

Home - School Communications at HCCS and HC6F

A position statement.

Background

As a school, our first priority is to deliver high-quality teaching and learning. In recent years communications between home and school have shifted quite dramatically to email which is now the preferred and predominant mode of communication. Email provides us with an easy means of communication, however, it has also become increasingly difficult to distinguish between formal and informal communications. The ease of communication via email has many advantages but these are proving to have diminishing returns, as the expectation for an almost instantaneous reply, in a well-informed, considered and timely manner appears to be on the increase, with complaints following when the sender's expectations are not met.

The ability and ease of email communication directly with your child's teacher is a privilege. Many schools do not make this facility available to parents, as frequent requests for updates and information can distract teachers from their primary focus, teaching. On any single day, a teacher will have a plethora of demands on their time including teaching, tutor time, lunch duties and activities, and after-school practices and clubs.

Teachers are not expected to monitor and manage their inbox during lessons or at other times in the day, when they should be planning and preparing for lessons, assessing student work or carrying out school duties. All of us, school, parents and students, expect teachers to be fully prepared, focused and engaged with students, supporting their learning as their first priority. Whilst administration staff, support staff and senior leaders may be able to access emails more routinely, their primary function is to support teachers and students and not constantly checking their emails during the school day.

The school works hard to provide parents with timely and informative information concerning their child's progress throughout the year. As parents, we may feel that it is perfectly reasonable to ask for updates about our child's progress or behaviour. Whilst some argue that the occasional request might be manageable if the parent of every child a teacher teaches asks for bespoke feedback just once in a year that would, on average, generate 190 required responses. In a similar vein, parents should take care not to attempt to micromanage their child's education via email.

In order to set out a clear understanding between school and home, the following outlines the expectations we can share between us. All communication, home to school, school to home, must be of a professional nature..

Our general guidelines with regard to emails are

1. All communication including email must be made with respect, dignity and should be objective and measured.
2. Receipt of an email will be acknowledged within two working days during term time. Staff will not be expected to monitor or respond to emails out of their normal working hours (including weekends and school holidays).
3. Wherever possible we will reply to emails within 5 working days. This may include informing the sender that more time or more information is required to provide a full response.
4. If a member of staff is not able to deal with the email directly then they will pass it on to the most appropriate person and inform the sender that they have done so.
5. Whilst this is rare, if a member of staff receives an email which is of an aggressive tone, sets unreasonable demands or could otherwise be interpreted as harassing, they will refer this to a senior line manager in the school, who will decide how to proceed.

6. Whilst parents may compose emails at times to meet their own needs, staff will not be expected to monitor or respond to emails out of their normal working hours.

Why issue this position statement?

The Secretary of State's pronouncements reported in the press in January 2019 where he said '*Teachers should not have to email outside of office hours*', gives us some insight into the issues identified to be impacting directly on the recruitment and retention of teachers. The Governing Board at HCCS, recognise that the primary focus for all of us, at home and at school, is to achieve the best outcomes for our young people. Email communication is just one aspect of a productive and informative communications exchange that at our school, also includes:

- Interim reports - Currently, there are four interim reports per year which provide a clear picture of how each student is progressing in their subjects in addition to narrative reports in years 8 and 10
- Consultation meetings - At least one parent consultation meeting each year with additional consultation meetings where underachievement has been identified.
- Other methods of communication - Staff may also telephone, write or email a parent to inform them of a serious incident or serious ongoing concerns about a child's behaviour or attitude to learning.
- Student behaviour plans.
- My Child At School - The development of 'My Child at School' provides parents with an online system that enables them to view their child's attendance, behaviour and achievements.

It works both ways

- We would never wish to discourage parents from communicating with staff and establishing a positive relationship through working together.
- Parental communication is essential and we need your feedback to help us to continue to improve.
- The inappropriate use of social media can have a negative impact on home-school communications and can mask the effectiveness and clarity of information.
- On occasions, staff face criticism over an activity which they may be engaged in entirely out of goodwill, be it running a trip, or a team, or a concert, or a play and an ill-crafted email from an upset parent, even when the point is justified, can result in an understandable reluctance from staff to continue to go the extra mile that we so much appreciate of them.

Many of you will be facing the same challenges in your own workplace from an increasing expectation of any time, anywhere communications. Some readers may be of the view that this is simply the way the world works now. However, the school has a duty of care to staff, as it does to students. This includes a responsibility to ensure that the workload of each member of staff is manageable and does not unreasonably intrude into their private life.

The letters and emails of thanks and appreciation that we do receive are very much appreciated. We have an incredibly dedicated team of staff at HCCS and we want to retain them and make them feel valued. It is therefore essential that we respect them and help them to maintain a sustainable workload.