

07 January 2021

Dear Parent/Carer

Firstly, I would like to apologise for the confusing start to the Spring Term. I wrote to you on Monday regarding a staggered return to school and mass testing arrangements only to find that the government decided to change tact and move to a full lockdown Monday evening.

Yesterday saw the start of remote learning for all students and this is now expected to stay in place until February Half Term. We will be planning for a return of all students on Monday 22nd February unless lockdown is extended for our area.

We held a feedback meeting after school on Wednesday and I was delighted to hear from so many teachers how positive they were about our students' attendance, participation and eagerness to get back to learning. I recognise that online learning is no substitute for the classroom but we are trying to deliver as many live lessons as possible through Microsoft Teams and relay work and resources through Show My Homework. Once again, if you are experiencing technical problems with gaining access to either Teams or SMHW, please contact our IT help desk using the email: [itstudentsupport@birchwoodhigh.org.uk](mailto:itstudentsupport@birchwoodhigh.org.uk)

With yesterday's announcement by the Secretary of State that GCSE, A Level and BTEC exams would be replaced by Teacher Assessed Grades, we will be working as quickly as we can to work out the requirements from the examination boards. These are likely to include mock exam results, assessment marks and class work. To this end, it is really important that students in Year 11 and 13 continue with their online lessons so their teachers can inform them in due course about how they will be centre-assessed. As I explained to my Year 11 Geography class, we need to continue to work as if there are public exams, in order to motivate and ensure that they do their very best and achieve the highest grade they can. Once I am clear about our methodology and have had further guidance from Ofqual and the exam boards, I will inform you as soon as possible.

Linked to the announcement on Monday, we have also taken the decision to cancel the Year 12 and 13 BTEC and LiBF external exams due to take place. It would be unfair to have our students sit an exam when many other students will get their grades based on teacher assessment. This combined with the risk of Covid-19 infection at the moment meant that this decision had to be made but, once again, I apologise for the short notice - not of our making.

Other news: We have had record numbers of Sixth Form Applications (150 Year 11 students) along with 120 external applications. We will be contacting all applicants shortly with next steps and an opportunity for an online meeting. Equally, we had the largest number of students applying for a place at University in my time at Birchwood. This makes a lot of sense. The next three years should be more stable at University and this gives our students an opportunity to graduate into a more optimistic post-Covid world. We also had a record number of applications for places in Year 7 in September (over 900) despite having to rely on a 'virtual' Open Evening. We will do our very best to work with other local secondary schools to ensure that all local children are prioritised and that no-one has to be bussed out of Bishop's Stortford.

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I am sure that things will return to normal at some point but in the meantime I know my staff will work their hardest - we miss having students in school - we did have over 40 key worker children in yesterday - but this is not the same as 1400 students! Thank you for everything you are doing at home and if you do need any help or support please let your child's form tutor know. We will respond as quickly as we can.

Stay safe.

Yours sincerely

*Chris Ingate*

Dr Chris Ingate  
Principal