



## **Statement by the Director – 2 January 2020**

### **Re-opening schools**

Addressee: All headteachers and Chairs of Governors, Archdiocese of Southwark Catholic Schools  
Address: by email.

Dear all,

#### **Responses to the latest developments in the Coronavirus pandemic**

I wish you and your families a happy new year. The Education Commission staff hope that you were able to achieve some well-earned rest over the Christmas period. It was a very challenging calendar year, one in which your perseverance, resilience, creativity and imagination must have been sorely tested. It is with enormous gratitude that I write on behalf of Archbishop John to thank you for all your efforts, especially to keep schools open for the children of key workers and disadvantaged families. Your work is rooted deeply in the words of Jesus:

“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me”. (Mt 25:40)

Thank you also for the tremendous care you have shown your staff, your concern for their well-being and their mental health. We have a statistical understanding of the impact of the coronavirus on your schools, but we have no idea of the toll that has been taken from a qualitative perspective. We know that many of you have been ill with COVID-19, others have been too unwell to work, even from home, and we know that for many of you decisions to retire, which may have been on hold, have been brought forward.

Though it has been the ‘holiday’ period, there has been little relief from the publication of information and instruction from the Department for Education (DfE). This has been matched by outputs from Local Authorities, all trying to wrestle with what appears to be best for the Nation’s children in the new calendar year. I have become aware since Wednesday 30 December 2020, that the Unions have also been in frequent contact with information, advice and guidance about how to support their members in the current crisis. I became aware today that ASCL and the NAHT are in talks to mount a legal challenge to the Department for Education.

Also, in the last three days, there have been frequent updates to official publications from the DfE which mean that, as I write, all primary schools in London will not now be expected to open on Monday. I understand that the Kent Association of Headteachers is seeking the same consistent application of this policy across all primaries in the County which is in Tier 4. This would be logical for our schools in Kent. Medway schools will move to remote learning for all immediately on 4 January 2020. It is easy to see a situation where a parent is working in an ‘open’ school, while their own children’s school might well be closed. The conscience issues such a situation would provoke can be a metaphor for a wider discussion.

#### **The ‘science’**

Science, as you know, derives from the Latin word *scientia* meaning ‘knowledge’, or expertise. There are some things we know, affirmed by the Prime Minister, and his advisors, in his Coronavirus Briefing on Wednesday 30 December 2020:

- Children and Young People carry the disease, even if they do so asymptotically
- Children have been in bubbles where no social distancing was possible, nor could it be enforced
- Many bubbles have had to close due to illness or positive results from COVID-19 tests



- School staff have caught the virus from children in their bubbles
- School staff have infected their families, some for whom Christmas was written off
- The latest strain of the virus evolved and emerged in Kent and is spreading rapidly through the country and across the world.

Scientists believe that nobody will become more ill as a result of infection by this mutation, nor that the available vaccines will fail to deal with it efficaciously. As a side note, I want to thank the many educationists in schools and universities who taught the scientists, technicians and business people who have collaborated to get these vaccines so quickly into circulation. I remain concerned, though, that part of the Diocese is at the epicentre of this new strain and that all of the Diocese's schools are in Tier 4.

Of even greater concern, though, is my observational analysis that the current situation is exacerbating the inequalities that exist in the country. I wholly accept the view that keeping schools open is essential for the safety, security and well-being of a large minority of children. I also accept that being in school means that disadvantaged pupils may continue to benefit from the excellent care and support of leaders, teachers and support staff. But I am yet to be persuaded that this is possible if the staff are too ill to attend and that there are not enough of them to maintain an effective curriculum. I hope readers will understand this next point is not intended to be controversial. Schools are places of learning; they are not annexes to the social care system. It follows, then, that if schools cannot provide 'good' quality education in the crisis, they should not be open. Rather, it would be better if leaders', teachers' and their assistants' full concentration was on providing the best possible learning experiences for pupils at home. I am certain that we will need to have a much wider discussion about testing and examinations in the 2021 season. I will initiate that dialogue with you next week.

Moreover, schools are not annexes to the National Health Service (NHS). If mass testing in schools is to be rolled out, the NHS must provide suitably qualified, skilled and trained staff to do so. Additionally, I welcome the announcement that military personnel will increase the human resource available to get this up and running, but would want assurances that any engagement with pupils has been rigorously assessed for risk. The same applies to any volunteers for this programme. Given the length of time new DBS disclosures take, it is unlikely that any would be adequately assessed as fit and proper persons until the end of January at the earliest. Practically, it is hard to imagine that secondary school staff could simultaneously manage wholesale testing, face to face teaching and supporting pupils constrained to learn at home.

### The economics

In addition to the reasons given above for needing schools to be open, it is quite clear that the government sees an economic imperative. Talk-shows, phone-ins and other reviews of 2020 have relentlessly heard into speech the pleas of parents struggling with 'home learning'. Moreover, closed schools mean that, whether schools are social care annexes or not, there is a childcare/supervision problem for those whose work is essential and cannot be undertaken from home. Balancing home learning with maintaining productivity in your own organisation is challenging for those parents who are now expected to 'stay at home' to work. I understand this and I also understand fully the challenge for the self-employed. No work, means no income. While the Education Commission, and the Diocese as a whole, have benefitted from the furlough scheme. I recognise fully that this safety net has not been accessible for many of the economically active in the country. The attendant and probably hidden costs of the Coronavirus are yet to be calculated. What seems logical, therefore, is to do all in our power to bring the pandemic urgently to a close.

### Conclusion and recommendations

Logically, therefore, I would ask all our leaders – aided by their governing bodies – to:

- Err on the side of caution, health and well-being – don't re-open until you can guarantee the health, safety and well-being of every member of the community



- Keep in touch regularly and make joint decisions
- Update parents frequently
- Re-visit risk assessments urgently and judge how quickly and safely each school can be re-opened on a case-by-case basis
- Co-operate with Local Authorities, especially their Public Health departments, to ensure that any school opening is subject to the most rigorous cleaning and sanitising regimes and takes account of local infection and illness rates
- Co-operate with plans for mass testing on site, but apply the same rigour to the management of it as you would to any other school-based activity
- Collaborate with all Unions and Professional Associations to ensure that all members' interests, including your own, are taken into consideration
- Review the school's support for pupils' learning at home – please see below a series of self-evaluation questions which might be useful in this regard.

For the record, I will support any governing body whose evidence-based assessment goes against either local or national government mandates, at any given point in time. All I would ask is that you provide me with as much information as you can to make your case with you. If, for example, your LA tells you to close but you know that such an action will expose vulnerable children to even greater risk, I will support your case.

### **Support for pupils learning at home**

When reviewing your school's offer for pupils' learning at home, a curriculum leader could ask these questions:

- Are the pupils likely to have acquired all the prior learning to be able to access this next piece effectively?
- Is this piece of learning accessible to a pupil who only has access to a smart phone?
- Do our materials provide a balance of information, stimulus tasks and other activities?
- Are the instructions for each piece of intended learning easily understood? Could a parent who speaks English as an Additional Language interpret this easily enough to support their child?
- Can the pupils at whom this piece of intended learning is targeted be both challenged but self-sufficient in completing it?
- How will the teacher know that the intended learning outcomes have been achieved?
- Does the piece of learning have a means of providing feedback?
- What happens if a pupil or pupils do not make the intended learning gains? Will they be hampered in accessing the next steps in their learning?

Please look out for invitations to 'drop in' on Zoom so we can discuss these issues in person. With sincerest good wishes and in the hope that you know that the Education Commission is available to help as best we can in these challenging circumstances,

**Dr Simon Hughes**  
**Director of Education and Diocesan Schools Commissioner**  
CC. Most Reverend John Wilson, Archbishop of Southwark