



**Loreto Secondary School,
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Monday, 14 December 2020

Dear parents/guardians and students,

An indication of how turbulent 2020 has been for us all is the fact that this is the 22nd letter to families that I have issued in the course of the year.

In this letter, I wish to focus on three particular areas, as follows:

End of Year - Thank You

As I have done repeatedly throughout the year, I wish to thank all members of the school community for their tremendous co-operation, goodwill and determination.

No words can adequately express my gratitude to the teaching staff. From working remotely with students for nine weeks prior to the summer, teachers found themselves since September masked and behind perspex screens with up to 30 different students every 40 minutes in a 49 square metre room. Some staff have done this whilst being in the high risk category in the event of contracting Covid-19. Teachers have worked diligently to make up for lost ground due to school closures since March 12 and have provided re-assurance to students facing State examinations next June. They have dealt with much-changed work practices in a most co-operative and understanding manner and have done all in their power to make their classrooms safe for their students, even to the extent of sanitising desks every 40 minutes. In their pastoral roles, many teachers have provided support and guidance to students who are struggling for a variety of reasons. They have found new ways of doing things, particularly in the context of extra-curricular activity, to ensure a good and safe overall school experience for their students. The innovative approach adopted in Transition Year stands out as a particular beacon in this regard with the empowerment of so many hard-working and creative sub-committees of students linking in with their teachers.

Students have co-operated magnificently with all requests made of them in relation to Covid-19 preventive measures. I have thanked them all in person at socially-distanced assemblies in recent weeks. Wearing a mask from arrival in school each morning until departure in the evening has been extremely difficult but they rose to the challenge. Our 145 sanitising units are in constant need of re-filling, such is the high level of use that they get. Students have understood that many of their favourite extra-curricular activities could not proceed as normal e.g. training, competitive matches. However, they have been innovative in coming up with many activities that could proceed in a safe manner e.g. Think Languages Day, Random Acts of Kindness Week. They have filled the corridors, classrooms and General Purpose Area with noise, busyness, music and good cheer since the start of September, all of which makes the immense effort to keep schools open so worthwhile.

For a long number of years, Loreto has been blessed by the presence of a most caring, committed, flexible and hard-working team of non-teaching staff. The friendly faces and great efficiency of reception, secretarial, SNA and catering staff have provided a vital support to the full school community. They have risen to every challenge presented by this most demanding of years. Their focus has always been on doing the right thing whilst maintaining the good cheer, warmth and humour that has been a hallmark of their workplaces over the years.

Our school buildings and grounds occupy 10 acres and have to be ready and safe for use by more than 900 people on a daily basis. This is no easy task. It is right and proper as we come to year's end to formally thank all those workers and officials in companies and other bodies who maintain and oversee the new Loreto campus – facilities management staff, health and safety manager, cleaners, contractors, the Public Private Partnership Company and the National Development Finance Agency. They have never wavered in their support or determination to ensure that all the required safety measures were in place throughout the year.

I have been greatly assisted in my work throughout the year by the constant availability of the Deputy Principals. Emails, phone calls and texts have flown between us at all hours of the day and night, weekends and holidays since last March in an effort to keep our school functioning as smoothly as possible. No demand made of them has ever been too great.

The school's Board of Management continued to meet on a monthly basis in 2020. As well as dealing with issues relating to the pandemic, many other routine matters had to be considered so that the Board could meet its full range of statutory responsibilities. That this was done with the Board's customary efficiency is a tribute to its members' deep commitment to the school and sense of duty. All members, particularly the chairperson, were available to me at any time throughout the year to assist and advise as required.

I wish to say a particular thank you to all Loreto parents and guardians. I know from your correspondence how difficult a year it has been for many. You have had to deal with so much – worry about your daughters' education and wellbeing, job uncertainty, financial stress, illness, loss of loved ones, anxiety, fear and isolation. As a parent of four myself, I think it is probably fair to say that we have all experienced many dark days and moments since last March. Despite all of this, you have given great support to your families and I am sure that, when we all come out of this nightmare, you will once again be thanked for your role. You know what I mean when I say that your joy in sending your daughters out the door every morning to school is matched by our joy in seeing them come through the Loreto door. We all realise that the girls need routine,

structure and the opportunity to socialise with friends in school. Thank you, in particular, for your understanding of so many new practices around school and also for your financial support in such trying times for so many.

We must keep it going

The first half of the school year has been safely completed. However, we can take nothing for granted and we must ensure that we all keep our guard up in our collective effort to keep Covid-19 out of our school. The imminent arrival of various vaccines, when combined with existing preventive measures, should mean that a high level of normality will return to our lives in the course of 2021. Until then, maximum vigilance is essential.

I ask for your support with the following specific measures for the remainder of the 2020/2021 school year:

- Low rates of Covid-19 in the local Wexford community will increase the chance of keeping the virus out of Loreto. That is what we all want. Our individual and collective behaviour over Christmas and the New Year must be consistent with this aim. Please act on Public Health advice over the forthcoming holiday period to reduce social contact as much as possible.
- We must all maintain our observance of other public health measures to which we have become so accustomed this year – mask-wearing, frequent and thorough hand sanitising, social distancing and the avoidance of crowded indoor spaces.
- Students must not come to school if unwell or displaying any symptoms of Covid-19. I am worried that some parents have, in recent times, sent unwell students to school “to see how you get on”. Invariably, Reception staff have had to phone such parents to collect daughters within an hour of their arrival. Put simply, that is entirely unacceptable and poses a threat to the full school community.
- No student should attend school for 14 days after her return to Ireland following foreign travel and must be completely free of any Covid-19 symptoms when she does eventually come to school.
- In line with the normal school year cycle, the pace intensifies considerably when we return in January. 3rd and 6th year students will, at that stage, be only four weeks away from mock examinations. The build up to Junior and Leaving Certificate oral and practical examinations will then commence. From Easter there will be only eight weeks before the written State examinations in June. Any school closure from now on will have very serious implications for 3rd and 6th year students in particular. We owe it to them that they will not face the stress and uncertainty experienced by their fellow students in 2020.
- Parent-teacher meetings cannot take place this year in line with Public Health advice. Detailed reports will be posted home for all students on 4 January, in March for 3rd and 6th year students and in June for all 1st, 2nd and 5th year students. A parent/guardian

wishing to discuss any aspect of her daughter's education is warmly invited to contact the school to speak to any member of staff.

- No one wants to see a return to enforced school closures in 2021. Our individual and collective behaviour will determine whether this is necessary or not. However, all students must be ready for this possibility, should it materialise, and must ensure that they have the know-how to deal with remote teaching and learning requirements. Mr. McGinnity and Ms. Curran, along with the student digital leaders, can provide any assistance that may be required.

Best Wishes

In this, my last communication with you for 2020, I wish to conclude by wishing all Loreto students, parents and guardians a very safe, happy, relaxing Christmas and New Year.

We have come through a most difficult 2020. Let us all look forward to the better days that should come our way in 2021 if we all continue to play our full part.

Yours faithfully,

Billy O' Shea,
Principal and Secretary to the Board of Management.