staff, keeping us supplied with biscuits and coffee, you have been great and we've greatly appreciated it.

I also need to say a huge thank you to all my colleagues. They remained calm, pulled together and got through a very difficult time last week. There were so many small acts of kindness that brought smiles to faces when many of us were devastated about the situation unfolding before us. They were calm and reassuring to our children even when they were very worried about vulnerable people in their own families. Some colleagues even came to work despite being in a vulnerable group themselves because they knew we were short-staffed! Of course, we sent them home to keep them safe without giving them a choice on the matter. All this just demonstrates how committed our staff are to your children and I thank them for it.

We have been determined to open this week for the children of key workers who might be going to work doing vital jobs to keep our country going through this crisis. We appreciate the hard work you are doing and we want to be here to 'do our bit' to support you at this time. We are also supporting our families of vulnerable children and those who would normally be entitled to free school meals. For everyone's safety we are running a 'skeleton staff,' with no more than 12 of us in school at one time. I have devised a rota to reduce the risk of everyone suddenly becoming ill and needing to self-isolate. This, in turn, hopefully reduces the risk of us needing to close

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fully due to a lack of staff in the coming weeks. There will always be at least two or three teachers at school (depending on the numbers of pupils) as well as at least one senior leader who is a trained Safeguarding Lead.

I now want to address some of the outstanding issues that you and your children will likely be asking about. I don't have all the answers, but here are my thoughts.

Year 6

Lots of our Year 6 pupils are likely to have a lot of questions. The first one may be, "Will we ever come back to Orchard?" The Prime Minister last week told the nation that schools would be closed 'until further notice.' This means we do not yet know when they will reopen again. We hope it will be soon but we simply don't know when.

You may be aware that **Year 6 will not take their SATs this year**. Whilst I know there are lots of children who will be happy about this, some may be disappointed as they have worked really hard to prepare themselves for them. To those children I would say – do not worry; your hard work will definitely pay-off as you go through the next few years.

Some pupils have already asked me if they will need to re-sit the whole of Year 6. The answer to this is definitely **no**. Year 6 pupils will go to secondary school as planned. Some have asked what will happen about things such as 'leavers shirts' and our Leavers' Celebration Assembly / Disco. The honest answer is 'I don't know' yet, since we don't know when schools will re-open. However, if school does not open again before September you have my assurance that we will do **all we can** to give you a proper goodbye, even if this is much later in the year after the coronavirus outbreak is brought under control. We are not yet sure what will happen with the residential trip to the Isle of Wight. Though it has not yet been cancelled, at this stage it is sadly unlikely to go ahead (unless schools reopen before then).

Home Learning

I'm really proud that by Wednesday last week, we already had a range of activities on our school website for children in each year group to access from home. This was even before the government had announced national school closures. I'm sure you will join me in thanking the teachers that put this work together and posted it online in such a short space of time. You can find this work by going to our website (www.orchard.emat.uk) and looking for the 'Home Learning Activities During the Coronavirus Outbreak' tab on the sidebar menu. This work will be updated as the week goes on.

Timetables

Some schools have been issuing timetables for home learning. I am personally not sure this is a great idea as every family will be different in their ability to stick to these. In some cases, it may simply be impossible to stick to rigid timetables and may cause unnecessary stress! This said, consistency and routines will be very important so it may be worth drawing-up your own 'family timetable.'

Breaks and rewards will be very important. Three hours of quality focused learning over a day is going to be a lot better for everyone than six hours of negativity!

Teaching

Following the Prime Minister's announcement last night that everyone should stay at home unless necessary, we want you to support your child with their home education. We appreciate that nearly all of you are not teachers. Don't expect to be able to teach for six hours a day like we would do at school. You will be dealing with lots of

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other demands and priorities, so please don't put yourselves under undue pressure as this will negatively impact on everyone's mood in the house.

Of course, your children will need support and this will vary depending on the age, needs and personality of your child. You are not alone – parents up and down the country are in the same position and there is a lot of help, advice and guidance out there. We aim to support you as best as possible through our website.

The ideas and activities we have posted are starting points. Please encourage children to follow their interests and see learning in the broadest terms. If they are stuck and really can't access an activity, encourage them to move on to something that they can do. If in doubt, lots of practice of the 'basics' will be really helpful in the long term. Times tables, arithmetic practice, creative writing, spelling and reading are the key areas to focus on. Where possible, ask your children to read something (an article, short story, news report) and then ask them questions about it to see how well they've understood. Just reading stories with them / to them is also a great thing to do.

Support

We have requested that two new emails be set up for parents to contact with any questions they may have about home learning. Keep an eye on the 'Home Learning Activities During the Coronavirus Outbreak' pages on our website. If we can get these addresses set up, they will appear on here. For the time being, some of you have been messaging the school Facebook page with questions about home learning. This is absolutely fine and I am trying to give more staff access to the page so that we can answer your questions as quickly as possible.

Please take care of yourselves. Everyone at Orchard sends their very best wishes to all of our families and we hope your family are safe and well at this time.

Mr. C. Brown
Headteacher

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