

A Governor's Perspective on Coronavirus

My experience, as Chair of Governors at Bannockburn Primary School, an inner-city primary school in the Royal Borough of Greenwich with 900 plus pupils, has been a very positive one, in terms of the way in which the school has responded to the crisis. Once the possibility of schools' closure was announced, way back in March 2020, there was a determination to put together work-packs which children could manage at home, with systems set in place to enable parents/carers to return the work and collect new packs. Communication with parents has taken a variety of forms, including regular newsletters on the school web-site, emails, telephone conversations and in some cases home visits, especially with families identified as vulnerable, and written feedback for the children on their work. Central to the process of making the school as safe as possible for an increasing number of pupils from mid-June has been the drafting of the risk assessment and planning document. This 20 page document has drawn on guidance from the government, the local authority, the professional unions and specialists in the area of risk assessment. It was informed by consultation with the school staff and at the end of the day it had to be formally approved by the school governors. It was meticulous in its coverage of all aspects of the school's functioning, including health and safety matters relating to the school building, the measures for social distancing within the classroom and elsewhere, the provision for school lunches, policies for ensuring staff and pupil wellbeing, protocols for communication with parents and fellow staff etc. Once formally agreed within the school, the document was then reviewed by LA officers who provided feedback on its contents. It has continued to be updated with the review of research evidence and changing circumstances in school, including the return of the whole school population in September. The process of minimizing risk could not have been more rigorous!

Face-to-face contact has been out of the question for school governors, so we have been dependent on other forms of communication, including the *new* world of Zoom technology. The standard termly cycle of meetings with the full governing body meeting being supplemented by sub-committees addressing particular areas of concern (Finance and Personnel, Premises and Curriculum) was replaced last term by a more prioritised approach with the retention of the full governing body meeting supported by a *steering group*, consisting of the Head, Chair of Governors and the Chairs of the sub-committees, who will have met virtually three times this term. In addition, the Chair and Vice-chair were invited to all the Zoom briefings for new members of the teaching team joining on-site as pupil numbers increased and as Chair I have been consulted on the key communications to parents/carers. I have written two letters as well, wearing my hat as Chair, to clarify our continuing role in support of the school. This term (Autumn) with the resumption of *normal* schooling, we have reverted to our standard schedule of meetings but for the time being on-line.

In May the government was urging schools to extend pupil numbers across particular age-ranges from the start of June with a view to the provision of normal schooling for the whole of the primary sector for July. But there was strong opposition to this proposal for July, because it was seen as inconceivable that schools would be able to maintain social distancing

(with the two metres norm) as well as accommodate the entire school population in existing buildings. Some of us voiced this dismay in a survey conducted by the National Governance Association at the time and we were very relieved when the Prime Minister announced a U-turn on this matter. Some also had strong misgivings about the choice of reception and year one as the year groups to be prioritised in June (alongside year 6), given their developmental needs with regard to close social and physical contact and their capacity to respond to radically different schools' settings. It would appear, however, that pupils in general have coped remarkably well with the change of ambience, showing a degree of resilience and adaptability which has impressed staff. **This capacity to cope with changed routines, more restricted social arrangements across the school community and significant changes in the physical settings of classrooms with furniture arranged more traditionally, has been maintained with the full return of all age ranges this term. It is to the credit of all concerned that pupils have responded to this shift of ethos with great fortitude and flexibility.**

Another aspect of the current scene which has intrigued me has been the extent to which members of the school team since March have kept in touch with each other during lockdown and have taken steps to organise their own social events on line, such as quizzes. One cannot under-estimate the importance of the social capital, which is generated by such ventures, for maintaining the sense of professional community. I was impressed by their generosity of spirit to contribute to an emergency NHS fund in Lewisham by making a donation for each social event attended, raising well over £500. I was able to play a small role in this process by compiling a music quiz, which was great fun to administer, courtesy of zoom and am planning to do something similar in December! Planning for this term and for next as well as getting together packages for the summer vacation has also obliged the team to come together virtually. Irrespective of whether they have been part of the core team on campus from the start of the lockdown, they have all played their part in maintaining the school provision. I suspect that they will come out of 2020 with an even stronger sense of loyalty to the school than before.

I view with great interest how schools in general embark on the journey to educational recovery through the current academic year. Will the *catch-up* philosophy result in a narrowing of pupil experience with the strongest emphasis being placed on the core subjects and other areas treated as marginal? How are schools responding to the social imperative of re-integrating pupils back into school life? How are they dealing with the painful experiences of some children who have come face to face with family illness and in some cases the loss of a loved one? How long will it be before schools can safely extend the walls of the classroom by taking the children out into the local environment or further afield to museums, concert halls, field-centres and parks? **The absence of this dimension of school life which takes children beyond the school gates, enriching their social/cultural lives, is a serious deficiency and one can only hope that these opportunities will be re-opened sooner rather than later.** This is a particular issue for schools such as ours, serving a community where there are relatively high levels of deprivation, overcrowding and poverty and where the opportunities for *getting out* can be seriously limited. Outdoor education, drawing on the school's own resources, is now given greater prominence at Bannockburn as a result of the pandemic and one suspects other schools are following a similar path. How can the new virtual technology be harnessed constructively to support learning? Direct human contact is integral to the quality of the educational process and its motivation, but there is little doubt that the

potentialities of virtual technology are still to be tapped. The future for schools could not be more challenging!

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October 2020