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Dear Parents, Carers and Families,

I remember as a child lying on my bedroom floor endlessly re-reading *Scary House* by Jan Pienkowski, fascinated by its pop-up images. I remember reading *The Adventures of Major Tom*, a space cat accompanied by his robot, Oddball, but completely missing the Bowie references. I remember walking the mile and back to the local library to take out yet more Doctor Who books as in a world without on demand television this was how I could discover the adventures of the earlier Doctors. I remember my A Level English Literature teacher introducing us all to Margaret Atwood, who remains probably my favourite author, and drawing parallels to the treatment of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* and a group that had relatively recently taken control of 1990s Afghanistan called the Taliban. I remember being at university and spending a greater proportion of my daylight hours in the library than almost anywhere else, second in truth only to the pool table, often stuck in the short term loan queue where you could have the books only for 4 hours but if you took them out at 7.00pm you could use them over night and as inevitably there was only one copy of the book you all needed to reference for the essay due the following day this could be quite a fraught process.

I remember reading books on how to teach and on the history I would be teaching. I remember battling with 'classics' to "better myself", thinking that a lot of *Moby Dick* did just seem to be literally about the mechanics of the whaling industry in the 19th Century and then realising no one was checking up on me and that reading countless books about damaged cops and spies was just as valid. I remember re-reading *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy once I'd become a father myself and crying. I remember reading to my son in bed each night before he went to sleep, many nights spent considering the options in "You Choose" before moving on to the apparently never-ending *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series. I remember lying on the beach reading, curling up at home when it's raining and reading and I'm looking forward to reading something by Mick Herron that I picked up this week over the weekend.

Of course, I'm personally lucky that my own relationship with reading is strong. Despite being diagnosed with dyslexia just as I finished school, which at least explained why the word order in sentences just sometimes didn't make sense and why when I read aloud in class what I said and what was on the page was often pointed out as being two different things, I have always been happiest in the company of a book. I'm also able to financially support this habit in a way that can be a barrier to some. Not everyone is so lucky. However, the ability to not just read but also actively engage with it remains one of the biggest indicators of life success and happiness, two interlinked but subtly different things. This makes intuitive sense; reading is the gateway to knowledge about every aspect of life and the young people in our care who read the most are the ones likely to be able to know how to navigate the various challenges life throws at them, be that from a factual understanding of things or inferring lessons on life from literature.

Parents and carers who support their children in doing this are doing one of the most valuable things they can do to support their children's long-term happiness.

One of the great things I've found in this school since starting in September has been the strong reading culture here. In this half term alone there has been:

- An assembly for Year 7 from author Ross Montgomery following all of the year group being asked to read his book *I am Rebel* as part of their transition with the Key Stage Three holiday reading champion task being inspired by this book.
- The 6th Form book club have read *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and are currently looking at *The Great Gatsby*.
- For Banned Books Day there was a treasure hunt around the school linked to some banned books.
- A quiz – Taylor Swift or Shakespeare – for National Poetry Day.
- An author visit for Years 10,12 and 13 with Rosie Hewlett talking about her books *Medea* and *Medusa*.
- A visit to see *Othello* for Years 12 and 13.
- Reading Challenges in religious studies, English, computing and geography lessons.

This is just a flavour of what's happening and there are some exciting plans for next half term too. Whatever your own relationship to reading, please do talk to your child about this and ask them about things that have been happening in school. As ever, if you're a member of our community and also have something to offer or can work with us around this then please get in touch.

This is the final Friday Headteacher's update of this half term as the **school is closed to students on Thursday 24th and Friday 25th October** and the following week is the half term holiday. **School reopens for everyone on Monday 4th November**. Can I also remind everyone that **Wednesday 23rd October is a non-uniform day** with students engaging in a range of activities in their year group that doesn't follow their normal timetable. Please find more detail below. The start and finish times of the day remain the same as usual.

Many thanks for your continued support of the school; I hope you all have a good weekend.



Michael Wright

Please find this week's key messages below.

Closure of access to the school site from the pedestrian gate on Old Pit Lane

Please note – I shared this update last week and one parent contacted me to say that the number of students using the gate wasn't small – this is correct in relative terms, although it is a minority of our students. The lack of clarity on my part was not helpful but can I thank the parent I spoke with as it was a useful and constructive conversation.

Currently a **proportion** of our students access the school from a gate that is on Old Pit Lane, referred to as the Newton Hall gate. From after half term, we're proposing that

this gate will remain closed and this point of entry and exit to the school site will be removed. This is for two significant reasons:

- Safeguarding – we must monitor who accesses the school site and one less point of egress makes this easier to do.
- New Build – as many of you know, work is due to start on a new build for the school in the next calendar year. We envisage at this stage that when this starts, we will lose access to this gate and we'd rather find solutions to this now than when construction work starts.

We do appreciate that this extends the journey time to and from school for some students. Therefore, at this stage we're proposing this as a trial from **Monday 4th November until Monday 2nd December** with the option to convert the trial into a permanent change. We will be sharing this information with students during tutor time. Many thanks in advance for your support.

Staff will be visible at the crossings when this process begins after half term.

Enrichment Day

On **Wednesday 23rd October** we have an Enrichment Day. This is a collapsed timetable day which allows the school to provide a range of experiences beyond the usual curriculum diet. It is a non-uniform day which will allow students to dress appropriately for the activities they are involved in. Heads of Year will provide further guidance regarding non-uniform to their students.

Year 7 will have an introduction to careers skills. This will include a range of group challenges that will help develop understanding of teamwork, listening, speaking and creativity.

Year 8 have chosen options that interest them. These include sports (involving a visit to the local Jiu Jitsu academy), robotics, art, gaming/puzzles and food technology.

Year 9 will be on a visit to Beamish which has been heavily subsidised by a donation given by our ex-Head of History, Mr Robson. This is a genuine year group community event linked to our local cultural roots.

Year 10 will be involved in a careers day which covers personal finance, meet the employers and the launch of work experience on Unifrog, our careers online platform.

Year 11 will either be experiencing a day in the life of a sixth former or undertaking work on study skills around core subjects.

Mr Ward, Assistant Headteacher

6th Form Update

Congratulations to our 'early entry' Year 13 students, who have successfully submitted their university applications for medicine, veterinary medicine and Oxbridge - alongside their A' level studies, they have also been preparing for their university aptitude tests and admissions tests; we wish them the best of luck.

Next week on our Enrichment Day, as well as taking part in a study skills refresher session, our Year 12 students will be developing their leadership skills as they take a key role in the events planned for Year 7 and 8 students; we know that they will be fantastic role models for our younger students.

We also have one of our favourite community events coming up in the Sixth Form: the annual pumpkin decorating challenge and Halloween fancy dress, which always brings out our students' -and tutors'- creative and competitive sides! The guest judge has promised to enter fully into the 'spirit' of the event.

Mrs King, Head of 6th Form

Knowledge Quizzes in Lessons

Many of our teachers set knowledge quizzes in lessons as a way of checking students' independent learning. This applies most frequently in geography and French, but will also occur in other subject areas at different stages of the curriculum. For these quizzes, students will be expected to prepare by making and using flashcards or completing a look/cover/write/check activity.

Students need to achieve a particular score in these quizzes; this score will be decided by the teacher, depending on the class and the topic, and it will be communicated to the class before the quiz. If a student does not achieve this score, they are invited back at a breaktime or lunchtime for a support session, which means the teacher can help them to learn the information. These support sessions are put in place so that the student doesn't fall behind and to help them with their learning. They are an excellent way of boosting students' confidence, helping them to improve their revision techniques, and clarifying any misconceptions about the information.

If the student does not achieve the appropriate score in this quiz and also does not bring evidence of their revision (in the form of flashcards or look/cover/write/check notes), then the teacher will set a detention instead of a support session. This detention is set because the student has not provided evidence of having completed the independent learning, and is in line with the whole-school policy.

Dr Smith, Teaching and Learning Lead

Safeguarding Update

Designated Safeguarding Leads in school are now more visible to students, as they will be wearing a blue hi-viz jacket when on site. Of course, students should feel able to talk about any worry or concern with any member of staff.

Our safeguarding team in school support students with a variety of issues. If you have any concerns about any student's safety or well-being or need some advice, please contact Mrs Osborne, or your child's Year Team - they are all Designated Safeguarding Leads in school. Alternatively, if you are concerned about a child and wish to report something anonymously, you can call First Contact on 03000267979.

STEMFest

Last Thursday a group of Year 7 students spent a great day attending STEMFest at the Beacon of Light. Students explored potential future careers in STEM in the manufacturing, green, cyber and space industries.

They climbed a giant offshore wind turbine (in VR), were transported to Bletchley Park to break codes and locate German U-boats and learned about the true scale of space in the planetarium, leaving them all feeling very insignificant! Hopefully these students are feeling inspired to explore careers in STEM, and we're looking forward to our own STEM week in school later this year.

Key Year 11 Information

- Progress meetings

You should have received your progress meeting appointment via SIMS Report recently. This meeting is an opportunity for you and your child to meet with a senior member of staff to discuss current progress in Year 11 and how they can be preparing for the forthcoming mock exam series, commencing on **Monday 18th November**.

Please note - due to the volume of appointments being conducted, we are unable to change appointments or reschedule. Your child will attend their appointment on their own should you be unable to attend. There will be another opportunity to attend a subsequent progress meeting in the New Year.

- Raising Achievement Sessions (RAS)

RAS have started and will run until the start of the November mock series. These are targeted sessions designed to intervene where students struggle with key concepts and/or have knowledge gaps. Students have received an assembly about RAS and have been told how they work, why they exist and the importance of attending RAS if they have been selected to attend.

Students were selected to attend up to 3 sessions a week and the majority of the sessions take place at lunchtime, after your child has had a break and time to eat. Some maths, English and French sessions occur after school.

There are two more blocks of RAS, one in January in the build-up to the February mock series and one in April in the run up to the GCSE exam period. If your child doesn't have a session appear on their timetable for this block, it is likely they will be selected for one in the subsequent RAS blocks.

We have asked the students to 'trust the process', and to look at being invited to RAS as a positive thing, one that will help them achieve the outcomes we know they are capable of. Your support in getting your child to these sessions is crucial and much appreciated as we help prepare your child for their mock exams.

Department Spotlight – Drama

This week we have been visiting Drama lessons; we have seen Year 7 exploring how to create a character and present themselves in that role for a sustained period of time; we have enjoyed observing students work hard on keeping an improvised dialogue going without stopping the action and Year 9 have been considering how they can use a stimulus to devise an improvised drama and have been working on their use of voice, movement and body language to create their characters. Year 10 students were using a photo card of a person shackled to their mobile phone to devise their own 6 scene sketches and we saw some powerful concepts being explored. Probably the most heart-warming moment in our visits to Drama lessons is where students spoke so passionately about how confident and safe they feel in Drama and how they are not afraid to push themselves out of their comfort zone. Our Drama curriculum is designed to build students' confidence and creativity, and their teachers are passionate about supporting their love for the subject. Year 9 students said that while they can see that the curriculum is a "step up from last year", they find the subject "really enjoyable" and know that they are developing their confidence. They spoke passionately about the dramas they are devising and the characters they are creating, thinking about how best to bring them to life.

On a related note; after half term this years 'variety show' will be announced to students in assembly with auditions and rehearsals beginning after Christmas. The show will take place from 2nd-4th April and we look forward to seeing many of our students audition to be part of what I am sure will be a fantastic show. Our school shows are always wonderfully inclusive and all the students involved get so much out of the experience, so please do encourage your child to audition if they enjoy singing, dancing or performing. We have so many talented students and we cant wait to see them!

Mrs Machin, Deputy Headteacher