

17<sup>th</sup> July 2020

To: All employees of Reach South Academy Trust  
Subject: COVID-19 2019-nCoV, Coronavirus

Dear Colleagues,

In this communication, I want to share with you the two national tensions, which are impacting on the lives of our pupils and their families, which we are having to balance in our planning for the opening of schools in September. Those two tensions are the negative impacts of long-term absence from school; and the risks of Covid-19 infection. We need to get all of our pupils back to school. However, we need to change how we organise our schools and our working practices, to keep our pupils and ourselves as safe as we can while the Covid-19 pandemic continues.

We are approaching the end of the most exceptional of academic years. The education sector has stepped up magnificently to the challenges that we have been asked to respond to as the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the United Kingdom. Team Reach South has been exemplary in the selfless commitment that you have all shown in doing whatever it took to minimise the impact on our pupils and do our bit to help protect our wider society. Thank you.

I know that we are all looking forward to seeing our pupils again and to start the processes of re-engaging children to the safe and structured environment that you all provide in our schools. As we do this though it is important to reflect on the two conflicting tensions that will define how we live and work in September: the impact on the wellbeing and welfare of our pupils and their families, of prolonged absence from school; and the impact on the wellbeing and welfare of all of us, of an on-going Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Prolonged School Closure**

- Between 20<sup>th</sup> March and 1<sup>st</sup> June, only 4.5% of our pupils, on average, attended EduCare provision at school. Since 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 20% of our pupils, on average, have been attending school.
- 80% of our pupils have not attended school since 20<sup>th</sup> March. For these children, our virtual school offer has become their access to formal learning. The efforts made by so many of you to make this offer engaging and impactful has been superb. However, the engagement of pupils and families to virtual learning has been hugely variable, often due to circumstances beyond the control of the family. The gap, that is growing every day, between different pupils educational progress as well as the psychological impact on them of social lockdown, will have long-term impacts on the life chances and wellbeing of many of our pupils.
- Despite the excellent efforts of our team of Safeguarding Leads and Class Teachers, that have strived to maintain contact with our most vulnerable pupils and encourage them to attend EduCare, we cannot safeguard those children as effectively as when we have visibility of them in school. Too many of our vulnerable children are at heightened risk of falling below our normal lines of sight, whilst they are not attending school.
- School closure for so many children also has a real impact on their wider family and society. Parents, particularly of younger pupils, are finding it difficult or impossible to

return to their own work whilst they have to stay at home and look after their children. The impact of national social lockdown on the economy is expected to cause several million UK citizens to be facing unemployment. The impact of this on childhood poverty levels and associated poor health outcomes, cannot be overstated. It has always been a part of our role, as educationalists, to mitigate the risks of childhood poverty on individuals and wider society, through education and raising aspiration.

Our starting point has to be to get pupils back to school where we can work to remove their barriers to learning and enable their families to secure and retain their own employment.

### **An On-Going Covid-19 Pandemic**

- Official estimates are that 5-7% of the UK population has been infected by Covid-19. In the South West of England, we have enjoyed the lowest infection rates in the country. One way that the pandemic can be brought to a close is that if most of us have had the virus, then there will not be enough people left to infect. That is what is called 'herd immunity'. That is estimated as requiring 70-90% of us to have had the infection. Clearly, we are nowhere near that being the case, or likely to be in the near future.
- The second way that this infection could be brought to an end, is the development of a safe and effective vaccine. This remains a possibility for some time after Christmas, though it is not guaranteed.
- The good news in these difficult times is that children infected with the virus rarely develop symptoms and even more rarely become very ill with this virus. It is not clear though whether children become infected at the same rate as adults or if they are as infectious when they do catch the virus. We must assume that they are as likely to be infected, though usually asymptotically, until there is good evidence to the contrary.

Without a vaccine or herd immunity, we need to expect to be adapting our working practices to operate as safely as we can for much of the next academic year. Plan for the worst and hope for the best.

### **Balancing the Two Tensions**

In balancing the two tensions of the negative impacts of prolonged school closures and an on-going infection risk, we come to the following conclusions:

1. It is essential for the life chances and wellbeing of all of our pupils, and their families and wider society, that we get all children back to school in September.
2. Our pupils will have had very different experiences during lockdown, and we need to address that in the development of our curriculum next term to help all children transition back to a safe and structured learning environment.
3. The virus and its risks will not have gone away in September. We will have to adapt how we organise our schools and how we work to protect our pupils and ourselves from the risk of infection.
4. We should plan to change how we organise and work for the foreseeable future, possibly the whole of the next academic year.

## Next Steps

In preparing for the full opening of our academies we are taking the same rigorous risk assessment approach that we took for the wider opening in June. The Trust has published new guidance for the management of our schools and the management of infection controls:

[https://d82e36a5-67ec-4b94-9607-90a3d36c742f.filesusr.com/ugd/28e76f\\_018e3ddf263043f9a01c28fa1ba7fb3f.pdf](https://d82e36a5-67ec-4b94-9607-90a3d36c742f.filesusr.com/ugd/28e76f_018e3ddf263043f9a01c28fa1ba7fb3f.pdf)

I would ask that every member of staff reads and becomes familiar with this guidance. The guidance covers all of the key requirements on the creation of 'bubbles', infection controls and hygiene controls.

We are now completing the risk assessments to identify and implement the additional control measures required to comply with the DfE (Department for Education), PHE (Public Health England) and our own guidance. The DfE and PHE guidance was issued on 2<sup>nd</sup> July and can be read at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings>

Our risk assessments are quality reviewed by our qualified and independent experts, GS Musson and Associates. Only when all of the control measures are in place will each academy be certified for full opening in September. The certification for full opening will be signed by the Headteacher, the Director of the Learning Environment and myself to confirm that all of the necessary arrangements are in place. No academy will be allowed to open fully without this certification. We will be sharing our process and risk assessments with the relevant Trade Union officials.

National guidance on school workforce is that where schools apply the full measures detailed in the 'Guidance for full opening: Schools', the risks to all staff will be mitigated significantly, including those who are extremely clinically vulnerable and clinically vulnerable (this includes staff who are pregnant). We expect this will allow most staff to return to the workplace. An assessment process will be implemented to assess those in the most at-risk category with a view to making the necessary adjustments to enable them to return to the workplace in September 2020. For any member of staff who is particularly concerned about returning to the workplace in September, please speak to your Headteacher and an assessment will be undertaken as to the need for additional measures by the academy along with the HR and Health and Safety teams.

We will continue to monitor changing government guidance over the summer holiday period as well any changes in rates of infection nationally or locally. If necessary, we will review the position in the second half of August. If there are any changes to our plans I will write to all staff in August.

Finally, every one of us needs to constantly remember that Covid-19 is still with us. Both in our professional and personal lives we need to obsessively maintain the precautions to mitigate the risk of each of us catching the virus and spreading the virus.

With very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Ashton'.

Dean Ashton  
Chief Executive Officer