20 May 2020

Dear Parents/Carers,

**THE WIDER OPENING OF OUR SCHOOLS**

You will be aware that last week the Government announced a desire for children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 to begin to return to school from the 1st June. To assist schools with this they have released a vast array of guidance documents over the last 7 days. Trustees, senior leaders and governors from across the Trust have spent a considerable amount of time unpicking and discussing the various aspects of the guidance and how it relates to our schools and to Embark Federation.

I therefore thought it would be useful for me to write to you to outline our thinking at this stage and to begin to illustrate **what school may look like for those children in a position to return**.

It is important to point out that our schools have been open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic including through Easter and each of the bank holidays. I am grateful to all our Embark Federation staff and external contractors, for their hard work and commitment to enable our emergency childcare to take place. Our schools will be closed over half term for the first time since the pandemic for staff to have a break and for us to continue to plan for the re-opening of our schools for more of our children. Our emergency childcare provision for key workers and vulnerable children remains unchanged going forwards from 1st June, even as we begin to bring other groups of children back into school.

The guidance anticipates that we will be able to manage the large number of children and their parents safely on and off our school sites; that we will have created “bubbles” of small groups of children and staff that should not mix with anyone else; that we will have rearranged our classrooms; created one way systems around our corridors and found a way to provide lunches without any “bubble” groups crossing paths! We are also expected to have cleaned and cleared away all of our equipment, toys and resources, briefed our staff on new approaches to health and safety, risk assessed everything we intend to do and considered how we would manage the illness of staff and pupils if it should occur. This is a challenging task to say the very least.

Children are the centre of all we do at Embark Federation and we are desperate to have our children back in our schools. One of our core beliefs is ‘Family’ and we are missing our school family being together right now so much. However, safety and welfare is always our number one priority and myself and the trust board have said from the very beginning that we are not prepared to do anything that we think might risk the welfare of our children, their families and of our staff. I feel it is pertinent to make a few things clear about what school will look like and feel like for those returning:

* Children cannot effectively socially distance. We will do our upmost to try to encourage this but with all children, regardless of age, it is virtually impossible. We cannot guarantee that your child will always be able to socially distance.
* The physical limitations of some of our classrooms in some schools mean that we will not be able to operate groups of 15 as suggested by the Government. Our groups will need to be much smaller to provide the best chance of social distancing.
* It is possible that your child will not be with their usual class teacher or teaching assistant. Classes will be split (into “bubbles”) and therefore each small group will require two staff (minimum) who will stay with them the whole time. Staff will not be permitted to go into other rooms or work with other children that are not in their group. Pupils will not be able to mix with anyone outside of their small group even at playtimes and lunchtimes.
* The classrooms will look quite different. All surfaces will have to be cleared to allow continual cleaning during the day and children of all ages will have to sit at individual desks.
* Lunches will have to be eaten in the classrooms at the desk your child has been allocated.
* We will not be able to operate before or after school clubs or childcare at the schools that usually do this, as it would mean different groups of children having to mix.
* The usual end of year and summer activities will not take place. These include Sports Days, Year 6 productions, leaver’s assemblies, and Year 6 end of year celebrations. I know our schools will be very keen to do something for our Year 6’s in the future whenever it is possible to do so.
* Children may see staff wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) if they have to deal with any illness.
* The curriculum will be very different as group or paired activities can no longer take place, equipment cannot be shared, and children will not be able to move freely around the classroom or school. Our leaders and staff have worked incredibly hard, creatively, and sensitively on a suite of resources to consider the social and emotional effect the pandemic has had on us all. These brilliant resources have been designed to **allow children time to come back to school in a way that supports their emotional well-being first**. I am incredibly proud that our Trust has led the way on this front, it will benefit our children hugely and be shared nationally for wider benefit.

This is by no means an exhaustive list but I think it is important that as parents you have the chance to speak with your child about how different school may look and feel if/when they return. I know it will break the heart of many of our staff not to be able to give your children a hug when they return or even talk with their class as a whole group. We all need to be prepared for this. We encourage parents to reflect on what is right for their child and family and if you make the decision not to send your child back to school please be reassured that this does not impact on your school place nor will you be questioned over your child’s attendance. It is completely your decision.

The Government have made it clear that usual attendance protocols will not be in effect over the summer term. However, ‘Teamwork’ is also one of our core beliefs. Our staff have been incredibly positive over the last eight weeks, coming into school at the peak of the pandemic to educate key workers children and always with a smile, even though they were putting themselves at risk. We continue to be positive as we re-open our schools and would love to see your child when the time is right for you. We can’t wait until our schools are full and buzzing again once we are able to return to some sense of normality.

Further to this, please be cautious about comparing our approach to the return to school with that of other schools locally. Each school is unique with regard to the size of its rooms, the layout of the buildings, the availability of its staff and the challenges they face. Each school has completed a comprehensive risk assessment, and this has been shared with trustees. **Over the course of the next few days we will be finalising our plans and you will receive a letter from your school setting out their specific plan**. **The letter will provide additional information as to how the school will operate, the measures being put into place, which children will be returning and when, and what you will need to do when you bring your child to school.**

I feel it is important to be open and transparent. **It is highly unlikely that all children from Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 will be asked back into school on the 1st June.** In fact, we believe it is important that our staff are in school on 1st June for a few days to fully go over all the health and safety requirements to safeguard your children. It is also important to realise the 1st June was set out as the earliest possible date and several factors such as the ‘R’ number may prevent schools from opening. This is dynamic situation that requires regular review.

We know this decision is crucial and we are committed to doing our very best - a prudent approach would be to gradually build-up the number of children and staff on our sites over time. Thank you for your patience as we work together to implement this. **Our provision for key workers remains unchanged**. As soon as other children begin to return, our key worker children will become their own group (“bubble”) and stay with the same staff members to avoid mixing. We will also continue with virtual support and provision for you and your children who are not physically attending school.

To reiterate, I would like to thank you and all of our school communities for their support throughout this challenging time and I hope you can understand that our ambition is to bring our children back to school in a safe and well-planned manner. As always, we will keep all our decisions under regular review and make sure you are informed every step of the way. Please keep checking our school websites for updates and the school specific letters which will be sent out by each school. I look forward to seeing you all as soon as it is safely possible and for our Embark Family to be able to be back together safely and enjoying a brilliant education.

Yours sincerely,



Matthew Crawford

**Trust Leader**