



Blackfen School for Girls

Raising aspirations - releasing potential

Headteacher Matthew Brown BA(Hons) DMS(Ed)

Blackfen School for Girls,
Blackfen Road,
Sidcup, Kent.
DA15 9NU

T: 020 8303 1887

F: 020 8298 1656

E: admin@blackfen.bexley.sch.uk
www.blackfenschoolforgirls.co.uk

10th February 2021

Remote Teaching and Learning update: (2)

Dear Parents and Carers in Key Stage 3,

He got it right: *“And I’m particularly in awe of the way the parents, carers and guardians of children have risen to the unique challenges with which you have been faced”*.

(Boris Johnson, Prime Minister, 29.1.21, in an open letter to parents)

The ‘unique challenges’ of home learning are not always resolved by laptops, parenting websites or even face-to-face video lessons. On some days, as parents and teachers, getting home learning ‘right’ is better described as giving it our ‘best’ at this moment and preparing to do better, next time. After spending an afternoon answering your enquiries, I found myself listening to a parent who said about his daughter, “She just needs to be back in school”. How true. Home is not school.

Likewise, I also had a long conversation last week with an experienced colleague who is trying to teach ‘as normal’ on “Microsoft Teams”. We agreed that remote teaching presents its own ‘unique challenges’ because there isn’t a single device or digital platform or on-line program to replicate the teacher’s work in a classroom. ‘Teams’ does not feel ‘right’.

As leaders, we continue to follow advice on running the school remotely from a number of educational organisations, including the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). You may have noted the appointment last week of one of their ex-Directors, Sir Kevan Collins, as the government’s ‘Education recovery commissioner’. The EEF’s solid and reliable educational research is a tonic for frenzied media reporting, which can feel overwhelming. Please take time to read Appendix A: ‘Expectations of parents and carers’ in our Remote Learning Policy because it’s the part of home learning that we ask Key Stage 3 parents and carers to steer and it contains the EEF’s sensible and practical suggestions for dealing with the ‘unique challenges’ you face at home.

So – after half a term of remote learning, where do we go from here?

- Firstly, take a break during the February half term week. Remote learning is an intense experience for students and it intrudes on the way that the whole household functions.
- Secondly, take time out with your daughter to review what has worked well at home and what needs to change, after the half term break, in order to improve home learning. School leaders are doing a similar exercise, this week.
- Thirdly, take control of the ‘known knowns’. In 2002, it was the then US Secretary of State for Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, who coined the phrase about the ‘known knowns’, the ‘known unknowns’ and the ‘unknown unknowns’! Parents and carers are in charge of the ‘known knowns’ at home. The school asks Key Stage 3 parents and carers to support home *learning* by managing the home context because it is the job that you know best. We do not ask our parents to deliver home *schooling*: that is the job that teachers know best.
- Fourthly, take charge of Microsoft Teams. Ask your daughter to show you her version of ‘Teams’. Look inside the different subject folders; check the assignments set and note completion deadlines.

Some elements of learning, such as group work, cannot be reproduced easily by Microsoft Teams and are much missed by teachers and students, alike. The EEF has reported how peer discussion



motivates students, as well as deepens their understanding of subject knowledge. Teachers plan group work and peer discussion as an integral element of effective teaching. As we have all discovered, lonely learning does little to motivate students of any age.

So parents and carers' discussions with students at home are valued and much appreciated by teachers and are essential to students continuing to make good progress: parents and students scheduling lessons and breaks, together, at the beginning of the day and reviewing learning at the end of the day cannot be overrated. Testing memorisation of lesson content and asking questions about notes and completed tasks keeps students' skills of memorisation and mental processing sharp and clear. Daily conversations also maintain your child's mental and emotional good health, as the *Young Minds* charity recommended, when they launched their *#Take 20* initiative in 2017. Their website has been updated to help parents and teens keep talking during the pandemic and the tab labelled '*20 activities for 20 minutes*' is especially helpful: <https://youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/>.

Of course, there are actions to be taken by Key Stage 3 students, themselves. We expect all students to be dressed and ready to learn by 8.30 am. You may wish to review Appendix B: 'Expectations of students' in our Remote Learning Policy, with your daughter, which lets her see the particular responsibilities she is allocated during school closure.

Their teachers know that Year 7 and Year 8 students are learning how to sustain focus and concentration when working independently and without the immediate support of their peers. Independent study is often the most challenging level of learning because it requires students to activate and apply lesson content on their own. It is the struggle to do so which deepens understanding and embeds it in the long-term memory. Parents should not be tempted to provide quick answers, thereby reducing the level of challenge and thinking.

Likewise, Year 9 students should adopt the same disciplined mind-set in every subject, in order to build a secure and robust platform to support Key Stage 4 learning in September. Although they will select specific subjects to start in Year 10 as GCSE or BTEC qualifications, students must complete *every* task in *every* subject in their current timetable, to their best level of achievement. There is no subject in the Year 9 curriculum which does not contribute to their Key Stage 4 success. So it is the case that memorisation of foreign language grammar and vocabulary strengthens memorisation of GCSE and BTEC subject content for Year 11 public examinations; the construction of an argument for or against the actions taken in historical events is the same thinking and reasoning skill-set required for predicting and justifying the outcomes of an experiment in GCSE Science.

The Contact names and emails listed in the Remote Learning Policy Appendices also let you know that Blackfen School is still open *remotely*. We are still here for you and working with you as leaders, teachers and support staff. The 'unique challenges' of remote education are finally being recognised and discussed more openly and we thank parents and carers for their support, thus far. Please do not hesitate to request our support in return and, although we may not always get it 'right', first time, we will continue to strive to do our best for you.

Yours sincerely,



Miss F Minnis
Deputy Headteacher

