

HM Assembly: Thursday 19th March 2020

Thank you all for gathering. This is indeed a gathering and I suspect that some of you will be wondering whether we should indeed be gathering like this. If you are asking this question, I would simply say this: we are a community and part of what holds a community together is being together. We have been eating together; meeting together in House; we have been together in lessons and activities; we are together now as a School.

So, this is a necessary whole school gathering. There will be no Chapel or year group assemblies tomorrow morning: this is our last whole school gathering for a while. There are some important messages to share with you all now, as we are moving into a different mode of activity over the coming weeks, and the remote learning programme begins on Monday 23rd March.

We have been travelling through uncharted territory; and these are uncertain times. I want to pay tribute, again, to you all for the way you have conducted yourselves, in particular over the past few weeks. I also want to thank my colleagues, sitting behind me here, and all those in other places and roles in the School, for the phenomenal effort that they have been putting in to care for you and keep you learning.

Human beings don't much like uncertainty. We like to know what is coming next. We may like the odd surprise – pleasant ones – but as a general rule we want to be in control of what happens to us. We like to be in command of events. However, we are all living in times where events are controlling us.

Conscious that this makes us uncomfortable, I am reminded of the words of the great Maya Angelou, who said: “You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them”.

We are Shrewsbury School and we will not be reduced by these events. The stage we are moving into now, means that we are going to disperse for a while. This is something that we do every holiday: we disperse across the country; we disperse across the world. And then we come back together. This time, as we return to our families and guardians, we are not sure when we will all be back here together. This will become clear in time, but for the moment, we become a virtual community. What I want to emphasise is that, even though we are dispersing for the Easter period, we are still a school, still a community. The digital age gives us multiple ways to keep in touch. You can keep in touch with one another. We can keep in touch with you.

There is great strength in community and we can continue to draw strength from each other. However, the truth is that these coming weeks and months are going to challenge us as a civilised society; and they are going to challenge us as individuals. Much will depend on the attitude we bring to our own individual circumstances.

Ten days ago at a similar assembly I spoke about the coronavirus Covid-19. My message aimed to raise awareness of the need for good hygiene; civilized behaviour, civic good sense, concern for others and a 'keep calm and carry on' approach. I said that I didn't know whether School would close but I thought it likely we would be going into a significant period of disruption, with ongoing pupil and staff absence. I said that we will be delivering a remote learning programme so that each of you will be able to continue your academic progress and preparation for summer exams.

Yesterday afternoon's announcements from the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Schools told us two new things.

Firstly, that all schools in England will close their doors at the end of this week. This is country-wide. It is part of the effort to limit the spread of the virus. The UK government wanted to keep schools open for as long as possible. However, the decision was taken yesterday that schools must close their gates on Friday afternoon. As a boarding school, we have asked your parents to arrange for you to be at home or with guardians by lunchtime on Saturday; many pupils have already headed home. Let me clarify three things:

- This is not a decision we have taken ourselves. It's a national decision.
- The School will still be operational next week. We have a duty to stay open for children of key workers – that includes people who work in the NHS, the police and other public services, for example.
- We are still open for all of you as we deliver our remote learning.

So, we are not in fact closing: rather, we are moving into a different mode, with the remote learning programme running all of next week for all pupils through to the published end of term. In other words, we will keep you learning. Clearly, all the other things we do together here in the co-curricular programme and house life will stop. But learning, where practicable, will continue remotely.

Secondly, yesterday evening we were told by the Secretary of State for education that the summer exams would not go ahead.

I want to speak now to those of you in public examination years. The Fifth Form and the Upper Sixth. Yesterday was very big news. I feel for you. You have every right to be disappointed; worried and confused. You have taken a big shock.

I want you to be clear that this news landed with us at the same time that it landed with you. We heard through the BBC. I can share with you my frustration that schools were given no warning; no hint – in fact, quite the reverse – of this decision. We were given no heads up and therefore no time to think carefully on your behalf about how we might support you for this news. I would have liked it to be different for you. However, these are unusual times.

The wording used yesterday was that exams would not happen in May or June. Then the wording was that they are cancelled in England and Wales. Whilst the wording could change again, it looks pretty clear that exams will not happen as scheduled this summer.

As it stands today, schools have been given no details on how GCSE and A Level qualifications may be awarded. We don't know yet how university and higher education establishments will make decisions on offers. We will get this clear in the coming days. As soon as we know, you will know.

We also need to recognise that the Government is dealing with an unparalleled challenge and we need to accept that we have to be flexible, adaptable, calm and responsible. We also need to ask the right questions and get sensible answers for you.

In the meantime, there is only one prudent message to those of you in exam years: please don't let up. The only sensible assumption at this point, even with yesterday's announcement, is that you may well need to show your knowledge and skills in some kind of formal way. It is hard to remain clear-headed and motivated when the finish line seems to have been moved or even erased. But our strong advice is to keep your game head on and keep preparing. Especially until more details are known in the coming days.

There is a more profound reason for this.

In the case of Fifth Form, whether or not you sit in an exam hall, your GCSE learning is fundamental to the next stage of your academic journey. You have been building a foundation, layer by layer, brick by brick, for the studies that

follow. No learning is ever wasted. Nothing you have done has been lost. All your GCSE subjects develop skills that will then flow into your A Level studies.

Some of you may even have been punching the air, celebrating, feeling that the pressure is suddenly off. Please, think again. Think bigger.

Most of you will be disappointed at the sense that you have done all the training but don't get to run the race. I get that. We will continue to support and monitor your progress. We need to see you continue to engage and to learn.

So, my message is don't write anything off; don't underestimate the value of the knowledge and skills you have built up. Don't lose momentum. Don't switch off.

Turning to pupils in the Upper Sixth: I have been trying to put myself in your shoes. I really feel for you. What is the good news? Is there any? Well, we have been told that pupils should not lose the chance to go to university. We wait to see what this looks like but there is a promise there that we expect to be delivered. An announcement is expected tomorrow.

Again, just as with those a couple of clicks behind you in Fifth Form, you need to keep on top of your learning. You need to maintain momentum and be prepared. We don't yet know how university places will be confirmed and how assessments may be made. It is hard to keep training for an event that has been changed, deferred, apparently cancelled. But you need to keep in training.

So, my academic message is this. Keep to your academic programme. Be prepared to showcase your knowledge. And remember that this is also about momentum; maintaining the pace, focus and agility of mind that you will need to carry into your studies after Shrewsbury.

There is a broader social and personal development element too. The final year of school is one of culmination; a rite of passage into the next stage; a series of markers to be enjoyed in the doing and savoured in the remembering. It also a year of leadership; and mastery – that sense that you are on top of your game and yet with everything ahead of you. The bonds of friendship run deep after several years of co-travelling. You deserve the right to earn the next stage in your journey; in most cases, that means a university place. Perhaps more deeply, you only get one opportunity to leave School. You also deserve to finish school well.

I talked earlier about that fact that we are now dispersing. And we don't exactly know when we will be back in full session with everyone here on site. I make this commitment now to the Upper Sixth:

We will get you together again; and we will celebrate you. We will find ways for you to be together, to mark your time here. We will see you off well and ensure that you end your Salopian career on a high. Please, don't feel that you need to create events and moments in the next 48 hours. Now is too early. We will work hard to make sure you have the rites of passage that you deserve.

It is my firm belief that the Upper Sixth help set the tone of the school. You are leaders. We look to you to see what a Salopian is. You are absorbing a range of uncertainties. And I don't undervalue that. But, there is also opportunity in all this.

We all of us need to close this section of the term in an orderly and considerate way. Staff have been working flat out on our behalf; we all want to say our farewells – our 'see you soon's' – in the best possible way.

Turning to non-exam years – the Third Form, the Fourth Form and the Lower Sixth. You too are facing disruption and a new normal. Remote learning is now our key mode of delivery. Inevitably, for a while, elements of our diverse programme and all that this means for us, are on hold. You do need to keep learning and we will keep you on it. This is a massive opportunity to get ahead and make incredibly valuable intellectual and academic progress. Please, seize it.

All of us need to seize this opportunity to deepen our skills; read more widely. We don't want to fritter away our time in an orgy of Netflix and gaming binges. We can use this time to become better thinkers; cleverer problem-solvers; more creative collaborators. The Salopian spirit is one of enterprise and adaptation: we need to be true to this spirit as we enter a full, demanding and meaningful programme of remote learning.

I have always said, and firmly believe, that school is not about the gathering of certificates. It is about deep learning. Now, more than ever, is the time to show this truth.

Widening our focus back to the whole school, and hopefully without being patronising, or devaluing all the feelings, worries and frustrations you may be experiencing, I do want to ask that we all keep a big perspective. And think of others as well as ourselves.

We need to:

- look after our physical health: staying active; getting exercise. We may need to be inventive – loads of good creative ideas on the web
- look after our mental health
 - try to avoid obsessive following of the news – I am going to limit myself to a couple of downloads a day; keep informed but deal in fact
 - Try not to obsess on a spiral of ‘what if’s’ – there are too many of them – we need to deal in the immediate; control what we can control; looking after others’ health is good for our own wellbeing; we need to be grateful.
 - It’s important to connect with the natural world; get fresh air; sense the gradual arrival of spring; notice and appreciate things of beauty – this may sound a bit soft, but this is really important and good for all of us
 - We should use this time to try new things; read new books; do practical tasks that mean we produce things of value and give us a sense of positive control and growth
 - We need to help each other keep perspective and stay positive
- Continue to observe the good hygiene guidance that we have all been given - especially on handwashing
- You need to support your parents: they are dealing with incredibly heavy and diverse burdens themselves – they have all kinds of challenges to face. You can play your part in so many ways. Each of us needs to support our family.
- We are Salopians and we are also citizens of a nation and citizens of the world. We need to play our part. I ask you to think about how you can actively help your local communities when you are home.
- Finally, we have an overriding civic duty to follow Government directions on social distancing; protecting the elderly and the vulnerable; behaving responsibly; taking only what we need; thinking of others; and helping to slow and limit the spread of COVID-19.

So, to close.

We are social animals and we will miss being together. These times will test us all. Stay in touch with each other – and with the School.

This place has been around a long while and it is not going anywhere. I live on site and so do 70 of my colleagues. Many of us will be in and around School throughout the Easter period. Next week we will be delivering the remote learning programme and planning for delivery next term. This term's formal learning concludes at the end of Friday 27th March. A core team will keep the school open and running as necessary and appropriate over the Easter period. Our commitment is that the summer term will start on 21 April and that we will all re-start then, most likely with our remote learning programme.

In the meantime, we want to navigate the next 48 hours cheerfully, calmly and co-operatively. I know that you will help us to do that.

This is a time for each of us to show what we are made of. Our school motto tells us: "*Intus si recte, ne labora*" - "If right within, worry not". It seems right to ask - what does this actually mean, now, here, in these unprecedented times? I think that it means that we need to show character. We need to live out our Salopian virtues: to show wisdom, kindness, courage, integrity, self-mastery, and spirit. We are a community of learning. And we will continue to be a community of learning in the weeks and months ahead.

I'm deeply proud of the people you are; and the people you are becoming. Try to find opportunity in these unsettled times. Keep learning.

I wish you and your families well.

We'll stay in touch.



Floreat Salopia!