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To All Parents/Carers
St Benet's MAT Academies and Schools

Dear St Benet's Parents/Carers,

I last wrote to you in July as the academic year was drawing to a close and we were looking ahead to September with hope in our hearts that life would have returned to something much closer to 'normality'. One month into the new term I feel the need to write to you again with an update on the situation facing the schools in St Benet's MAT.

You will recall the national lifting in July of various measures including bubbles, Test and Trace and self-isolation and will be aware that we continue a strong focus on hand washing and ventilation. The impact of these changes can be seen in our towns and villages as more and more people return to the workplace and choose whether to wear a face covering or not. Life really does appear in those settings to be returning to normal. There is less and less coverage of COVID in the media and nationally the numbers of people testing positive, numbers of deaths and hospitalisations are falling. This is of course all good news.

However, and this is the point of my letter, the situation nationally in our schools is very different. COVID cases amongst schoolchildren have surged to a record high. New cases among 5-14 year olds increased by 80% week-on-week to 811 per 100,000 in the period ending 19th September, eclipsing their previous peak recorded in late July. This group is seeing the fastest rise in cases, more than any other group across the country.

Every one of our Headteachers is following the guidance from the Department for Education to the letter, as they have always done. Whatever our views, politically or otherwise, this has to be the correct way forward. The government guidance to Headteachers is clear in stating that the *'priority is for you to deliver face-to-face, high-quality education to all pupils. The evidence is clear that being out of education causes significant harm to educational attainment, life chances, mental and physical health.'*

The full guidance can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/schools-covid-19-operational-guidance>.

One of the key differences from previous guidance that affects children, parents and staff is the new approach to isolation: *'Staff who do not need to isolate, and children and young people aged under 18 years 6 months who usually attend school, and have been identified as a close contact, should continue to attend school as normal.'*



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This approach has, understandably, caused a considerable degree of concern across our school communities, particularly given the rise in cases amongst school children. I want to reassure you that our Headteachers are obliged to follow this advice and are in constant dialogue with our Head of Operations at St Benet's, the Local Authority and Public Health England to ensure that they are supported in making the correct decisions. Should this advice change then our Headteachers will of course respond accordingly.

Our Headteachers and I are very grateful for the support that you have given the staff across all of our schools over the past 18 months as they continued their work during this unprecedented period. As we enter what is rapidly becoming the most challenging time within that period I ask that we continue to work together to provide the best for the children in our care through following the government guidance.

On my visits to our schools in the first 3 weeks of this term I was delighted to feel the positive atmosphere amongst staff and children and to feel that sense of hope that I talked about in July coming to life at long last. The last fortnight, as we have seen cases rising, has clearly challenged all of us and dented that hope. However, before long, I believe that together we will get through this latest hurdle and look back with a real sense of pride and achievement.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Cranmer
Chief Executive Officer