KLA through the Coronavirus Pandemic – A Summary

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, we at King’s Lynn Academy have repeatedly adapted our procedures to try to protect our pupils’ education from its worst effects, as well as ensuring that our school community, especially staff, are kept safe and healthy at all times. We have continually reviewed and checked the plans we have in place, leaning on support from the Eastern MAT, the DfE and the Norfolk Public Health Outbreak Management Centre.

We know that parents, pupils and the KLA community will have worries and concerns about the potential impact that could be caused for our young people by over twelve months of continual disruption, including over six months of school closure and off-site learning for most of them. This summary attempts to share the actions that the school has taken already to safeguard our pupils’ wellbeing and learning, as well as posting early suggestions of what we may look to do in the coming months and years to make sure that we meet our own determination to make sure that KLA pupils do not suffer adverse experiences or outcomes as a result of these challenging times.

**Providing for our community**

Throughout the pandemic, we have been very clear that we wanted to continue to make sure that KLA is a place of strength and confidence for our community. From the outset, at the beginning of the first closure in March, we have worked hard to make sure that we look after all of our pupils and their families as far as we possibly could.

* We made sure that we were always open in that first lockdown, including Easter and bank holidays, to provide support for pupils from critical worker families – we did not ask for evidence of proof of status, and had one of the highest rates of in-person attendance for secondary schools in Norfolk throughout the first closure.
* We extended our own definition of ‘vulnerable’ pupils to capture any pupils whose parents were concerned about the potential impact of the pandemic on their children, regardless of whether or not they met the definition provided by government, and invited those pupils to attend. This was the case in the first prolonged closure and has continued into the current subsequent one.
* We worked in partnership with our local primary schools to offer and provide space for their Year 6 pupils to attend KLA in the summer term when they were being asked to return to school, thus freeing up those schools to offer more places to younger pupils. This also meant that those pupils who were about to transition to KLA to being their Year 7 in September were able to benefit from a form of transition that the restrictions had otherwise denied them, helping them to be readier to start secondary school in September and providing a boost to their mental wellbeing and confidence.
* Our Design Technology department used their skills and 3D printer to make PPE for local healthcare settings, including the children’s ward at QEH, which were enthusiastically received.
* The school operates two specific facilities for our most vulnerable pupils – for those who display the most challenging behaviour and who need the highest level of support, our Forward Step provision is in place. For those pupils who arrive with the weakest academic levels, our SEN nurture provision, the CUB (Catch-Up Hub) provides small group immersive support. Both of these facilities have remained open for pupils who have been entitled to attend throughout, with high numbers attending both throughout the pandemic.
* Usually we hold a KLA Community Christmas Dinner in the Christmas holidays for the local elderly and lonely population. Although that was clearly not possible this year, we felt it was more important this year than ever to make sure that they knew that KLA pupils were thinking of them. As a result, the team at KLA launched the 100-hamper challenge to provide and deliver Christmas hampers to 100 local residents, who had previously been invited to the Christmas Lunch that had had to be cancelled.
* We have tried to communicate as frequently as possible with our community throughout the pandemic, believing as we do that this is at the heart of building confidence – even when we do not possess the answers to the questions the community are asking!
* We have been privileged and delighted with the parental and community feedback the school has gathered throughout. With many parents taking time to write to or email us with their thanks and praise at every stage – this is very much appreciated and provides some evidence for the quality of the school’s response throughout, whilst never allowing for any complacency.

**Lockdown learning**

Throughout the pandemic we have been striving to keep pupils focused and learning, despite the unnerving circumstances. Although the requirements for providing remote education came upon us very quickly back in March 2020, we managed to maintain learning provision throughout the first closure, mainly by use of the off-site learning Apps we already had in place, as well as school set tasks and feedback via Go4Schools.

When Year 10 returned to school for catch-up teaching in very small, very intensive small groups in June, we began to develop an approach that we felt would be more robust and would help us to deliver online teaching when necessary in the future. In the summer we therefore trialed the use of MS Teams extensively to deliver full lessons, hoping to ensure that pupils who were forced to study at home, for whatever reasons, could access their lessons live online. This was successfully developed and when pupils were required to self-isolate in the Autumn term, they were able to benefit from this provision.

The following characteristics of lockdown learning have been apparent at KLA

* In the first closure, our online provision, although limited, did reach approximately three quarters of pupils successfully, with that proportion of pupils regularly completing work set. Around 40% of pupils completed essentially all work set, with around a further 35% completing half to most.
* Around one quarter of pupils in the first closure did not engage with home learning to the fullest extent that we would have liked, with access to technology and pupil disengagement the most likely reasons for this.
* By the time of the second school closure, beginning in January 2021, we had taken delivery of and distributed 144 laptops from the DfE, including to all those pupils who had shared their limited access to technology with us. We also distributed a number of wireless internet dongles to those families with no internet access.
* Following extensive planning and trialing during Autumn term 2020, all pupils and staff have been developing their ability to use MS Teams. Although occasional glitches and issues remain (technology is not always our friend!), the success of live lesson delivery of most lessons has enabled KLA pupils to access a virtually full timetable of teaching and learning every day, with high attendance levels being seen throughout. This is the expected mode of lesson delivery in all years and in most subjects, and has worked successfully.
* These two developments to our provision have helped increase levels of high pupil engagement to over 90% in the second closure in January 2021.
* Where pupils are found to be not engaging in live lessons their parents are contacted and they are strongly encouraged to take up a school place onsite to ensure that they do not fall behind. Heads of Year complete daily monitoring of attendance and engagement to make sure that these pupils are identified and contacted.
* We have learned how important it is to be able to respond with speed and agility to pupils’ queries when they are unable to access or log into their online platforms. We created a small team, with their own contact via a dedicated email address, who have been exceptionally proactive in responding to such queries – nearly always within an hour – and getting those pupils back online as quickly as possible.

**Keeping everyone safe**

Given that school closures are part of a targeted response to a public health emergency, it clearly has been of the very first importance throughout that KLA takes every necessary measure to ensure that pupils and staff are kept safe within school, and that safety protocols for covid-19 are well constructed and complied with to keep family members and the wider community safe. This has been achieved with support from Eastern Multi-Academy Trust, which provided draft protocols and checklists for creating covid-secure conditions, and by external Health and Safety expertise that has reviewed our detailed risk assessments and operating procedures.

The success of these can be seen in the following information:

* There have been very few confirmed cases of coronavirus within the KLA community – less than 10 in total since March 2020 – with no outbreaks or clusters designated by the local public health authorities as a result of any of these cases.
* Mitigations in place to stop transmission of the virus on-site at KLA have been reviewed and found to be good, by both public health authorities and H&S inspectors
* Where we have been providing food via the canteen, the local authority Health inspectors from the Food Standards Agency have visited site and found all expected protocols in place and observed.
* The closure risk assessments that we created foreground the need for those staff and pupils who are considered to be at enhanced risk from coronavirus to be able to work from home to avoid unnecessary contacts.

**Assessment and Qualifications**

An identifiable difficulty in the delivery of remote learning is the need for protocols for assessing pupil progress and for teacher feedback to pupils. For those pupils facing certification for GCSE qualifications this year in Year 11, this is especially vital – and problematic when the current situation really does call for electronic remote submission of work rather than handwritten work that can be marked traditionally.

* In the first school closure we relied heavily on electronic submission of pupil work via email and using Go4Schools as a tracking mechanism. We did discover that the electronic submission via email, although generally appropriate and successful, did incur a high tariff in terms of staff time and workload – this method was laborious and took longer than traditional marking.
* In the current lockdown and school closure, we have been making greater use of the facilities afforded by MS Teams for submitting, assessing and feeding back – using the ‘chat’ and ‘assignments’ functions available within it. In addition, we have continued to use AI-driven online applications, such as Hegarty Maths, PiXL English and Kahoot, Quizlet and other remote forms of question and answer to enable staff to ascertain class understanding and security of knowledge.
* Staff are continuing to improve and develop their understanding of the potential that remote assessment and feedback could be providing, and have recently started using MS Forms alongside these other forms of online assessment, to gauge student understanding and confidence with key knowledge and to enable whole-class feedback.
* Pupils in Year 11 are being supported through the uncertainty around the certification process for their GCSE grades, and staff are working hard to make sure that they are supported to complete their studies. A full set of past paper assessments was undertaken in November for this cohort, and the results have been shared with pupils and parents on the basis of ‘current standard of work produced’, to make sure they are aware of their current situation.

**Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Although we are very aware of the potential for the pandemic and related school closures to cause a heightened level of anxiety and more serious potential mental health problems that might develop, it is encouraging to be able to note that this has not been borne out by our experience so far.

We have taken the following steps to try to support and protect our pupils’ mental wellbeing throughout the pandemic

* Every single pupil has an entitlement to a *Personal Development Plan (PDP)* meeting with their form tutor, to ensure that they have a meeting each term where the only focus is on their wellbeing.
* Upon full return to school in September, every single KLA pupil had a short ‘check-in’ where they completed a mental health and wellbeing ‘scaling’ exercise, designed to help flag for key staff which pupils had struggled most through the first lockdown, enabling us to ensure that support could be appropriately targeted for those small number of pupils who needed it.
* Pastoral support and ‘check-in’ protocols throughout have been strong, with form teachers prioritizing contact and Heads of Year making frequent contact with parents where teachers or tutors flag any issue.
* All staff have had three training sessions (one in March at the beginning of the first closure, one in September on full return of pupils and one in early January before the beginning of the second school closure). These sessions included safeguarding refreshers, ICT appropriate use policy refreshers and mental health first-aid training (spotting possible issues) for all staff.
* The Mental Health First Aid Team at KLA have been deployed throughout the pandemic, and we have trained additional members of the team to create additional capacity for 1:1 support, should this be needed. Our Senior Lead for Mental Health has undergone refresher training and upskilling in this area to be able to successfully lead this developing area of our school’s work.
* Although most students have shown remarkable and commendable resilience, some students have struggled and the implementation of the Mental Health Support Team programme has meant that as an academy we are able to access outside support more easily than a lengthy CAMHS referral process has meant in the past.
* The importance of staff mental health and wellbeing has not been overlooked throughout the challenges of the past year. Those colleagues identified as being at any greater risk of negative impacts of coronavirus (including elevated levels of anxiety) have had all requests for reasonable adjustments to their working environments and work patterns met by the school. Ongoing check-in with staff who were unable to attend were undertaken and the Trust HR team continue to offer support, ongoing counselling and general help for staff mental wellbeing.

**Developing Character**

The further development of the place of character education was already a fundamental area that we had been developing in our school. Amidst catastrophizing headlines that painted a bleak future for our young people, and confident assertions that the current crop of pupils were likely to become a ‘lost generation’, it has become very apparent that this area of our work needed to take on an even higher profile as part of the recovery planning we have been doing for post-covid education.

Character education had already become a focus of the Personal Development Plan (PDP) which is written for every student at KLA in conjunction with their form tutor. This has been a particularly useful tool to identify need as well as develop potential and drive aspiration. Students are asked to RAG (red, amber green) five character traits and then select at least one to focus on developing further; the tutor then shares this target with parents so that support and encouragement can be implemented at school as well as at home before reviewing it with the student.

Resilience is a key aspect of character development that we will be focusing on in the coming months and years, recognising that young people have suffered massive disruption not just to learning, but to routine, socialisation and developing relationships during a period of enforced isolation. This work will link closely with the existing Academy Development Plan, which already contained actions to strengthen curriculum delivery of Personal, Health, Sex, Relationships and Social Education, RE and Careers Information and guidance through an integrated programme of teaching and experiences.

**Looking to the future**

It is important for us all to hold onto the promise that at some point, in the hopefully not too distant future, this pandemic will be over and we will be able to return with our pupils to a more normal mode of operation. We are already making plans to develop our development planning to capture the following areas:

* **Overcoming disadvantage**

It is clear that most commentators anticipate that the pandemic will exacerbate the attainment gap that already exists nationally between disadvantaged pupils and those who are from better off backgrounds. We are determined to make sure that this is not the case at KLA, and are beginning to develop our plans to accelerate our provision yet further once the pandemic is over. Our Pupil Premium Strategy has been revamped to build on the excellent work that had already taken place since 2018, with a new senior leader appointed to support this vulnerable cohort of our pupils. This strategy is published on our website for anyone interested to review.

* **No Excuses**

Despite the undoubted challenges that the covid pandemic has provided for all schools, it has been a consistent theme of our work at KLA that the critical work of delivering long-term school improvement was sustained throughout, and that there was no ‘pause’ in this work as a result of those challenges. The KLA Development Plan has continued to drive the improvement focus the school has worked so hard to develop throughout the past four year, and while a new strand for CV19 has been added to that plan, the other key improvement priorities we had identified together have continued to be at the forefront of KLA’s work this year, alongside ensuring the highest-possible quality of teaching and learning under the restrictions in place. We have been determined that C19 cannot be used as any justification for us failing to meet these priorities, and have been clear with ourselves at all times that if a facet of our Development Plan was important enough for us to focus on pre-covid, it becomes if anything even more so during and post. The following progress in improving our school has been secured throughout 2020:

* + The development of the KLA Entitlement Framework for Continuing Professional Development has been completed and the framework implemented this academic year, with support and alignment to the Notre Dame Research Teaching School, with whom we have developed a strong partnership throughout 2020 and which will continue into 2021.
  + The critical role KLA has in developing young teachers has continued apace – 12 newly-qualified or recently-qualified teachers joined KLA in September 2020, and at a time of extreme national challenge clearly their jobs have been made even more difficult. KLA lobbied to become a pilot school for the extended roll-out of the Department for Education’s national ‘Early Career Framework’ and as a result our newly-qualified and recently-qualified staff have benefitted from exceptionally high-quality support and training, provided by the Ambition Institute.
  + Although when planning our new curriculum in 2018 and 2019, we were not specifically planning for a curriculum with the necessary robustness to manage lockdown learning, we have been delighted with the impact our new curriculum has had during this process. The mastery and knowledge that each subject has placed at the heart of their curriculum has proven remarkably resilient in the most challenging of circumstances, and the shared approach to collaborative planning that we had implemented has meant that the demands of the pandemic have not added unacceptably to teachers’ workload. It was also evident when pupils returned to school in September, that the focus on the importance of memory and remembering more had meant that knowledge mastered prior to school closure had been retained better than it would have been previously – in a sense the extended school closures have ‘stress-tested’ our new curriculum approach – and it appears to have passed!
* **Embracing Positives**

It is important to be open to the fact that being forced to change approaches as we have been can lead to possibilities that we may not have had the chance to consider previously. We have identified some approaches that we have developed during school closures and limited in-school pupil movement that could be beneficial in the longer-term. One of these is the clearly more defined approach we have been able to embed for off-site learning, use of technology and the fact that we are confident virtually all pupils now have the ability to work at home using an appropriate device. The potential this could offer in the longer-term to deepen our approaches to homework, revision and scholarship is very exciting, both for times of lengthy pupil absence, but also for times to come where in-person lessons have to be disrupted, for example through boiler failure or extreme weather. This is just one example of where being forced out of our normal routine has forced us to think about better operational possibilities, which we have embraced.

Finally, it is necessary to formally acknowledge the part played throughout the coronavirus pandemic by all stakeholders. From the dedication of the school’s staff team including its governing body, through the support provided by parents to the resilience shown by KLA’s admirable student body, this has been a total team effort throughout. As KLA continues its journey of improvement, the fact that the pandemic and its possible negative effects have been so effectively navigated by all connected with the school bodes well for our future.

**Alan Fletcher**

**Principal, King’s Lynn Academy**

**January 2021**