24th August 2020

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I hope that you and all your families are keeping safe and well through these unprecedented times. All our lives have changed quite dramatically since last March when the schools were closed at short notice. The board of management and all the staff of the Mercy are looking forward to opening up and welcoming everyone back to school.

Construction work to upgrade the labs is ongoing so certain parts of the school are not accessible to school staff or students at the moment. There will be extra traffic and heavy equipment around the school grounds. We ask that you explain to your daughters the need to be extra careful and vigilant of such construction traffic and equipment.

In order to re-open our school in as safe a manner as possible it has been necessary to make many structural and administrative changes. We were guided in our work by the documents produced by the DES. You can access all the documents and supports provided for schools, parents and students on the gov.ie/backtoschool website including:

**Reopening Our Schools- The Roadmap for the Full Return to School** and

**COVID-19 Response Plan for re-opening post-primary schools**.

The board of management has met and signed the COVID-19 Policy Statement and work is ongoing to facilitate a full return to school. The following changes have been adopted to date and will be subject to ongoing review:

1. **Updated Return to School Schedule**

**Wed 26th Aug 2020:** 09.00 - 14.00 Staff only

14.00 - 15.00 LCA parent/student induction

**Thurs 27th Aug 2020: Staff Day – staff only**

**Fri 28th Aug 2020: Staff Day – staff only**

**Mon 31st Aug 2020:** 08.55 – 12.00 1st year induction - meet in PE Hall for assembly

13.30 – 14.30 TY 2019/2020 Closing Ceremony

**Tues 1st Sept 2020:** 08.55 - 11.00 6th years registration in PE Hall

**Wed 2nd Sept 2020:** 08.55 – 11.00 3rd year registration in PE Hall

08.55 – 15.55 6th years – follow timetable

14.00 – 15.50 TY registration in PE Hall

**Thurs 3rd Sept 2020:** 08.55 – 11.00 5th year registration in PE Hall

08.55 – 15.55 6th years – follow timetable

09.30 – 12.30 1st years – follow timetable

**Fri 4th Sept 2020:** 08.55 – 11.00 2nd year registration in PE Hall

08.55 – 13.10 1st and 6th years – follow timetable

**Mon 7th Sept 2020:** 08.55 – 15.50 Full resumption for all

1. **Class based classrooms**

Students are assigned to a class group as usual. Each class group is assigned to a base classroom. Where possible we have assigned classes from the same year group to base classrooms in the same area or zone. The students will remain in the base classroom for core subjects where possible and practical. The teachers will move from room to room to teach classes. Students may need to move to specialised rooms for optional subjects eg home economics, music etc, and to another classroom in their zone for higher/lower level subject classes.

1. **Staggered breaks and lunches**

Staggered breaks will be introduced to enable physical distancing to occur as outlined below. Hopefully this will reduce the number of students on the corridors, using bathrooms and around the school at any one time.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Times | Junior School | Times | Senior School |
| 8.55-9.35 | Period 1 | 8.55-9.35 | Period 1 |
| 9.35-10.15 | Period 2 | 9.35-10.15 | Period 2 |
| 10.15-10.55 | Period 3 | 10.15-10.30 | Break |
| 10.55-11.10 | Break | 10.30-11.10 | Period 3 |
| 11.10-11.50 | Period 4 | 11.10-11.50 | Period 4 |
| 11.50-12.30 | Period 5 | 11.50-12.30 | Period 5 |
| 12.30-1.10 | Lunch | 12.30-1.10 | Period 6 |
| 1.10-1.50 | Period 6 | 1.10-1.50 | Lunch 2 |
| 1.50-2.30 | Period 7 | 1.50-2.30 | Period 7 |
| 2.30-3.10 | Period 8 | 2.30-3.10 | Period 8 |
| 3.10-3.50 | Period 9 | 3.10-3.50 | Period 9 |

1. **Arriving/Departing to/from school**

The main gate, the gate opposite the front door and the PE hall gate will be open for entry to the school. Students are asked to enter the main building via the front door or lift door. Entry to the PE Hall or to the prefabs will be via the PE hall gate. Classrooms will be open from 8.30am. Students must go to their appropriate classroom and must not linger on the corridors. During the school day students may exit to go to the PE Hall, prefabs, field via the back door. At the end of the day when departing for home students must leave the school by the designated door.

1. **One-way system**

A new one-way system will be trialled for movement along the corridors. Students must follow the arrows on the one-way system.

1. **Face Coverings**

The health advice is that where 2m physical distance cannot be met then students and staff should wear face coverings. Classrooms are now set up with 1m distance between the students. This means that students will be required to wear face coverings (masks preferably) during classes and between classes. Students should have at least 3 re-usable masks and masks must be washed at the end of each day. If a student cannot wear a mask for medical reasons then a visor will suffice. Students will need rest breaks from mask wearing at times during the day eg lunch time, classes getting a break outdoors etc.

1. **Books/Stationery:**

If you were unable to collect books under book rental scheme earlier in August then they will be given to your daughter in September. Journals will be distributed as soon as possible following payment of €10.

Initially we are asking all students to keep their textbooks at home. Students will need to bring in copies, pens, pencils as usual. Teachers will advise students when they need to bring a textbook to school. Please note that in the current climate students are not permitted to share school items so care is needed when packing school bags.

1. **Deep Clean**

The whole school was thoroughly cleaned during the summer.

1. **Appointments**

If you wish to meet with a member of staff during the school day you will need to have confirmed appointment. Please call the school office on 051 - 373476 to arrange an appointment.

1. **Charges**

Should you need to come to school to make payments before the school re-opens to students please wear a mask or visor. You may also pay by electronic transfer. Please make sure to give your daughter’s name as the reference in the transfer. Thank you to those parents who have already made payments.

1. **Access to toilets**

Students will have access to toilets but only a limited number of students may access the toilets at any one time.

1. **Isolation Room**

In line with the guidelines we have a number of dedicated isolation rooms for students that may display signs of COVID-19. If a student presents with symptoms she will be escorted to the isolation room. Her parents/guardians will be contacted so that they may arrange collection. We kindly request that in such circumstances you would collect your daughter as promptly as possible.

1. **PE Hall**

We are retaining our PE Hall so that PE classes may take place. The showers are not available for use at this time. The Hall may also be used for gatherings of large groups of students (eg assemblies) with the students arranged in class pods.

1. **PPE**

Hand sanitisers will be available in all classrooms and throughout the school. There is soap and water in the bathrooms. Students must clean their hands when entering or leaving the school building and when entering or leaving each classroom.

All staff and students must keep their own space and personal belongings clean during the day. This means that your daughter will need to wipe down her chair and desk at intervals during the school day. Sanitising spray will be available in the classrooms.

Your daughter will receive training on covid-19 procedures when she returns to school.

1. **Ventilation**

Ventilation is required in classrooms. This means that doors and windows will be open a lot of the time. As the weather gets colder layers of clothing may be needed to keep warm eg thermals underneath uniform. it is recommended that all students have a warm, waterproof coat (with a hood or else bring an umbrella) as some classes may take place outdoors. Students will be encouraged to take breaks outdoors as much as possible.

1. **Students with conditions that place them at high risk**

The school will try its best to provide guidance and support to high risk students where possible and practicable. We are awaiting further guidance from DES on how to support high risk students.

1. **Visits to the school**

* Visitors will use hand sanitiser if given permission to enter the school and give their details in a log book that may be used for contact tracing if necessary.
* Physical distancing of 2 metres should be maintained with visitors where possible.
* Parents visiting for a meeting with a member of staff will be **by appointment only**. The meeting will be facilitated in a way that observes physical distancing requirements. When parents arrive for such an appointment they must wait in the foyer until the staff member is ready to meet them.
* We are asking parents to refrain from visiting the school except in the case of an emergency. This means that you should ensure that your daughter has everything she needs before leaving home in the morning eg copies, coat, lunch etc. Regretfully we will be unable to accept the drop off of forgotten items at this time.

1. **Key points for parents**

* Parents should not send their children to school if the child has symptoms of a viral respiratory infection or if there is someone in the household suspected or known to have COVID-19.
* Parents are not to bring their daughter to school if they have been identified as COVID-19 contacts.
* Parents are to ensure students (as appropriate) are aware of the reason why they should not attend school if they have respiratory symptoms.
* Parents are to ensure are aware that if they develop signs or symptoms when at school they should inform the school immediately.
* It is unlikely to be practical to ask students to declare that they are symptoms free on arrival to school. However, I am advising parents now that the school reserves the right to decline entry to students who appear to have a fever or respiratory tract infection.
* It is vital that parents ensure that they have provided **up to date contact numbers** to the school so that they can be contacted to collect their daughters from school in the event of illness.
* Once we are back in school, the most up to date guidelines around travel will apply to schools. If your daughter travels to a country that requires quarantine after your visit there, your daughter will have to stay home from school for the designated period and please inform the school.

It is essential that school, parents and students work together to keep everyone safe in this new environment. In the documentation received from the DES we are all asked to accept that no interpersonal interaction or activity is without risk of transmission at any time. We all need to have a heightened awareness of standard infection and control procedures. All of us are required to know:

* the symptoms of this disease
* how to protect ourselves and each other
* how to recognise and report the symptoms of COVID-19.

We all need to do everything we can to avoid the introduction of COVID-19 into the school. If the infection is uncommon in the community then the likelihood of introduction is much lower. It is incumbent on us all to follow the advice and recommendations of the HSE/DES. We all have a collective and a personal responsibility to ensure adherence to the health and safety procedures. The key recommendations are:

* Minimise the risk of infection – exclusion of students, staff and visitors who are ill
* Manage the risk of spread of the virus by implementing the following:
  + Regular hand hygiene
  + Physical distancing
  + Application of respiratory hygiene and cough/sneeze etiquette
  + Environmental hygiene.

Please discuss these recommendations with your daughter and ensure she knows how to perform hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette effectively. We will reinforce these messages in school.

**CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS**

1. Monitor your child’s health and keep them at home from school if they are ill. If your child is not displaying any symptoms such as fever or a cough it is best to keep them in school. If your child develops COVID-19 symptoms, seek medical advice by calling your GP. Remember that symptoms of COVID-19 such as cough or fever can be similar to those of flu or the common cold, which are a lot more common. If your child is sick, keep them home from school and notify the school of your child’s absence and symptoms.
2. Teach and model good hygiene practices for your child. Wash your hands with soap and water frequently. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based sanitiser. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty. Ensure any waste is carefully disposed of. Cough and sneeze into a tissue or your elbow and avoid touching your face, eyes, mouth and nose.
3. Encourage your child to ask questions and express their feelings with you and with any of their teachers. Remember that your child may have different reactions to stress, be patient and understanding.
4. Prevent stigma by using facts and reminding children to be considerate of one another.
5. Coordinate with the school to receive information. We use email/text/website/phone to communicate with you. Please continue to check email and make sure we have up to date contact information for you.

I know there is rather a lot of information included here but I would greatly appreciate it if you read through this letter with your daughter and stress the importance of understanding and adhering to our new situation.

If you require any additional information, please contact the school office during office hours. Meanwhile we will continue to prepare for the re-opening of our school and we are looking forward to welcoming all the girls back to the Mercy.

God bless and stay safe,

Mary Meade

Principal