

Dear Parents and Carers

I am writing to you to update you regarding the latest developments in school.

You will be aware, some of you directly through the experiences of your sons and daughters, that we have had to send year groups home to self-isolate during the course of this half term. Sadly, our largest contact group, the Sixth Form, has had to be sent home twice.

Please note that there has been no general outbreak of Covid at the school. We have had a handful of cases at the school but all have been brought into the school through community transmission. This is further evidenced by the fact that, as I write, there have been no confirmed positive cases amongst pupils who shared a contact group with the pupils who caught the virus in the community.

However, on the strength of these isolated incidents, hundreds of pupils have had their education interrupted.

I need to make a few things clear here:

- The school does not make the decision on which pupils have to be sent home. This decision is made by Test, Trace, Protect (TTP)
- The school has closely followed public health guidance throughout this pandemic and will continue to do so
- The school has followed local and national guidelines in establishing contact groups. This is common to all Swansea schools, although our contact groups are inevitably larger because we are the largest school in Swansea
- When contacted by TTP, the school has tried to give information which might 'narrow' the contact group and result in less pupils being sent home. However, the decision has been made by TTP that all pupils in the contact group should remain at home. This is in line with the approach adopted by TTP locally with other Swansea schools, although not in line with the approach taken in some other Welsh authorities (I will return to this later, as it is a matter of real concern to us here at the school)

We are experiencing relatively high levels of inquiry about the school's response to these self-isolation decisions, although I am told by the local authority that we are experiencing a lower level of inquiry, typically, than other schools.

Whilst I fully understand your frustration and anxiety, I need to say that not all of these inquiries are helpful at this time. There are many things that are completely outside the school's control, including the course of the virus itself. We cannot act in ways that are contrary to public health advice, whatever the individual level of frustration, and we will not do so.

However, I will attempt here to answer some of the most frequent questions we have been asked and explain the public health constraints and advice within which we have to operate in relation to them:

'Why can't you narrow the contact groups so that fewer pupils are sent home?'

Pupils are kept apart from pupils in other year groups throughout the school day. Class lists are kept so that we can establish who sat next or near to a pupil who subsequently tests positive. We cannot keep pupils within the contact groups apart during their break and lunch times. We can only ensure that they do not mix with pupils from other contact groups. Pupils in Key Stage 4 and above mix, up to a point, with other pupils in their contact groups as a result of their subject choices in the way I have described to you in previous communications. Thus, it becomes almost impossible to ensure that any one pupil in a contact group is kept apart from another pupil in the same group.

*Pupils in the contact groups are **not** socially distanced from each other by the 2 metre rule. This is because, as I have told you before, if 2 metre distancing were observed between pupils, the school would only be able physically to accommodate around 20% of its pupils at any one time, resulting in one day of schooling per week for each pupil. **This is a national policy, not an Olchfa one.***

However, teachers always observe the 2 metre rule, distancing themselves from pupils and other adults. The only times when this is not observed are when teachers are in transit from one location to another (during which time face masks are always worn), or when they only come momentarily within 2 metres, such as passing a pupil whilst on duty in one of the school yards etc.. This is in line with national advice which says that passing someone in a corridor or elsewhere, briefly, whilst wearing a face covering, poses minimal risk.

'But I've heard that in other part of Wales, only parts of year groups have been sent home'

In short, I have as well, and it has worried and concerned me. As well as being headteacher here at Olchfa, I am also the current President of the Association of School and College Leaders in Wales (ASCL). As such, I have a very clear understanding of the picture across the country. I also have a wide network of professional contacts, including many headteachers across Wales and officials in Welsh Government.

It has become an area of real concern to ASCL that TTP seems to be operating differently in different parts of Wales. This is not only confusing but, especially in relation to examination year groups, unfair. As an organisation, we are pursuing this with Welsh Government vigorously. As a school, we have also drawn it to the attention of the local authority.

I offer no comment as to which approach is 'best'; the cautious approach (such as the one being taken here in Swansea) or the riskier approach (being taken elsewhere) which tries to narrow the contact group by asking pupils questions such as who they recall sitting near at lunch, how long they chatted to another pupil, for how long and at what distance etc. What I will say, however, is that there should be a clear national approach for all.

'Why don't you inform us if a teacher or other member of staff has to self-isolate?'

Teachers and other staff self-isolate for a number of reasons. These reasons will be exactly the same reasons that apply to you as parents and in your jobs. These will include things like:

- A family member becomes symptomatic (in which case they remain off school until that member of their family receives a negative test result)
- A family member tests positive for Covid 19
- They receive a letter from TTP, via NHS Wales, telling them to self-isolate
- They exhibit one of the three main Covid symptoms (high temperature, continuous cough, or loss of taste and/or smell)
- They test positive themselves

All of these things have happened here this term, although not to a huge degree yet.

We cannot inform parents of all these developments. It would not be appropriate and it is contrary to guidance.

At any rate, **teachers pose no risk to pupils** as social distancing between them is always strictly observed. I say 'no risk' here advisedly. We all have our private reservations about 'the science' and I am not convinced, personally, that 2 metres is anything other than a fairly arbitrary figure arrived at by government. However, we are where we are on this. We don't make the rules, we just have to play by them.

Towards the start of this letter I referred to the level of inquiry we are receiving at this time. These inquiries sometimes tip over into complaints and a very small number become rather unpleasant.

I find these isolated examples very disappointing. Teachers at this school have worked exceptionally hard throughout this crisis to educate your sons and daughters and to keep them as safe as possible. **Teachers and school staff are key workers.** And what is the key work that they do? They educate children, not just because children need to be educated, but also so that their parents and carers can continue to go to work.

Let's take another key worker; a nurse. Should a nurse spend two or three hours a day answering emails from patients who have already been given an answer to a query, or should he or she attend to the patients on the ward? I think we all know the answer to that question. And so, I have to say to you that our ability to respond to every inquiry, particularly when the inquiry is repeated and our answer not accepted, is more limited at this time than ever before. Teachers and support staff are at full stretch and I owe them a duty of care, which I take very seriously.

Please do not be offended if we are unable to respond to you as quickly and in as much detail as we would normally be able to do. Please understand that we will stop replying at all if you keep on asking us the same question but do not like the answer that we give. Please understand that, if you get a response from us that refers to public advice and guidance that we have followed, you need to read the guidance and advice and accept that we are bound by it before offering negative comment. **If you disagree with the public health advice, contact your local AMs, MPs or health boards.** They are the only ones who can change things.

As I write, we are on the cusp of a changing national strategy. A national lockdown, or 'circuit breaker', seems imminent and schooling may change as a result moving forward. I will inform you of this as soon as the details become clear.

Finally, as always, I hope this letter finds you safe and well. I am sorry if some of what I have said is not what you wanted to hear. I have always tried to be honest with you and I am not about to stop now. You need to know the constraints we operate under and that we are following public health advice meticulously. You also need to know, with respect, that (for a very small number of parents) venting totally understandable frustration, either on the school generally or on members of its staff individually, is unhelpful and upsetting at a time when we are all trying so hard to keep everything afloat.

Sincerely



Hugh Davies

Headteacher