

Dear Parents/Carers

Two matters have come to light very recently, which I feel I need to share with you. Both came my way very late in the day and their last-minute nature has dictated to some extent the decisions I have had to make. Rest assured that I have not taken either decision lightly, and lengthy debate over the last 48 hours has taken place with my immediate colleagues and my counterparts at other schools. A cross-county consensus has not been reached on either matter as far as I understand it (at the time of writing) but this is of no consequence: the decisions I have taken, as I always try to do, are in the interests of staff and children (and their parents) at NTS alone. There are obviously many reasons for these decisions and those listed below are but a brief summary:

1. No early finish to this term

The Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, wrote to Heads to say that they could finish a day early this term; we were told about this with less than two weeks to go. We were also told that we would have to make up any time missed by staff/pupils later in the year. Altering the schedule of term dates at such late notice, we felt, would not be sensible (and might have childcare implications), and we have decided to stick to the original plan. School will continue in the final week, therefore, right up until 3.30pm on Friday, and we expect full attendance as normal.

2. No mass testing at NTS in early January

The first we knew about the possibility of mass testing pupils and staff across the county in the first two days in January was via a brief phone call that I received from the LA on Friday 4th, late in the day. An urgent two-hour meeting was held last night (Wednesday 9th) attended by secondary heads across the county to discuss the proposal and the detail, much of which has still to be confirmed. Many heads expressed serious concerns about the organisation and planning required. I had another meeting at 8.15am this morning (Thursday 10th) with my senior management team, the Chair of Governors and other heads in the Carlisle area to share our thoughts and concerns, mainly about getting parental consent, school transport, safety of pupils, the impact on teaching and learning and the effectiveness of the tests. It was agreed that, whilst we approved of the idea in principle, the potential problems and logistics of organising such a major event at NTS at such short notice outweighed what appeared to be short-term gains, and we chose to decline. (This would normally take many weeks, if not months, to plan.) We will continue to follow this pilot scheme with interest, and may join at a later date should the opportunity present itself, but advanced warning will be critical to our decision making. In brief, then, school will begin as normal for all on Tuesday 5th January (with staff training on the 4th January), as originally planned.

In light of the decision we have taken regarding the pilot, it is all the more important that over the festive period we continue to observe the national guidance on the wearing of face masks and social distancing so that cases in the local community do not increase. We look forward to January when we can build on the solid foundations we have established this term but this will only be possible if there is collective effort in the area, beyond the school, to minimise the spread of the virus. This will be a challenge for all of us.

Finally, please could you as parents ensure that children dress warmly when they return in January. We have had instances this term where children have used the slighter cooler temperature in classrooms (because windows have been kept ajar to increase air circulation) as an excuse for

wearing their coats in lessons *instead of* their blazer/jumper. We need to maintain standards on this front and if children are cold, they must come to school dressed appropriately. They can of course wear a T-shirt/vest under their shirt/blouse if they wish but they will not be allowed to wear coats in lessons as these are unnecessary. (Year 7-10 pupils also have the option of wearing the green jumper as an extra layer, of course.)

I should take this opportunity to thank you all, staff and parents, for your support this term during what has been an arduous and stressful time on many fronts. We will get through this difficult period, but we all need a lengthy rest.

Please take care over the Christmas break and enjoy it as best you can.

Kind regards,

Mr DS Northwood, Headmaster