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ROYAL ALEXANDRA & ALBERT SCHOOL



16th October 2020

Dear Parent,

Well, it has been quite a different half term!

Firstly, can I thank you for all of your support during these challenging times. The staff and pupils have been excellent in the way that they have worked with the new arrangements, both with the school day and the extended day but it has been very helpful having your understanding and support during this time.

As you know, we have needed to have boarders in isolation in their houses a number of times over the course of the half-term with symptoms and tests being taken. We have been fortunate enough not to have any positive cases for anyone living on site so far since re-opening in September, although we have had one flexi-boarder who has tested positive in Year 11. Thankfully, because of our arrangements, we were able to allow the vast majority of Year 11 to continue to attend school during the 14-day isolation period. Only forty pupils needed to isolate and stay away from school or to stay within the boarding house. Public Health England have been full of praise for our arrangements both in school and in boarding in our discussions with them over isolation.

The boarders have been particularly resilient. I would like at this point to pay credit to them but also to the boarding staff who have supported them fantastically. It is at a time like this when we are particularly thankful of living in extensive grounds with 260 acres. It has meant, for example, that the isolating boarders can have daily activity of a walk around one of the lakes and to do so in a controlled and safe way. In fact, I would say that Gatton Park has been a particular blessing to us in general in these restricted times – we have a very large private garden that we can use for our boarding community.

Remote learning is going very well indeed and my thanks goes to the teaching staff for this. Of course, there have been some teething problems and technical issues both at school and at home. I am thankful for the perseverance of everyone as we refined it as a method of teaching over the course of the half-term. Just this week I taught my Year 11 Maths class with only two pupils in the classroom with me. Another twelve were logged in and watching the lesson via the internet, either in a boarding house or at home and a number were engaging in the lesson and offering answers to questions over the internet. Of course, when a couple tried to “convince” me that their microphones were not working when asked a question, I was left wondering if this was a new clever ploy to avoid work. It is a reminder that with new systems there will also be new tricks that we as teachers will need to wise up to, but also a comfort that when everything changes, nothing really does at the same time! (*plus ça change* as the French say)

The Extended Day Programme for flexi-boarders has been well populated with many pupils still very engaged in the co-curriculum activities throughout the week. In the evenings and weekends, boarders have been taking part in a range of activities in their house groups. The move to vertical boarding with each house having a larger range of ages has gone very well indeed, helped in fact by the COVID arrangements of being together more to eat as a house or do activities as a house. We seem to have stronger house spirit in evidence amongst the boarding houses this term, which is perhaps partly as a result of the challenges. The houses certainly feel like stronger family units.

As you may well know, the Government have now introduced three tiers of restrictions for areas in England: Tier 1 for Medium-Level-Alert, which is the default and also the current designation for the School's area of the country. Tier 2 for High-Level-Alert, which London is now in, and of course there will be a number of pupils commuting from there as flexi-boarders. Lastly, Tier 3, which is Very-High-Level-Alert. Some of our boarders do live in Tier 3 areas.

Please see the link below for current details on the tiering and what this means:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-covid-alert-levels-what-you-need-to-know#contents>

Travel to and from Tier 2 and Tier 3 level areas for necessary travel such as half-term travel to home and back is allowed. A number of parents have asked about this and we consider this to be okay but care should be taken particularly for Tier 3 areas. As before, pupils should only return to school or to boarding if no one in their household has symptoms.

We are planning to re-open flexi-boarding nights in the boarding houses for flexi-boarders. We will be putting systems in place to make this as safe as we can and will be communicating these to you, along with information as to when they can start, and how to book. Given the announcements that London is in Tier 2 and that Elmbridge in Surrey is in Tier 2, it would not seem right to allow the flexi-boarding nights quite yet because Tier 2 includes restrictions on households mixing, which of course having flexi-boarders staying overnight would be. We will review this after half-term and consider a possible start date but I want to be more confident that the School's local geographical area is in Tier 1 in a sustained way before we re-start this provision.

To end on a couple of positive notes: the School is in a position of strength in terms of popularity this year. Firstly, for the second year running we are Surrey's most sought-after Secondary School for local pupils. Secondly, we have, for the first time in the School's history, surpassed the 500-mark for the number of boarders in the School. This has come about mainly because of growth in the demand for Sixth Form places, and this growth has meant that we can offer an even broader range of courses in the Sixth Form, which is great news for all. Please see the relevant press releases below about these pieces of news:

RAAS is Surrey's most sought-after Secondary School for the second year in a row:

http://www.raa-school.co.uk/press_release.asp?id=508

RAAS joins the "500 boarder club":

http://www.raa-school.co.uk/press_release.asp?id=509

My best wishes for a good half-term break.

Yours sincerely



Mark Dixon
Headmaster