

Dubai English Speaking School

PO Box 2002

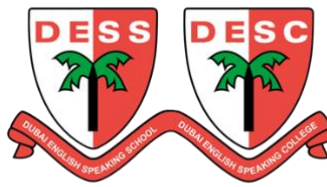
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HEADTEACHER

Catherine Dando

HEADTEACHER

Chris Vizzard

31<sup>st</sup> December 2020

Dear Parents

I hope this finds you well and that you managed to enjoy some downtime with your family and friends over the last few weeks.

Apologies for writing to you on New Year's Eve, however I want to impart some important information about next week that it has not been feasible to share with you before now given the need to seek a dialogue with, and approval from, the KHDA on the back of the new direction of travel where Covid19 is concerned. Today I received the requisite approval from the KHDA to proceed with a decision I outline below.

After a lot of deliberation, reflection and consultation it has been agreed that DESS and DESC, very regrettably, will not be opening for in-person learning on Sunday January 3 for the first week of term, with an exemption for Year 11 at DESC who are sitting their mock/rehearsal GCSE examinations; given the ongoing uncertainty about the 2021 exam season for UK curriculum schools the data derived from these mocks may well form part of centre-assessed grades should these be required (as they were last year) to determine final grade awards.

I should point out this is not a sector-wide mandated decision from the KHDA. It is a decision we have made for our two schools. Others may decide to do similarly, or not. That is their choice, ones that I respect whichever path they choose to follow.

**The duration of this period of closure is one week in the first instance;** at the end of the week, we will review matters and decide about the following week based on the data around infection rates among our children/students, families and staff. I apologise profusely for the childcare imposition on parents of our younger pupils at such short notice; this is not a timeline of our or anybody else's choosing.

We very much hope we will be able to open for Week 2, and for now that is our default setting. What we need is visibility on the impact of potentially higher rates of infection following the Winter Break, for reasons I am sure you are all familiar with via news outlets over recent weeks.

What are our concerns?

We have a very significant number of families who have travelled overseas, many of them to the UK which, as you will know, is experiencing a rapid rise in new Covid19 cases courtesy of a new mutation of the virus that by all accounts is 50-70% more infectious than any previous variation. South Africa, also with a new variant, has been another country DESSC families and staff have visited over the break.

Regardless of where people have been, however, there is an added risk of exposure to the virus that means we are concerned about the impact on two sizeable, busy school environments, one with 1000 pupils (DESS) and the other with 1700 pupils (DESC). Add to that 460 staff members across the two schools.

For families and staff that have stayed in Dubai over the break there will inevitably have been occasions when people have, naturally enough, enjoyed social interaction in a variety of settings, some of which have meant the potential for an increased risk of viral transmissions.

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In addition, we have had a spike in numbers here in the UAE over the last two days, with today being the second day running where the highest number of cases have been reported since the beginning of the pandemic: over 1700 on both days.

### What are the kind of scenarios that concern us?

- Most obviously increased numbers of infections, for health reasons, among all our stakeholders - children/students, families and staff. We did a fine job, led by our outstanding health practitioners, and by virtue of all the measures put in place and adhered to, in terms of suppressing transmissions in both school's last term. However, larger numbers of infections (as it appears will be inevitable), fomented by a more aggressive variant of the virus will be a very difficult situation to contain.
- In the case of staff: candidly, we had 'pinch' moments last term where staff absence (either as positive cases or through contact tracing) that stretched our staffing resource very considerably. And this without the added complicator of a new, more infectious variant of the virus. Over 100 of our staff travelled overseas, many of them, like our parents, to see family for the first time in over a year. Should enough of them, and their colleagues that stayed, be incapacitated owing to positive tests or direct contacts, then we will be faced with making ad hoc, daily, reactive decisions about which year groups can and cannot be in school.
- Crisis management of resources and operations that mean the focus is merely on virus suppression/'firefighting' and that quality learning experiences become a secondary consideration. In this case online learning is a markedly preferable, more effective tool and option.

For the sake of a five, possibly ten-day buffer between the end of a break where so much has changed in terms of infection rates and speed of transmission, I hope many of you will concur with, and support, our course of action. Mindful of the adage 'You can't please all the people all the time' I equally hope that whilst others will fundamentally disagree with us, they will respect the reasons for our decision. One thing I believe we can agree upon, however, is that you, I, our two sets of staff, all of us don't like it as an alternative to being in school, in-person.

This is not a decision taken lightly, especially after being able to offer fourteen weeks of unbroken on-site learning to all our children/students since the beginning of September (save for periods of time where Covid positive results and contact tracing led to enforced absences, plus those among our two communities who for medical reasons decided to pursue the online learning option from the outset). Having three children of my own who, like so many of their peers, have very much enjoyed being back in school as opposed to the March-July online phase, means personally and professionally this is a message I deliver with a heavy heart. It is though in our view, on balance, the right thing to do in the current climate.

Mr Vizzard and Mrs Dando will be writing to you tomorrow to confirm the details of online learning provision for next week; in Mr Vizzard's case to also confirm the arrangements for our Year 11s and their mock examinations. As a precursor to his message, I can confirm that if our Year 11s are reliant upon a bus service this will be provided; further details to follow.

### DHA health/travel declarations update

As you will be aware the DHA have stipulated that for all pupils to be readmitted to schools a [health/travel declaration](#) must be submitted to us within 48 hours of going on school premises. **For our Year 11s this**

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**must be completed this weekend.** For all other year groups this will need to be done 48 hours before their new start date - so January 10, all being well, or January 17.

PCR tests will need to be provided **ONLY** for all students and staff that have travelled outside the UAE and seek to rejoin DESSC within 14 days of their arrival back in the country. These tests should be no more than 48 hours 'old' and must be conducted in the UAE. **Again, Year 11 will need to provide them this weekend;** for all other year groups it will depend on their new start date (and if it does turn out to be January 17 only those pupils who arrived back after January 3 will need to retest as everyone who arrived on or before that date will have completed their 14-day period back in country).

A final couple of observations:

To the question 'What happens if this continues beyond January 17?'. Well, if it does, we will almost certainly be in a period where school closure becomes mandatory for all; it will no longer be a decision we take independently of others. So, as things stand, that is firmly the limit of our unilateral approach to this issue.

For all the apparent 'doom and gloom' that some of you may read into this message: we are confident, as are many others from different walks of life, that with the advent of vaccines we can look forward to better times ahead in 2021. 2020 has had such a devastating impact on so many people and taken its terrible toll in so many ways. For our children who have been deprived of so much that we, and they, all largely took for granted prior to March of this year, I have every faith their tolerance, patience and stoicism will be rewarded with a better, brighter, happier future; something I wish for all our pupils, parents, families and staff alike.

As a message someone sent to me earlier today read: 'I'm going to stay up until midnight tonight. Not to see the New Year in, but make sure this one leaves.'

I wish you all well and, most of all, a happy and healthy New Year.

Yours sincerely

Mr Andrew Gibbs

Principal / CEO of DESS and DESC