

Dear parents and carers,

I am delighted to see school coming back to life, and to say that our new students in both Year 7 and Year 12 have made a very positive start. It is a strange way to start secondary school, which is in itself a big step: the first thing we do to our new students is stick a plastic probe up their nose. More on the lateral flow tests and on Covid contingencies later.

I promised an overview of some development priorities, and a statement of our values in this letter. I will confess (with apologies to our lovely parent governors who will be reading this) that I did not think, on going into it, that the Saturday we spent discussing vision and values in June was likely to be time well-spent; school and business websites drip with vision and are stuffed with values, most of them hot air. I was afraid that we would spend the morning dipping into a smorgasbord of cliché, and larding the air with pseudo-management buzzwords, before triumphantly coming up with a flabby mission statement, along the lines of ‘proactively engaging with stakeholders in the education space in order to help securing the brightest future for all young people’, when I thought ‘we are a school and we want to educate kids’ more or less summed it up.

I was wrong. What comes below is the result of those discussions. I think it actually has meaning, and is a decent representation of what we believe at Cheney. We have discussed it with the staff as well, and I think we have very broad agreement on the overall message; it has spawned some interesting conversations, and I have some suggestions from colleagues of things to include in future iterations. It is a collaborative but not a democratic document, and it certainly isn’t authored by committee, heaven forbid. In short, I welcome comments and reactions from everyone, which may (or may not) be reflected in future versions. I have also agreed with the English department that our motto would be better with a semicolon; I’m all in favour of semicolons, and of our motto, and will put that into practice straight away.

Values

We are a school: we will educate a new generation to view the world critically, make their own decisions, and act in a way that benefits the wider community, not just themselves. This is summed up in our motto: “think for yourself; act for others”.

Cheney is a genuinely comprehensive school, in the best sense of the term, with a fully inclusive intake, which represents not just our catchment area, but also modern Britain. The ideals of the comprehensive movement have been met in Cheney, in a way that is very rare.

We value creativity over conformity; education over league tables; the needs of students over data; self-discipline over sanctions; nuance over simplification; curiosity over acceptance; honesty over reassurance; the judgement of our community over the judgement of the

official world. We value emotional intelligence equally to academic intelligence; well-being equally to success; self-knowledge to factual knowledge; humanity to rigour.

This is not to say that the things we value less are worthless; in their place, and in their time, quite the reverse. In fact, we believe that if we get the first things right, the second will follow.

Development priorities

Teaching and learning: we have a well-developed plan to raise the standard of teaching in every classroom, and to eliminate variability between colleagues and between departments. This is not a criticism, and does not imply that standards are not already good; rather it is a recognition that teaching is a profession that is reflective and endlessly self-critical, and we can all improve, no matter how experienced we are. A lot of this is about maintaining or refining current practice, and in a few cases (for example the books last year often looked terrible) returning to the standards we used to have before Covid prevented us doing a number of basic things. We are very lucky at Cheney that we have a staff body who all want to get even better and all agree on the direction of travel, and I am very much looking forward to concentrating a lot more on *teaching* this year.

Respect for Learning: nothing fundamental is changing in our behaviour system, but we are simplifying and clarifying the rules and our systems. If everyone, both staff and students, know exactly what the rules are, and why we have them, it will make it easier for everyone to behave well. I would much prefer a discipline system that relies on self-directed behaviour than on consequences and punishments. Detentions and other sanctions will always be part of a well-regulated school, but if the rules are easy to understand, and applied as consistently as possible, then fewer will be necessary. We have therefore condensed all our rules into just three:

- Be ready.
- Be respectful.
- Be your best.

These are of course overarching rules, but we believe first that any undesirable behaviour will fit into at least one of these rules, and secondly that a long list of increasingly prescriptive prohibitions do not add to clarity, or improve behaviour. For example, noisy loitering in the corridor instead of going into class certainly shows that the students concerned are not ready to learn, are not being respectful either of their teachers or of the other students whose lessons they are disrupting. Likewise insisting on coming to school in the incorrect uniform shows a lack of respect for staff, and a lack of readiness.

Inclusion: we have put a lot of thought into the provision for our children with the highest needs over the last year, and we have increased provision accordingly. We now have 3 specialist provisions running in school:

- Cheney Plus, which is long established, and is a permanent provision for children who struggle with mainstream classes.

- School Within a School, which started last year, and is a short term placement of 6 or 12 weeks for children at risk of permanent exclusion to help regulate their emotions and their behaviour.
- ‘Star’ and ‘Up’ classes in Years 7 and 8, with continuity in Year 9, are starting this year to meet the needs of children who come from primary needing literacy or numeracy catch-up (Star classes), or with social, emotional or mental health needs (Up classes).

We are also introducing painting and decorating as an entirely vocational course in Years 10 and 11. If possible, we hope to introduce carpentry next September. These courses aim both to provide highly employable skills, which will hopefully lead directly into apprenticeships, and to help some of our students re-engage with school. We are also running a pilot scheme this year for flexi-schooling (as far as I am aware, we are the only secondary school in the country doing it), building on some of our expertise in blended learning: this is to give access to school for children currently home-educated.

Of course, we also have put a lot of thought into those with the greatest need to be stretched as well. A Level provision has expanded to include psychology, which is very welcome, and we have made sure that highly academic courses such as further maths and languages are given the proper amount of time, and we have a Latin A Level class; if it is worth doing, it must be done properly, and a truly comprehensive school does Virgil as well as literacy (more on our university destinations below).

Investment in equipment: we have replaced the IT in Lane and Wainwright blocks over the summer, and we are aiming to do Chadwick over the course of this academic year. We will also be replacing various other bits of IT infrastructure (such as the phone system, which is antiquated) and the CCTV network. There are other significant expenses coming in the near future, such as several of the boilers for a number of blocks, but the priority for this year is to make sure the classrooms are properly functional. We also have a redecoration plan, although this will be piecemeal until we have all the classroom teaching equipment up to standard.

Major building projects: it is no secret that our buildings are old and substandard. We have bid for several grants to redo blocks that are at the end of (and rather beyond) their reasonable lifespan, but so far we have not been successful. Of most concern is Chadwick, which contains English and Art. I am afraid that it is likely that we will have to close Chadwick this winter if there is a cold spell (morning temperatures of 3 degrees in some classrooms last winter), which will cause major disruption. There are several things we are trying, before we get to that stage, and I will report more fully on plans for this towards the end of the month.

Finance: parents will remember the poor financial situation of the school 18 months ago, and the consequences of that. I am very pleased to say that the budget is now balanced, and looks likely to remain stable into the foreseeable future. A balanced budget does not give us reserves, however, or allow us to plan for full refurbishment of teaching blocks a decade hence. I am fairly confident that we will manage to make some financial improvements, without having to sacrifice things we consider essential for good education and pastoral care, or the investments mentioned above. The money remains tight, and we will have to be very disciplined about expenditure; there is no getting away from the fact that £6,000 per student per year for everything is not very much. I will share a fuller financial update towards the end of the month.

Destinations: you may recall that I have said that I do not believe in learning loss for students at Cheney (granted, some children have struggled badly, but equally some have thrived with online learning, hence the flexi-schooling pilot mentioned above). I hope that the destinations of our leavers show this:

Year 13

7 students won places at Oxbridge this year:

- Zev Bitel - History at Oxford
- William Deacon - History and Politics at Cambridge
- Isaac Jackson - English at Cambridge
- Lidiana Mottram - Chinese at Cambridge (after gap year)
- Jude Smith - Maths at Oxford
- Darcey Snape - PPE at Oxford
- Joined by Katie Heneghan from last year doing Medicine at Oxford.

Wajid Latifi and Yara Alsouleman (both Year Fourteen) won places for Medicine at Southampton and Leicester respectively.

88 students were placed at their firm choice, and 3 at their insurance choice. 31 students have places at Russell Group universities.

3 students are doing Art Foundation, 33 are taking Gap Years and/or doing employment of some kind (including Fintan Fox, who is working for a start-up company), and 2 are starting apprenticeships.

Year 11

We still have some of the destination forms to collate for Year 11, so I do not have the full picture. What I can say with certainty is that our students' destinations are at least as good as in previous years, if not better. We have 136 in Year 12, and I am not currently aware of any student who does not have an appropriate place for the new academic year, although there are some students we are not sure about. I will include a fuller report next week.

Covid update

We have completed our first round of Lateral Flow Tests. Of the entire school, there was only one positive result. I will admit that I was anticipating significantly more than this; I am afraid that it is inevitable that we will see cases in school in the coming weeks. Our contingency plan to reimpose some of the control measures from last year is below, and will be on the website next week.

Because of the low current level of cases in school, we will start with assemblies in person (masked) and with using the PE changing rooms. Students must come in their normal uniform, therefore, please.

Please remember that self-isolation now only applies to those who have tested positive. Close contacts (including family members) should book a PCR test, rather than self-isolating.

August 2021 - Covid contingency

DfE contingency framework:

[Contingency framework: education and childcare settings](#)

DfE operational guidance:

[Schools COVID-19 operational guidance](#)

Measures in place:

1. Keeping symptomatic cases out of school: ongoing communication with staff, parents and children.
2. Individual risk assessments for all staff as appropriate.
3. Hygiene and cleaning: hand sanitiser; “catch it, bin it, kill it”; cleaning of desk spaces as part of start of lesson routine; enhanced cleaning of site.
4. Lateral Flow Tests: 2 asymptomatic tests at the start of term; ongoing home tests.
5. Ventilation: site team checked all rooms before the start of term; windows and doors to remain open where possible, including at break / lunch and overnight; staff to report poor ventilation; CO2 monitors are due to arrive from DfE; ways of improving ventilation will be explored, within the bounds of what is possible.
6. Track and Trace have taken responsibility for contact tracing, but school will in addition send a warning email to parents when a child in the same class has tested positive, encouraging PCR tests.
7. Staff briefing will remain online.
8. If assemblies are in person, masks will be worn.
9. Ongoing compliance with PHE / Track and Trace advice.

Contingencies:

Level 1: 2 or 3 confirmed cases in a year group.

1. Assemblies revert to online.
2. PE changing rooms taken out of use; students come in PE kit.

Level 2: several confirmed cases in one or more year groups, but not qualifying as an outbreak (see contingency framework): the cases are not clustered, but appear to be separate.

1. Staff training and meetings move online.
2. Masks again become compulsory inside.
3. Limits on visitors.

Level 3: depends on advice from PHE, but is in the event of a significant outbreak. Measures will be imposed following advice, but may well include:

- Separate entrances and exits.
- Split break and lunch.
- Canteen service reverts to take-away only.

- Limits on clubs, performances and extra-curricular activities.
- Isolation of larger groups, up to full or partial closure of the school.
- Introduction of asymptomatic testing in school for groups, or the whole school.

Rob Pavey
Headteacher