Dear Year Eight parents and carers

I hope that you are managing to balance the demands of these extremely challenging weeks, which I know will be different for each family. Some of you will be working very long hours in very stressful occupations as critical workers, or under pressure working at home or in the workplace in a variety of other roles, often whilst trying to balance oversight of your children’s learning. Others will be feeling extremely isolated, be dealing with job losses or other challenges, and some may be ill or looking after others who are not well. Events have unfolded quickly around us, and we are all responding as well as we can, simply just doing our best every day. We appreciate all the support which you are giving both your children and the college community at a time when you may feel that you have very little left to give – please believe me that both your support and your encouragement, however much of each you are able to give, make an enormous difference. I have spoken and written regularly to you, your children and college staff about the fact that we can’t change the darkness of our circumstances, but we can shine our light into them as brightly as we can, as our response to them. There have been some extremely bright lights shining in unison already this half term in and out of the college to light up the gloomy landscape – thank you. It feels a very special community to work and learn in.

Here are some updates for you:

**Rapid Flow Covid Testing**

We have been extremely proud to have been one of the first secondary schools in the Midlands to introduce asymptomatic testing on site. We redeployed some of our support staff team, overseen by our Student Health Administrator who is herself public health trained, and trained them virtually to NHS Rapid Flow testing standards with hands on practice, and have swiftly been able to roll out both a weekly programme for testing staff and an initial programme for testing students arriving on site (children of critical workers, vulnerable children and students taking Year 11 exams this week so far), both programmes in place and working effectively from last week. If you follow us on facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/thomasestley> you can see photos of the test centre, as well as lots of other posts to celebrate students’ achievements. When your child returns on site, they will be given two initial tests (as long as we have consent) as one of our many proactive Covid-secure measures to reduce risk on site and keep students, families and staff safe.

**Changes to examinations in 2021**

It has been very challenging this year for our Year Eleven students to find out that they will not be able to take the summer examination series as normal, as a result of the pandemic and its impact. We have been told that there will be a type of teacher assessment taking place again, but that this will be different to last year’s centre assessed grades and there will not be an algorithm involved. The government are consulting on this with Ofqual over the next fortnight, and it is likely that it will include work done between January and the Summer Term in some way so that continued effort is rewarded, and that there will be moderation around the teacher assessed grades to ensure that they are as fair as possible. It may include some type of testing at some point. The precise details are not yet known and we should not be making conjectures until they are, but it is vital that your child continues to complete all of their online work to the best possible standard, as this is highly likely to be an important part of the process. As soon as we know more, we will confirm details to you. Planned January exams in vocational subjects were able to proceed as normal this week – well done to all who attended. We saw great focus and hard work on your part during the examinations.

**Online Remote Learning**

Those of you who attended my assembly last week with your child will have heard me describe how hard we have been working as a team to further improve and develop our remote learning programme, which we began during the March lockdown last year and continued for students self-isolating last term. We have focussed on introducing more live elements and high-quality feedback and instruction in order to engage students better and help them progress more quickly.

The government has told us that we should work to:

* *‘set meaningful and ambitious work each day in an appropriate range of subjects.*
* *provide teaching that is equivalent in length to the core teaching pupils would receive in school. This will include both recorded or live direct teaching time and time for pupils to complete tasks and assignments independently, and will be as a minimum 5 hours a day for secondary aged children.*
* *Consider how to transfer into remote education what we already know about effective teaching in the live classroom. These characteristics of good teaching are more important than the medium of delivery, be it in the ‘live’ classroom or through remote provision (whether or not that remote provision is live or pre-recorded). Live classrooms enable important interaction between teachers and pupils through, for example, questioning, eliciting and reflective discussion. These complex teacher skills in the live classroom are not always easy to recreate in a remote environment, but where remote education recreates at least some aspects of this interactivity and intentional dialogue, teaching is likely to be more effective, support pupil motivation and lead to better progress.’*

Your child may have already noticed that some lessons this term are delivered live, and these, together with some high quality pre-recorded and written materials and a range of tasks to complete, will make up their learning diet during this period. The same provision is available for the small number of students on site who are all working through the online tasks in the same way as the children at home. It is really important that your child logs onto Satchel One, our remote learning platform (previously called ShowMyHomework) at 8:25am each day to see what their work for the day is and to know which lessons will be live – links will be posted for them for any live lessons. From the end of this week, we will be following up any non-completion of work, in order to minimise lost learning and to maximise progress for all.

You should have your own parental pin for the platform – if you have not had one or have lost it, please email Mrs Young myoung@thomasestley.org.uk. Meanwhile, thank you all for the positive feedback which we have been receiving over the last couple of weeks – our teachers are themselves on a steep learning curve in this area, and are trying their best to deliver lessons of the highest possible quality; we are regularly sharing and developing best practice within the college.

**Contact with registration supervisors, pastoral and leadership staff**

We have already carried out some welfare checks and are looking to develop our remote pastoral contacts further. Your child was invited to an assembly with me last week and an assembly with their year leader this week, and we will continue with weekly assemblies (8:30-8:50). I will be running next week’s assembly again on Tuesday and the link for the Microsoft Teams assembly will be shared on SatchelOne as well as here: [Click here to join the meeting](https://teams.microsoft.com/l/meetup-join/19%3Ameeting_YzNiNzczNTMtOWJmNS00MzYyLWE3Y2QtM2FiMzJlMDZhNmMx%40thread.v2/0?context=%7b%22Tid%22%3a%22e5a5bf2b-0eac-48b9-bc7e-cc734f2143cd%22%2c%22Oid%22%3a%22fc9ae537-bc89-40c9-8dd1-828aa3224db6%22%7d)

Registration supervisors will also start to make **weekly contact** with students from next week.   Your child's tutor will make contact on the days outlined below (8:30-8:50); the TEAMS link will be shared on Show My Homework so students can access.

* Mrs Briggs, Mr Virk, Mr Smith - Monday
* Ms Little - Wednesday
* Mrs Eatwell, Mrs Corbett, Mrs Bryan – Thursday

**Students’ wellbeing**

We are aware that it is a difficult time for our children, who are missing most of their normal social interactions and who may find largely screen based learning which is not face to face with their teachers more challenging. It is also clear, however, that it is vital for them to continue with their learning, as they have already missed out on certain areas over the last lockdown and possibly also last term. With this in mind, can I encourage you to ensure that children do take their daily exercise, and that they have some time away from their learning and their screens, at weekends and in the evenings.

There are also online resources available to help you and your child with mental health and wellbeing, including:

• MindEd, a free educational resource from Health Education England on children and young people’s mental health

• Rise Above, which aims to build resilience and support good mental health in young people aged 10 to 16

• Every Mind Matters, which includes an online tool and email journey to support everyone to feel more confident in taking action to look after their mental health and wellbeing

• Bereavement UK and the Childhood Bereavement Network, provide information and resources to support bereaved pupils, schools and staff

• Rise Above (adapted for COVID-19) website aims to build resilience and support good mental health in young people aged 10 to 16

Barnardo’s See, Hear, Respond service, provides support to children, young people and their families who aren’t currently seeing a social worker or other agency, and who are struggling to cope with the emotional impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19). You can access via the ‘See, Hear, Respond’ service self-referral webpage or Freephone 0800 151 7015.

Public Health England's advice and guidance for parents and professionals on supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing includes key actions you can take to support your child’s mental health and wellbeing, such as supporting safe ways to connect with friends. It also emphasises the importance of children continuing to remain fit and active and, wherever possible, having the 60 minutes of daily physical activity, recommended by the Chief Medical Officers. Further advice and support to help pupils remain physically active are available from Youth Sport Trust and Sport England.

Where further support is required, NHS mental health services remain open, and they have digital tools to enable them to connect with people and provide ongoing support, so you should continue referring to your local children and young people’s mental health service when needed.

It is also vital to report any safeguarding concerns you have about any child – please contact us at the college so that we can provide immediate support. Any child can also contact us at the college talk@thomasestley.org.uk email address with any concerns or worries.

**Advice and support for parents**

Here is some general advice from the government around education, for parents, during the lockdown period: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951035/210108_Parents_Guidance_vF.pdf>

Guidance is also available to help you [look after your own mental health](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing) during this challenging period.

I am very proud of all that has already been achieved this term, with very short notice for college and parents for significant changes, and we will continue to work hard as a community – staff, students and parents – to support each other and the wellbeing and educational outcomes of our young people.

Warmest wishes,

Mandi Collins, Principal