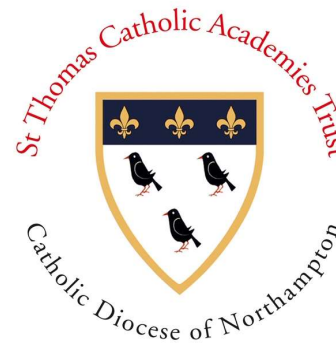


15 May 2020



RE-OPENING OF SCHOOLS IN THE ST THOMAS CATHOLIC ACADEMIES TRUST

“The glory of God is
a human being fully alive!”

Dear Parents and Carers

As the Strategic Executive Leader of the St Thomas Catholic Academies Trust, I find myself writing to you for the first time in very unusual circumstances. In this letter I will begin to outline how school leaders across our Trust are working to respond to the challenges that face schools up and down the country.

First, let me extend my sincere best wishes to each family in our Trust. The last few months have been incredibly difficult for too many and I know that sadness has touched families directly linked to our schools. Where this has been the case, I extend my sincere sympathies and my prayers.

Second, let me be clear that our schools have been open, whether physically or online, throughout the pandemic and I applaud all that has been done to provide education to children across our Trust since the lockdown was announced. Our Headteachers are still working on ways to improve this provision as we prepare for extended remote learning to be part of what is being described as the ‘new normal’. I particularly wish to thank every member of staff who made it possible for schools to provide a place of support to key workers, to children with Education Health Care Plans and to vulnerable children where this has been required.



On Sunday 10th May the Prime Minister unveiled the government’s plan to release the country from lockdown in stages. This announcement was a high-level summary and contained little detail. Since then, the Department for Education has released a series of papers and guidance notes to assist schools as they consider how to welcome students back to school from Monday 1st June - that guidance remains incomplete.

Ahead of this announcement the Headteachers and senior leaders of the St Thomas Catholic Academies Trust began work on plans to bring students back to school in a way that was safe as possible for students and staff alike. This work is not straight forward and is subject to constant change as we learn more about the coronavirus, especially the risk of infection to young people and adults in school settings. Much has been made of the fact that the virus does not impact on children as much as adults, but it would be wrong to be complacent about the risk to children and wrong to ignore the adults in our schools who are in no way less likely to be affected by the virus. The Headteachers and Trust leaders are going to proceed with an abundance of caution.

In the weeks ahead we have a number of tasks to work through as we seek to organise our schools in ways that will significantly reduce the risk to students and staff. You may wish to read the guidance schools have been issued as it will answer a number of questions you may have about issues such as face masks, PPE and social distancing in schools - you can find this guidance at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/details-on-phased-wider-opening-of-schools-colleges-and-nurseries>.

On the 28th May the government is set to review the scientific evidence around the pandemic - in particular, the rate at which the virus is spreading. No final decision will be made with respect to the opening of our

schools until that review has taken place – we will plan for a return but will only confirm our decision if it is responsible to do so.

Over the course of the next two weeks each school's Headteacher will write to you to explain the stages each school will go through as we welcome most students from Reception, Year 1, Year 6, Year 10 and Year 12 back to school. All schools are going to hold an INSET day as staff will need to learn the new procedures that must be followed to keep students and staff safe. School leaders will inform parents and carers of the details of these INSET days in due course – the Trust has approved provision of an INSET day on Monday 1st June in Primary schools if school leaders determine this is required, including at short notice if there are substantial changes to government guidance over the half term break.

Will all schools return on the same date and make the same provision?

Parents and Carers should be aware that not all schools will return in the same way. Some schools will have more staff affected by 'shielding' advice, meaning those staff cannot return to school. Some schools have larger classrooms, making social distancing with larger groups more achievable. It is almost certain that all children will have different teachers for at least part of their school day and there will be an increase in the time children spend working with teaching assistants.

Schools will need to operate staggered start and finish to the school day. In addition, schools will not be opening their canteens in the normal way as a hot meal provision is not logistically possible in any of our schools currently, only providing a packed lunch to those entitled to a free school meal.

I share all these points to illustrate the fact that when children do return, it will not be to school as normal. While we are adapting to these challenges and new ways of working, we are going to need your support and patience.

There are several other key points to bring to your attention:

Key worker children, children with an Education Health Care Plan and children with social care support:

We do understand that as school staff and others return to work there will be an increase in demand for places for the children of key workers from all year groups. In addition, all students in all year groups who have an Education Health Care Plan and those children with some form of social care support should all return to school unless there is a medical need that prevents them from doing so.

Will all children in eligible year groups be able to return to school?

Not all children will be able to return to school after half term. Some children who are classed as medically vulnerable or medically extremely vulnerable will not be able to return to school as no school will be able to guarantee the stringent social distancing that is required. In addition, it would not be appropriate for children who live with someone who is in the category 'medically extremely vulnerable' to return to school – these are the people who will have received a letter from the NHS identifying the need to shield at the start of the lockdown.

Schools will continue to set work to be completed remotely for children who are unable to return.

Working with you:

Some children, parents and carers will have some anxiety over the proposed return to school. Where this is the case we are looking to work with families and children over time to build confidence so that a return to

school is possible. We will be supportive, but our goal will be that ultimately all children return as absence from school will cause significant long-term damage to any child's education.

Social distancing, face coverings and PPE:

It is important that everyone in positions of trust and authority is honest about what lies ahead. So, let me be honest and recognise that strict social distancing in schools in the way that we have been advised for some time is simply not possible. We can reduce class sizes and take steps to significantly reduce the risk of infection and each school will publish the steps it will take to do so, but schools cannot meet the standards that are set out for most workplaces and the government guidance does not require them to do so. It is surely our shared wish that by the time we come to return, the evidence of reduced infection is so strong that we are more comfortable with the difference in standards being applied to schools when compared to other places of work.

The advice around PPE and face coverings is similar. Currently, the advice is that there is no general need for PPE or the wearing of masks set out in the guidance from the Department for Education. This is most likely reflects the fact that in most classrooms we can open windows and generate a throughflow of fresh air that is not possible in many offices or shops. Moreover, in a classroom we are not in the same close proximity as people using public transport where there is now advice that face coverings would be beneficial. That said, it will be impossible to socially distance from nursery, Reception and Year 1 children in many circumstances and we should not pretend that this is something that is possible.

How can you help?

Your school will have contacted you to complete a survey to establish whether or not you intend to send your child back to school when we open to more students – or will do so shortly if they have not done so already. It is vitally important that you complete this survey and that if you change your mind that you inform the school as soon as possible.

Looking ahead:

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and my apologies for the fact it is so long. Your child's school is working hard to pull together the specific details of re-opening and these will follow in the days and weeks ahead from the Headteacher of the school. As I said before, it is important that schools take the time they need to get this right, so please be patient ahead of announcements from your child's school.

Finally, I have really enjoyed seeing the work of a huge number of children shared on the social media accounts of each of the schools. It is important that the children know that this work is valued even though we are not there to say it in person. We pray that we are all together soon to celebrate the things that we achieve as we build the kingdom of God in this place.

St Thomas, Pray For Us.

Sincerely

Joe Richardson

Joe Richardson

Strategic Executive Leader, St Thomas Catholic Academies Trust