

24th November 2020

Dear Dame Glenys

I feel I must write again, having written to you in October to highlight the continued and worsening issues we are experiencing as a school in the North East of England. I think it is important to be absolutely clear that I am keen to be part of the solution, rather than just highlighting the problems.

To provide some context - we were one of the first areas in the country to be placed in a local lockdown, Tier 2 Restriction then followed this prior to the 4-week national lockdown.

Due to the high incidence of COVID-19 in this area, we have had 49 positive cases of COVID-19 within our student body since September. As a consequence, 758 students have had to self-isolate at least once, including 265 Year 11 students and 83 Year 13 students. In addition, 149 students have had to isolate at least twice, including 75 Year 11 students. We now have 10 students entering their third period of isolation, including 7 Year 11 students. Below is an extract from an e-mail I received from the parents of a Year 11 girl who was just starting her third period of isolation:

Dear Mr. Wilson

Thank you for calling us today regarding the commencement of’s third period of isolation since September.

We are grateful to you for your swift response to COVID cases as and when they are reported to you, and for your proactive stance with OFQUAL through your letter dated 20 October. We fully appreciate and understand that has simply been unlucky here, and we support everything that you and your team are doing to maintain as much normality as possible for students through these difficult times.

..... works hard both at home and at school and we’re sure she will do everything possible to maintain her current position in her learning. is self-driven and aims for the highest grades, and she deserves to have the opportunity to prove herself fairly alongside her classmates. However, with now entering her third period of self-isolation, we cannot see how - having lost almost 50% of teaching time by early December in such a pivotal year - that she can be measured fairly by examination in May/June on a “level playing field” with those fortunate enough to have been taught in school/s for most or all of this time. It is no-one’s fault, and we ask for no favourable treatment. Indeed, we are sure you will feel the same frustrations as we do as parents. All we ask for is fairness and we’re grateful to you for already advising us that consideration will be given to any student that faces such a predicament.

All parents whose children have missed school, echo the feelings of these parents.

In addition, our staffing has been affected by the current situation in North Tyneside. Since September, 57 staff have been affected in some way by COVID. This ranges from:

- testing positive and having to self-isolate
- having to self-isolate due to close contact with someone who has tested positive
- unavoidable child care issue because staff children have been sent home from local first and primary schools due to COVID outbreaks
- having to wait for test results that return negative but after a number of days of school have been missed.

I am glad to say that we have managed to remain open throughout this time but such staff issues clearly disrupt the education of students and the normal running of a school of 1700 students.

All this means students at Whitley Bay High School and many other schools will be at a distinct disadvantage compared to other schools around the country, where no or few positive cases have been identified and small numbers of students have had to self-isolate.

The suggestion, that exams, as they are currently planned, will be a level playing field for all students, is simply not correct. They are not fit for purpose for a large number of students and we would suggest the exam arrangements will be discriminatory for many students, unless significant adaptations are made.

I said in my last letter, there are some straightforward adaptations to the examinations that would reduce the impact of this inequality of educational experience that students are suffering due to COVID-19. However, since my last letter and following further disruption, I think the time has come to consider the viability of summer exams given the huge regional variations within England in terms of disruption to student education. Moreover, this inequality is further compounded by the variation in approach between different countries within the UK. Centre Assessed Grades remove the barriers to success that some students inevitably meet when assessed only by exam, for instance, illness, bereavement or error in reading the rubric correctly and, for this academic year, time off due to self-isolation. We will inevitably have a situation where Welsh students, given CAGs, will be given a university place at the expense of an equal ability North of England student with exam grades.

As a National Leader in Education within an area that continues to experience high levels of disruption due to COVID-19, I would happily offer my knowledge as a Head who is dealing with these issues daily, to support Ofqual in the important decisions they have to make.

I look forward to your response to this letter and any future announcements the 2021 exams.

Yours sincerely



STEVE WILSON
Headteacher/National Leader in Education