



St. Anthony's

SPECIALIST SCHOOL ●●●

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Dear Parents/Carers

Happy New Year!

With the government announcing at very short notice this week that schools will be closed this term to limit contacts and help reduce the spread of Coronavirus, Special schools are exempt and are not to be closed but to remain open as normal. The guidance from the DfE that the school has been given to work and plan from, arrives either at the last minute but then has not been at all helpful as it contradicts itself.

We have been in talks with local authority officers and the Leader of KCC, but we require action on a national level to help untie our hands and better serve the young people and their families in the St Anthony's School Community.

Our key issues can be summarised as follows

- Pupil attendance - definitions of 'vulnerable' include the blanket statement that all students with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are classed as vulnerable. This means that the sound bite that 'schools are closed' is not true in our case. We remain open to all. But I do hope you understand the pressure this puts on staffing and organisation. We would wish to have a revision to read 'most vulnerable' with a definition that has regard for pupil's needs rather than their 'label' as SEN, by virtue of their EHCP. I do wish to support those parents that wish to keep their children at home but it appears that as of next week all our pupils are expected to be in school. Therefore, we would not provide remote learning or FSM to them.
- Online learning – If teachers are in school providing face to face teaching they will not be able to easily provide online learning as well, there is no advice provided on how we overcome this. The other challenge is that our students cannot independently access 3-5 hours of daily online learning if we are able to provide it, as we work on an individual basis to provide appropriate learning for all our students. If you have concerns or worries around this, please do contact me and I will help to sort any issues.
- Staff vaccination – Where our staff are still engaged in face to face teaching and learning with students, and where that teaching and learning requires a good deal of close contact, as it does in our schools, there needs to be a prioritisation of special school staff for vaccination. Clearly this needs to follow NHS frontline workers, but we are hearing of office based NHS staff and social care staff being given priority access when our teams are left unacceptably vulnerable.

We used the training days on Monday and Tuesday this week to set up a COVID asymptomatic testing centre in school for staff and pupils. There has been lots of debate about the effectiveness of testing this way, but we see it as another tool to provide reassurance to the school community, alongside continued vigilance with hand washing, social distancing and bubbles. Setting up the testing involved training a team of school staff to understand the 'whys and how's' via online learning and assessments. Staff were all tested on Tuesday, with pupils being tested on Thursday and Friday. I am pleased to report that all tests have been negative so far.



Staffing trained to test pupils and staff.

Though I do worry that it is only a matter of time, I am afraid, before we have serious staff illness as a consequence of transmission in school. That is a heavy burden for any special school leader as it seems that specialist settings have been left to make it up as we go along.

The culmination of these issues – when seen together – places St Anthony's in conflict with the 'stay at home' message and forces me to bring all staff and pupils into a single environment. If we were any other form of organisation, we would be closed down under current rules, and ultimately places the most vulnerable youngsters in even greater danger of catching and transmitting the disease. We are, apparently, the acceptable face of the "vector of transmission", or put another way, we appear to be the acceptable collateral damage in this pandemic.

Because of all this uncertainty, we cannot outline a definitive plan for the rest of Term 3. All we can do is communicate arrangements to you on a weekly basis and ask you to show the patience and understanding you have always done in supporting us. I wish to reassure you of our commitment to serve all members of the St Anthony's community. If you have any concerns or issues, please contact me, and I will do all I can to support.

Headteacher