



Watford Grammar School for Boys

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Headmaster: Mr I Cooksey MA (Oxon) MA (Lond)

17th June, 2020

Dear Parents and Carers,

School is back, but not as we know it

It was a real treat to be able to start welcoming back more students into the school this week. There was an understandable sense of apprehension amongst some at the outset, but they have quickly got into the swing of things and they have adjusted well to the new expectations. We have been really pleased with the exceptionally high levels of attendance. The recent media reports of high absenteeism in re-opened schools has not been evident at Watford Boys this week; so far we have attendance rates in excess of 90% every day, with an average of just 4 student absences per day. This seems to suggest that the appetite for a return is there, which we never really doubted, and that parents and students have been sufficiently reassured by the safety measures in place. These measures are summarised in a video presentation which was made available to Year 10 and 12 parents last week. It has been suggested to me that parents of boys in other year groups may like to know what is going on at the school, so I have copied the link here for your interest: [Year 10 & Year 12 Return - video briefing](#)

Aside from the obvious benefit of providing some face-to-face time for students in Years 10 and 12, we have also been able to trial our systems and processes in readiness for accommodating more students. At present, we are constrained by government guidance, with a cap on student numbers. As a school, we have sought to bring back the maximum number of students across this period and from the first day that this was permissible. This should provide a measure of our intent to return all students to the classroom as soon as it is possible. I recognise that this may be of little comfort to students in Years 7 to 9, but do be assured that we are already confident that we can accommodate more students on site with social distancing in place as soon as the government eases the restrictions on secondary schools. We see little prospect of this happening before September.

In praise of: Students

Recent media reports have also highlighted significant disengagement amongst students nationally during the lockdown. Thankfully, at Watford Boys, most of our students have retained a good level of focus throughout this period in spite of the evident challenges and the demands on

their levels of self-motivation. Our tracking of student work submission suggests that only 15% of our boys have failed to submit work for 5 or more of their subjects and approximately half of the students have submitted every single piece of work for every single subject across the course of the first 7 weeks of lockdown learning. We have sent messages of congratulations home to these boys who are deserving of such praise and we have also been in touch with those with whom we have concerns. We will be completing another round of assessing engagement this week and form tutors will be following up with the boys in their tutor groups through the pastoral review days next week. We are hopeful that student engagement will be even higher in response to the diversified approaches to online learning being deployed by teachers during this half term.

On Monday of this week, the government changed its guidance to secondary schools once more, with the suggestion that we might be able to arrange for 'one-off' meetings with boys in year groups other than Years 10 and 12, although the overall cap on student numbers remains in place. Once we have a better understanding of this guidance, which has not been well-framed, we will explore the possibility of inviting students and their parents into school for a meeting if they have not been engaging with school work adequately. We will contact those parents separately as required. For most students, we are hopeful that the form tutor contact next week will be sufficient to keep them on track and motivated for the remainder of this term.

In praise of: Parents

As a parent myself, I have a good understanding of some of the anxieties, frustrations and challenges that 'lockdown learning' present. Trying to supervise children's school tasks whilst juggling work and domestic responsibilities has been demanding for many of us. Our children have also exposed the limits of our understanding of specialised curriculum content and, whilst learning about the American Civil War together might be interesting, it is certainly time-consuming. You have worked to keep your children on track and you have helped to nurture their love of learning. Collectively, parents have also been very supportive of the school's efforts during this time and for that I am very grateful indeed. At a time when the national discourse about schools seems to be plumbing new depths, the appreciative comments about the efforts of teachers at Watford Boys have been very welcome.

In praise of: Teachers and Support Staff

We are well-blessed with an extraordinarily professional and committed body of staff. The lockdown has taken its toll on everyone and presented significant challenges for all, including the staff at this school. At the start of the outbreak, some contracted the coronavirus infection, some have been bereaved and many have had to deal challenging personal circumstances. In spite of this, staff at this school have continued to provide resources and feedback to students and they have recently diversified their approaches to support greater engagement. Many of the staff at this school have been supporting the home-schooling of their own children during the day, whilst working through their evenings and the night to support their classes at WBGS. A significant

proportion have reported that their working hours are as long or longer than they would be under normal circumstances. Moreover, teachers are now spending more time on the activities that yield least satisfaction for them – preparing resources and marking, rather than interacting with young people in classrooms. Thankfully, we are now able to do this to some extent again and we are hopeful that a return to the classroom will be a possibility for all of us next term.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Cooksey'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Ian Cooksey