

Portlethen Academy

Learn and Improve. Get Involved. Think of the Consequences. Respect All.

Dear Parent/Carer

October 2020 Update

As we finish the term, I want to update you on a range of matters from school. As with previous communications I have opted for gathering all the points in one letter rather than several smaller ones though I have saved a few items for a letter at the start of the new term. Apologies if this is not your preferred means of communications however I am conscious you can receive a lot of messages and this is designed to provide broader general points and to capture several items in one place.

I want to start by expressing my thanks to all in the school community for the way they have pulled together to enable us to chart a safe course through the last 9 weeks. School has been a place with even more rules and procedures, but our young people and staff have responded with a real rigour so that they are following these and working to keep themselves and others safe.

As I sit in my office, I can hear two noises filtering through daily from the main canteen and nearby corridor. The first is the chatter of young people interacting with a minimum of fuss. The second is the steady roar of the hand dryers in the nearby toilets as pupils follow that safety measure – crucially this happens with the need for regular reminders. These may be small observations, but the first captures the benefits of having young people in school from a Health and Well Being aspect and the second illustrates the rigour with which our pupils, your children, have responded. With this rigour we can continue safely after the break.

Staff have been tremendous and all have made a huge effort to support our young people and each other. The tensions of the term have been wearing and I feel they have done an excellent job in often stressful circumstances. The delay in resolving the SQA exams' issue has put a strain on teaching staff and the repeated, but necessary, changes to procedures have meant they have had to adapt. More adaptation will be required as SQA clarify specific details around each subject.

Your support as parents and carers has been excellent and it is evident that many of you have reinforced messages about school procedures in your discussions at home. Your openness and communication with us have also been very helpful. We have been able to adapt our practices considering your comments and the information you pass on helps us support your child(ren) and others.

Covid 19 situations

In respect of Covid 19 situations we are steered by NHS Grampian's Health Protection team who advise us. The safety of all in the school community is central to all we do as we wish learning to continue uninterrupted, so we are very rigorous around our actions. We cannot identify individuals or groups of young people or comment on individual cases outwith the family involved. However, we do understand that there can be anxieties and we pass on what information we can and families have

been hugely helpful and responsible in this respect. Any communications will provide the facts confirmed with the relevant families and health professionals rather than rumour - which is not helpful in these situations or, indeed, at any time.

Staff absences

We have been fortunate in being able to recruit a number of regular supply staff to cover in the event of staff absence. This has been crucial as we have had the usual short absences and some longer-term ones. Longer term absences are difficult to cover and we know that pupils and parents are concerned at the impact these can have on learning. Subject specialist supply cover can be very hard to come by and is made worse by Covid 19 with all schools using the pool of supply staff. This pool has also reduced as many supply teachers who were retired have stopped doing this work. While we do all we can to recruit specialist supply staff it is a significant issue and one that is likely to increase as we move into winter. There are simply not enough supply teachers available and this adds pressure for the staff in school. Where we can, we prioritise the remaining staff to take certificate classes though this has an impact on younger classes who can then be taken by non-subject specialists. As intimated in a previous letter, if ongoing staff absences are such that we cannot cover, this could lead to temporary closures for groups of pupils. We want to make you aware of this possibility but hope this is not the case. If we have to do this it is likely we will prioritise senior pupils and keep them in school. We appreciate this would have childcare complications and we would endeavour to ensure you were alerted as soon as possible and that it was for as short a time as possible.

Staff changes

In addition to the issues around staff absence we also have some staff changes that impact upon us. Mrs Baxter, our Principal Teacher of Health Promotions, will leave us in Mid-November after a hugely successful time at the Academy where she has built the faculty and raised attainment. Her replacement as Principal Teacher is Mr Lawson, a PE specialist. He has been able to start already and will work alongside Mrs Baxter, allowing a handover. We also required a Home Economics teacher to replace that element of Mrs Baxter's work and we are delighted to have Miss Cumming joining us after the holidays. Elsewhere Mrs Piper, Support for Learning, has decided to retire and we wish her well after over 10 years of service to the Academy. Both Mr and Mrs Johnston (Chemistry/Principal Teacher Development and Maths teacher, respectively) are moving south to be nearer family. We are currently recruiting to these posts and will need to see what interest they attract. We will update you on progress.

Temperature and Ventilation

We still await further guidance from the Scottish Government with regard to ventilation as we move into cooler weather. Currently the medical advice is that we should ensure good ventilation where possible. As the outside temperature drops this can make the classroom environment very cool. We have asked staff to be pragmatic and to ensure windows are open but only partially so that there is ventilation but not an excessive chill. Nonetheless, we would advise all young people to ensure they have a black top (preferably a jumper) so that they are ready for the cooler temperatures. We will update you as the advice emerges.

PE Kit

After the October break we will be continuing to follow Covid-19 guidance and remaining outdoors for PE until further notice. This means pupils will be outside in poor weather conditions.

Pupils should bring a change of all clothing items, so they don't need to spend the rest of the day wet.

These include a change of:

- Trainers
- Socks
- Leggings/trackies/shorts
- T-shirt
- Jumper
- A waterproof jacket
- Hat/Gloves (if needed)
- Pupils will also need a carrier bag to put wet clothes in and keep the rest of their belongings dry

This also applies to pupils not participating as you will be expected to be outside with your class and will be involved in the lesson.

Additionally, in PE lessons, pupils with long hair are required to bring a hair bobble and hair should be tied back during lesson for safety purposes.

Pupils should attend in school uniform and therefore are expected to change before and after lessons. We would be grateful if you can reinforce this at home.

Face Coverings and Covid 19 Advice

Our young people have been fantastic with their wearing of face coverings and only a very small number have to be reminded to wear them. The Traffic Light system for pupils wearing them in classes has been a great success and I know staff value this support. We do notice some, generally younger, pupils struggle to get a good fit, particularly around the nose. We would ask that you check that any reusable coverings do fit well. While we have not had any real issue with non-compliance around face coverings or any of our other Covid 19 procedures I do need to stress that young people who do not follow the advice may have to study from home for periods of time. If this noncompliance were to occur on the buses the pupil may forfeit their right to travel.

Daily Contact Time

You will be aware that we have halted Daily Contact Time (our daily slot when pupils meet their tutor). We are currently working on reinstating this in an enhanced form. It is a key communication time and we also want to use it more effectively to support a variety of things including the school's values, pupil achievements and the development of pupils' skills profiles. This area of work was in Mr Johnston's remit and we have now appointed Ms Mason to the post of Principal Teacher Development (DCT) and she will take this forward alongside her role as a Technical teacher. As our plans develop we will update you on our approach.

SQA

As you may be aware the Deputy First Minister has announced that Nat 5 Qualifications will be assessed internally and there will not be an exam diet for them. With Highers and Advanced Highers the intention is to hold a slightly delayed exam diet although contingency planning will be put in place in case it is not possible to run these exams. With many of the Highers and Advanced Highers assignments have also been removed to allow more teaching and learning of coursework.

Although not yet fully populated the details for each subject can be found here <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/45625.html> We would ask that you encourage your child to research the requirements for each of their subjects so that they are fully aware of what will be required.

As a school we await further advice from SQA and Aberdeenshire on the practical issues relating to some subjects or, more generally, to issues like prelims. As the advice emerges, we will update pupils and parents. Our key advice is that pupils should apply themselves throughout the course so that we have evidence of their work from throughout the session and in the event of any change to our situation.

Holidays and Quarantine Requirements

I am sure that holiday plans will have changed significantly for many, if not most families. However, we do know that some families are able to continue with their plans for the break. I would stress that it is imperative that any quarantine arrangements that are required on return are strictly adhered to and that pupils affected by this do not attend school. Where this is the case please contact the relevant Guidance teacher so that they are aware of the absence.

In conclusion, I hope the above helps update you on a range of issues. I'm sure you will have many more questions as the year progresses and we will do our best to update you as clarity appears and situations change. I will finish by stressing my thanks to all in the school community. This has been a difficult term however the way everyone has pulled together and taken responsibility for their actions has been tremendous.

Have a happy and safe break.

Yours faithfully,

Neil Morrison

Head Teacher

Portlethen Academy

9 October 2020