

Update from Royal Wootton Bassett Academy

Anita Ellis - Headteacher

The challenges of returning to school in such circumstances this year have certainly presented themselves at RWBA thus far. However, the determination to overcome these challenges and provide resolution to each barrier from students, staff and parents has been phenomenal! I have been so proud to start my headship with such committed individuals.

We have introduced a wide range of safety measures to ensure that students, staff and parents feel safe and secure and that they can focus on the important business of learning. Attendance to date this year is 93.7%, less than we would normally see at this time of year but significantly more than many other schools. Much of the absence is down to parents trying to be cautious over illness and deciphering what potentially could be COVID-19 related illness, or not. We have very few students shielding or not attending school out of concern. Our Year Teams are doing an excellent job (as they did throughout lockdown) in communicating with the home environment to ensure that attendance continues to improve.

We have self-isolated 2 Year Groups, Year 9 and Year 10. They are not linked cases and we know that neither were caught or transmitted through school. We know this because one case was as a result of foreign travel and the other transmitted within the family. Through both isolations, no other student has reported COVID-19 symptoms or fallen ill, and due to our measures in place, no staff member has had to isolate. We carry out a proximity test on all staff who taught or supported the students and as they passed the test and developed no symptoms, no staff members were affected.

We wrote a Risk Assessment and Return To School Document in June 2020 and they have been re-evaluated every 2 weeks as a result of monitoring, student, staff and parent feedback. They are published on our Website and sent directly to all parents.

Some of the most significant changes to school are:

1. Staggered arrival and departure times for all Year Groups so that we are able to bubble each Year Group and reduce the risk of transmission. This means that in the event of a positive case, we have only needed to ask that particular Year Group to isolate.
2. Staggered breaks and lunch times. Each Year Group have their own break and lunch time in their specific Break Zone. This has been the biggest logistical challenge as we only had one eatery (Terry's Restaurant) at the start of summer and we have since developed a further one on the other side of the school building. This has allowed us to only have three breaks and lunches over two different locations – but this has come at considerable cost and providing shelter that can last through the winter is going to cost over 55k. Behaviour and calmness at break and lunch times has been noticeable as a Year Group of nearly 290 students has been able to enjoy the freedoms of their own space.
3. Each Year Group has their own toilets.
4. To enable the above, we have had to break apart the structure of the day. We have not reduced our curriculum offer as breadth is important to us. Our transition around the school means that Year 7 and 8 are largely static in 2 parts of the school with Years 9-13 having movement around the school. Years 7 to 9 go to their Break Zone at the end of each lesson to sanitise and be picked up by their next teacher. This has resulted in smooth transitions where we can ensure that Year Group bubbles do not mix. Years 10 – 13 (ass examination classes) have been able to carry on their work towards their exams with no disruption.

5. We have introduced a one-way system around the school, which in line with the split breaks and lunches, keeps contact points between Year Groups at an absolute minimum and allows Years 7 and 8 movement away from their static classes.
6. We have increased the number of cleaning staff at school with a rota throughout the day of key areas such as ICT rooms and PE changing rooms between changeover. Every class desk is disinfected by students at the end of each lesson.

We were concerned about transport, our drop offs and pick ups but with more visible Leadership Team staffing and guidance, this has run brilliantly and our parents have been really supportive. It has also increased the quick catch ups that happen outside of the school building with students and parents.

In terms of supporting our students to catch up, we have a Reconnection Curriculum in place, which we launched before the summer holidays. We have rag rated (with the students) what they covered during lockdown, what they should know and their confidences around this. This summarises key knowledge and skills. All students will have more frequent formative assessment to ascertain where they are on their learning path and they will complete baseline assessments to inform our planning, interventions and further tuition, if needed.

Our remote learning offer (whilst not perfect) ensured that the vast majority of our students did not fall behind and this has been borne out in our return to school. That said, the key concern of most students is the sense that they are 'behind'. We are working hard to provide them with the SEB and MH (Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health) support that they need and deserve. Assemblies continue to go ahead, iLearn and Tutor support continues to go ahead and our online offer has meant that on average, 320 Parents have dialled into our Year Group Parent Information Evenings. Staff have learned new skills and our 2 self-isolations have provided us with opportunities to practice remote learning, and to ascertain the student skill base too.

Our recent virtual Open Evening was dialled in by over 540 families. We are constantly thinking out of the box in how we can make our communication clear and honest.

The Government has pledged around £115k to fund catch up at RWBA and in addition to the above, we have developed an Inclusion Zone with specialist support for those students who need it. We have increased the hours for our MDSAs to monitor behaviours and help keep our Zones calm. We also have 3 x 1to1 Teachers recruited out of this funding to support small group work with students across the Year Groups.

Our key concern is regarding the weather, inclement and cold weather will not help these structures but we remain resolution focused and positive.