

**St Mary’s Catholic School**

*where everyone can succeed*

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25th March 2020

Dear Students, Parents and Carers

I hope you are all keeping safe and well in these challenging times. School remains open for a small number of children in defined categories who cannot be safely cared for at home. So far, very few are needing to come in and we are managing with a very small number of staff in school to ensure the safety and care of the children. I know all other students will be heeding the latest government instruction to stay at home and only go out with those in your households for a bit of exercise.

This letter is to share with you **initial advice** from the school in response to the government’s initial announcements about GCSE/A level grading and to calm any worries about this. We are aware of unhelpful speculation across the education sector about this, so soon after the initial announcement about exams. As a result, we thought some initial advice would be helpful to students and parents. **Our advice will be on-going and may change, once further information is known.**

Before looking at exam grades, however, I wanted to say to all students how proud I was of your maturity last week, when faced with the realisation that you would be leaving at short notice and that your exams were cancelled. All of us at school really felt for you, as both of these things must have been very difficult to accept. Thank you so much for your cooperation over those last two days. Your mature attitude helped us deal with everything we had to manage. I repeat the promise that when this situation passes, we will invite you to a proper leaving day and a Prom.

I am sure you were disappointed with the lack of clarity from the government on Friday about the exam situation. Unfortunately, there is still no further detail. I am sending with this letter, information that has been published. This includes a brief statement from the exams’ regulator **Ofqual** anda slightly more detailed government statement including quotes from the Secretary of State Gavin Williamson which we have combined into one document for you. A separate document from **Gov.UK** called **Coronavirus: Cancellation of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020** is also attached**.** Rather than you having to trawl through all these similar documents, I thought this quick summary of key points and advice might help. The italics below are extracts from published information followed by initial advice from the school.

* *This year’s summer exam series, including A levels, GCSEs and other qualifications, and all primary assessments, have been cancelled as we fight to stop the spread of coronavirus.*

**ADVICE:** **The exams are cancelled and will definitely not be happening. This decision will not change. Avoid listening to speculation that this decision might somehow change as this will only cause you unnecessary worry.**

* *The ‘calculated grades’ (*that GCSE and A level students will receive*) will take into account a range of evidence* and there may be more information *‘in the coming days’.*

**ADVICE:** **For now, avoid listening to unofficial speculation about how grades will be calculated. It may also just cause you unnecessary further worry. No one knows the details of this yet.**

* *In terms of a permanent record, the grades will be indistinguishable from those provided in other years. We will also aim to ensure that the distribution of grades follows a similar pattern to that in other years, so that this year’s students do not face a systematic disadvantage as a consequence of these extraordinary circumstances.*

**ADVICE: This means that this year’s students will get 1-9s (GCSE) or A\*-E (A Level) as in previous years and the proportion of students getting each grade nationally will be similar to previous years, so this year’s students aren’t disadvantaged (this is a bit like what happened when GCSEs changed from letters to numbers and exams became harder). You won’t, however, all just get ‘national average’ grades either because we know that national averages are made up of a wide range of individual students’ performance, with some likely to achieve around the average, some above average and some below. A school’s historic ‘track record’ will almost certainly be reviewed to check that there is no over-inflation of grades by any schools. In terms of ‘track record’, St Mary’s obviously is in a strong position due to our ‘well above average’ student performance in recent years.**

* *Universities will be flexible and do all they can to support students and ensure they can progress to higher education.*

**ADVICE*:* This is good to note and entirely expected. Universities will want this year’s A level students to join them, as soon as the crisis is over. It is in their interests to have strong numbers of students on their courses, when normal education starts up again.**

* *Teachers will be asked to submit their judgement about the grade that they believe the student would have received if exams had gone ahead. To produce this, teachers will take into account a range of evidence and data including performance on mock exams and non-exam assessment – clear guidance on how to do this fairly and robustly will be provided to schools and colleges. The exam boards will then combine this information with other relevant data, including prior attainment, and use this information to produce a calculated grade for each student, which will be a best assessment of the work they have put in.*

**ADVICE: No detail about how the above process might work has been shared or agreed with schools. For example, we have no idea yet about how much importance will be given to each of the different factors mentioned like mocks, non-exam work, other assessment, prior or previous attainment, or the catch all above ‘other relevant data.’**

**However, no one piece of evidence such as mocks will be the key factor, as schools all take different approaches to timing and content of mocks, so that would be unfair and won’t happen. I hope that reassures you all. One of the documents also makes clear that students won’t automatically get their predicted grades, as again, schools take different approaches to that. So again, avoid worrying about that. In fact, avoid listening to all speculation about how calculated grades will be determined and don’t try to speculate yourself. This may cause you unnecessary worry.**

**Be reassured also that schools won’t agree to a process for ‘calculated grades’ that gives credit for work done after Friday March 20th. This should not happen for the important reason that, following the closure of schools, there is no longer what we might call ‘a level playing field’ for students or schools. For example, after March 20th, some students could unfortunately fall ill, some could be caring for family members, some students’ teachers could be ill for a long time, some students could have easier access to on-line learning resources than others, some could have different home situations more suited to extended home study and so on. It would not be fair or reasonable to say ‘it was the same for everyone’ after March 20th. As further reassurance, the national Secondary Schools Headteachers organisation ASCL has also advised that schools should not be asking students for new work.**

**Avoid worrying, therefore, if you hear other students saying they are being told to continue studying specifically towards this summer’s exams (which aren’t happening), as if this will somehow be credited in the calculated grades. Nowhere in the statements does it talk about work after the 20th March counting towards grades. An FAQ asks** *Will be parents be expected to educate their children at home while they are off school?* **And the answer given is simply**… *We are completely committed to ensuring that every child receives the best education possible and will be working with the BBC and others to provide resources for children to access while at home.*

**The initial government statements make reference to ‘***an exam’* **being available** *‘early in the next academic year’* **or, as the Secretary of State calls it ‘***at the earliest reasonable opportunity***’. In other words, we don’t know when or what these ‘***exams***’ will be – there is certainly nothing to suggest that they will be a case of the exact May/June exams pushed back into the autumn. Furthermore, the content and format of any new exams would need to be made explicit with proper advance notice so all students nationally have the same opportunity and preparation. Most importantly, keep in mind that the** *‘exam’* **is something that would only apply if a student was unhappy with any of their calculated grades and also after an appeal process against such calculated grades had run its course and a student was still unhappy. Hopefully, this will affect very few students anyway.**

**We will also of course be able to support anyone wanting to prepare for potential** *‘exams’* **at some future point, once we know what these look like. There will be plenty of time for that.**

**For the above reasons, therefore, and because there is nothing in the official publications to suggest that you need to be continuing to study hard at this point, we are not recommending that you do so. Hold on to any written work you have at home, whether GCSE or A level, though again, I must stress that we are not expecting to have to submit student work to support teacher judgements that feed into calculated grades. This is just general advice in case you need your work at some future point.**

**You may, as students, cause yourself unnecessary worry and stress if you felt that you have to keep going with serious study straightaway, as if the exams were somehow going to happen in May/June. We know they are not. The decisions of last week were an awful lot for you to take in and, no doubt, many of you are still coming to terms with this. Our immediate advice, therefore, three days after the school closure is that you take a break and make your priority staying safe and well and supporting your families.**

**We are promised clarity and detail ‘in the coming days’ from the government. Once we have this, we will digest it and respond accordingly to support you and make sure you understand how ‘calculated grades’ will be determined and allow you to share anything you feel is relevant about this at the appropriate time. Rest assured, we will not allow you to be disadvantaged over others in the same boat.**

**Separately, as I explained to Y11 and Y13 before they left, we will be in touch again soon, most likely straight after Easter holidays, about advice, guidance and preparatory work which we will provide, on an on-going basis, to help prepare for Sixth Form, College and University, as we appreciate students cannot and would not want to take a break of several months from their learning*.***

I hope that this initial advice from the school provides some reassurance. I would be grateful for the time-being, if specific questions could be held back, as we have limited staff capacity to follow up. I hope everyone keeps safe and well at this challenging time.

Thanks for your on-going support.

Yours faithfully



J Foster

Headteacher