

## Keeping the focus on Support and Community in Uncertain Times

We have been so happy to be back on the wonderful Merchiston campus since April this year following an absence of 4 months. The buzz has been uplifting and, although we have remained under safety restrictions, being back together has felt like a step in the right direction. Perhaps the highlight has been the chance to step away from the reliance on technology which, although it has kept us connected and allowed the boys to keep making progress, it is no substitute for being together in person.

We have all found ourselves thrown into a closer relationship with digital technology than we would have envisaged just a few short, although it seems long, months ago! The benefits have been clear, with online teaching, videoconference house meetings, social activities and quizzes, school services and more. However, these have brought challenges and who would have thought that online learning could be so intense and exhausting for both pupils and staff. Also for parents, I hasten to add! Now, we are back to school, but there may yet be interruptions when pupils have to go back online due to the renewed impact of COVID-19, so we targeted a seamless transition as our priority to reduce the anxiety of any further face to face teaching being lost.

Over Summer Term 2020, in all of the hard work to quickly shift to online learning, to support examination candidates who felt deeply worried about how the system would work and to reassure staff and parents, it quickly became apparent that the focus on wellbeing was of even greater importance. Now, as we come to the end of the second academic year that has had interruptions, the uncertainties continue to challenge our approach to wellbeing and support.

The initial burst of excitement and relief on returning to school has been tempered by fresh challenges to pupils' mental wellbeing when it became clear that school is not the same as it was, however much we all try. Face coverings, hand sanitiser by the bucket, wiping down desks and physical distancing are just a few of the obstacles to a "normal" school experience and we must be receptive to what our pupils are reporting.

What about looking after those pupils in the public examination year groups for 2021? No public exams in 2020 required a greater focus on supporting pupil wellbeing. Will the centre-assessed grades system effectively reflect the hard work of each young person? Will this be fair for all if pupils have had their education interrupted? Will there be any recognition of the interruption to their learning? How can they feel reassured that they will not lose out? So many questions and so many unknowns for all. It was never harder to plan, but it has never been more important to have done so.

At Merchiston, in the absence of certainty, we decided to model a calm, reassuring and resilient approach to the changing landscape. This continues to be a time for schools to ensure that their communication is clear, reassuring, honest and based on the strong trust and support built with our pupils and families. It has been important to keep us all connected to our shared community. If we have failed to build this trusting relationship then we will struggle to offer the support our young people need.

The strength of a school environment where the foundation of every activity is built on wellbeing considerations has borne fruit in these two academic years of hardship and stress for so many. If young people and staff are used to talking about their wellbeing then they will react openly to our questions about how they are feeling about the new approaches that we have all had to put in place, and then amend! In fact, the willingness to listen and change shows that you care and trust the input of your pupils and means that more effective solutions

can be put in place. There is nothing worse than someone thinking they know how to deal with a completely unknown challenge.

So how can we support our pupils, staff and parents now and going forward into the next academic year? Again, the answer seems simple; clear planning, good communication, a strong rationale for how you will support every individual and offer parents access too. In this period of uncertainty, one thing we can be sure of is that the triangle of school – student – home offers a solid foundation. Merchiston is a community built on kindness and this has allowed us to navigate these stormy waters together.

Yes, it is as simple as continuing Merchiston's core commitment to offer caring support for each individual to ensure the best outcome. We have also seen the importance of our wider Merchiston community who have joined us through these difficult times and we hope to keep this connection going forwards.