



Aberdeenshire
COUNCIL



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Dear Parent / Carer

In the light of recent behaviours across the school and following discussion at the Parent Council meeting last week, it was agreed that I write to you all, in conjunction with our Parent Council Chair, to ensure you are aware of concerns staff have and to ask for your support as parents in discussing these with your son / daughter in order that we may move forwards positively during the remainder of this session and beyond.

We are all very aware that there has been a huge amount of challenge over the past two years and that behaviours and resilience of both young people and staff, have changed in ways that none of us could have anticipated. It does seem now however, time to take stock and ensure that, whilst always looking to support our young people, we do begin to challenge behaviours where these seem less than entirely appropriate, and certainly where they do not sit well with our core values of Respect, Aspiration, Inclusion and Success.

The first concern we have is around the rise of vaping. There is no doubt from media coverage that this is an issue that is being felt way beyond Mintlaw Academy and indeed the North East of Scotland. However ultimately it is our joint responsibility to deal with the concerns we find ourselves facing here. You will recall last term I wrote to you to share that we had allocated our toilet facilities on a year group basis to ensure all young people felt safe in accessing these facilities and moving forwards we moved to have S1/2, S3/4 and S5/6 toilets which allowed for a greater degree of flexibility although clearly still not as flexible as when all facilities were accessible to all year groups.

First can I say we have had no pupil since then share that they feel unsafe accessing their designated school toilet. Clearly this is what we would look to see. However, the initial strategy stemmed from youngsters, both during and outwith social times, using the toilet areas essentially as social areas, in some cases choosing to consume their lunch there but critically, using the area to vape. Numbers fell following the reallocation of toilet areas but never entirely disappeared and I have to share are on the rise once more.

Staff, particularly senior staff, are vigilant in keeping an eye, evacuating the conveniences where pupils are congregating and, wherever young people are found with vapes, ensuring appropriate sanctions are meted out. Guidance staff are also proactive in sharing emerging evidence around the dangers of addiction to vaping. It is likely we are still to see the full picture around this. For clarity however no young person should be in a position to purchase vapes and all Aberdeenshire campus areas are non vaping so entirely apart from health concerns, vaping on campus carries criminal consequences. Clearly our aim, with yourselves, is to support our youngsters in understanding the importance of adhering to no vaping at school.

Secondly, over the past 12 – 18 months, we have noticed a marked increase in low level, inappropriate behaviour, largely outwith class time but on occasion spilling into class behaviour. We were shocked to have a fight break out in registration last week. Whilst the behaviours I mention are largely low key (pushing / shoving / tripping each other up in the corridors etc) what we see increasingly is this escalating into more concerning behaviours, with someone invariably getting hurt. This has resulted in our exclusions figures showing a marked increase which is clearly not a statistic we want to see escalate further. Interestingly however, as part of our recent inspection our Exclusions were detailed as “in line with national averages” so I suspect Exclusions have seen an increase more generally as all schools move forward post Covid.

Again, on this one, I would ask for your support as parents to discuss appropriate behaviours in and around school with your youngsters. From my perspective, it’s frustrating to sit in meetings with youngsters, once they’ve ended up excluded, and have them very regretful about what has already happened. Anything you can do to support safe, respectful movement around our very busy campus would be of real benefit.

Finally, in terms of key concerns across the school, I would like to highlight the ongoing challenges we continue to experience in terms of intimidating communication from pupil to pupil online. This is becoming increasingly concerning with a recent case in particular, beyond shocking in terms of both the messages and pictures being exchanged by mobile phone. Can I stress that the vast majority of posts being forwarded are forwarded outwith school hours. Our challenge is dealing with the fall-out this brings back into the building between youngsters when they actually meet up. It is also undoubtedly the case that a small percentage of these posts do happen during learning time, difficult to police, when learning in 2023 very much revolves around e-learning as well as more traditional measures.

As a school staff we have discussed “banning” mobile phones but to do so would be to a) remove high quality learning and teaching options for our young people and also, in terms of safeguarding, pose concerns for yourselves as parents given the amount of time your sons/daughters are out of the home for. For most of our pupils travelling to and from school by bus, it is a long day, and access to a mobile phone can definitely give a confidence to your being able to keep in touch. What is critical however, is ensuring that we move forwards with educated use of mobile phones. I cannot overestimate the shocking nature of some of the posts I have been made aware of. The most recent case is in the hands of Police Scotland and we, as a school, will entirely support any parent who goes to the Police over online intimidation. What I would ask, as I am sure, the bill payer in most if not all cases, you talk to your youngsters about their mobile phone usage and should you feel in any way concerned, be prepared to check their accounts if necessary or certainly be clear about your own expectations as parents. I do not want to be writing to you all should something serious take place and I have to say, given lowered post covid pupil resilience and a seeming increase in the stark negativity of too much online communication, both personally and as a senior staff, we have concerns that unless collectively addressed, it is inevitable something goes badly wrong.

In conclusion can I make two positive points. We have been extremely impressed by the conduct of our S4-S6 pupils as they have completed their Preliminary Examinations over the past two weeks. These are important exams in preparation for May and the pupils have been on time, prepared with appropriate equipment, focused and courteous. School staff and external invigilator staff have all commended them on their conduct throughout. Well done them.

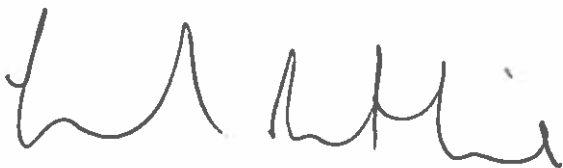
And finally, last week I spoke to S1 – S3 pupils, S3 in person as we have had some particular issues across S3 and S1-2 online. Generally I was sharing with them exactly the picture around behaviours I have outlined to yourselves above. Staff were very positive about an improvement in movement around the campus in the second half of the week and this week has started relatively well so hopefully pupils will respond positively.

Looking forwards, it is important that always, but perhaps particularly when specific challenges need to be addressed, that we work positively with yourselves as parents to ensure the very best outcomes for Mintlaw Academy youngsters, your sons and daughters. As you know, we had a visit from the Inspectorate end of last term, and although the report is still to be published and therefore I am unable to share detail as yet, the report will detail a very positive picture of the school and commend the pupils on how well they engaged with our guests throughout their visit. I would close by once again repeating my request that I terms of Vaping, Behaviours around Campus and appropriate Online Communication, if you could take some time, perhaps over the February long weekend, to have discuss these issues with your youngsters, reinforce our messages and support the school in moving forwards to optimise opportunities for all pupils as they move through Mintlaw Academy and beyond.

Many thanks in advance for your anticipated support with this. Have a lovely mid-term break when it comes.

Regards

L Duthie

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L Duthie', written in a cursive style.

Head Teacher

K Osterberg

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Osterberg', written in a cursive style.

PC Chair