

 Ballydown Primary School & Nursery Unit

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 Principal: Mr B Murphy M.Ed. B.Ed. PQH(NI)

Dear Parent

We are glad to have almost reached the end of the term with all of our pupils safe and well. It has been the most unusual and difficult few months for us all. We had planned and hoped that January would have allowed us a return to some normality in school. However, despite a vaccination programme starting, we are still a long way off from being clear of the threat of Covid.

I know a number of you have asked if and when school times can return to normal. It is something we had hoped for and one which we have given careful consideration to. Schools last week received information from the Department of Education saying that we need to be prepared for further disruption to the school year in January and to have plans in place for the possibility of further blended and home learning. This is something we hope will not happen, but realistically, and from what the experts are predicting, it may be the case.

By keeping the school day to single pickups it is allowing us to continue to maintain class bubbles and very importantly it is limiting the social contact adults are having with each other. We want to do everything we can to limit the spreading of the virus, especially amongst adults, many of whom are grandparents, who do pickups. By doing everything we can to minimize the spread of the virus we aim to continue keeping classes in school and avoid the necessity for having to send classes home to isolate. Current predications and rising Covid cases means we are very reluctant to make any changes until we see what happens in January. We will review the situation prior to half term.

We understand that you may be concerned that KS2 children are missing out on teaching time in the afternoons. We would like to reassure you that we are doing everything we can to ensure children are not disadvantaged. With the changes to the school day and because of the restrictions that are in place we are maximising teaching time and have also taken a number of steps to make the most of children’s time in school:

* The earlier start to the school day from 8:45am allows teaching to begin at least 15 minutes earlier.
* To allow for distancing and class bubbles to be maintained children have a shorter break and lunch, which gains 10-15 minutes teaching time per day.
* There are no weekly assemblies, which accounts for at least 1 hour extra of teaching time per week.
* There have been no class trips or outings, as well as no visitors to school, this term. Normally children will have had at least 2/3 days out of class per term and there is usually at least one class visitor in school (e.g. coaches, talks, topic visitors, etc.) per week.
* KS2 pupils would usually have a weekly swimming lesson, which again takes 2 hours out of their class time.
* To ensure we can maintain class bubbles our staff remain with their class the whole day. Teachers supervise all playtimes and do not get a break from this; resulting in more teaching time in the classroom.
* Children have a very long day in the classroom due to shortened breaks and limited movement around school for activities, clubs, sports etc.
* From mid November- December is usually spent rehearsing and preparing for our big Carol Service. Again because this was cancelled teachers gained a lot of additional teaching time in the classrooms.

In conclusion, despite the earlier finish and all of the changes to the day, we have had no real reduction in the length or quality of teaching time. Please rest assured we are doing everything we can to ensure your child receives a high quality education, despite all of the problems going on around them. As you know the staff in Ballydown are doing everything they can to make school as safe as possible and to maintain high standards of teaching and learning.

We really value your continued support and understanding at this very difficult time. We fully appreciate the efforts you are making and the commitment to deal with any inconveniences the changes to the school day means. If you have any concerns at all, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am at the front of school in the mornings and afternoons or phone/email me at any time.

Finally, may I take this opportunity to wish you all a very Happy Christmas and a peaceful, healthy a prosperous New Year. Enjoy and appreciate the time with your families.

Yours sincerely

Brian Murphy

Principal

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