



14th March 2014

Dear Parents

In recent years communications between home and school have shifted quite dramatically from pen and paper to e-mail; with e-mail becoming the preferred and predominant mode of communication.

E-mail provides us with a quick, cheap and easy means of communication. As a result it is used for such a wide range of communications, it has also become increasingly difficult to distinguish between formal and informal communications.

The ease of communication via e-mail has many advantages but these are proving to have ever diminishing returns, as the expectation for almost instantaneous reply, in a well-informed, considered and timely manner appears to be on the increase, with complaints following when this has not been the case.

I have become sufficiently concerned by the number of staff who have indicated that they are experiencing an increase in work load and feel they are being diverted from more necessary professional work resulting from e-mail communication, I think it would be timely to clarify the schools' expectations with regards to e-mail communications.

As a school our first priority is to deliver high quality teaching and learning. The ability and ease of e-mail communication directly with your child's teacher is a privilege. Many schools would not make this facility available to parents, as frequent requests for updates and information can distract teachers from their primary focus, teaching.

On any one day a teacher will have a plethora of demands on their time including up to five lessons teaching (and tutor time, lunch duties and activities, and after school practices and clubs). Teachers cannot and 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.

I (and you) expect teachers to be fully prepared, focused and engaged with students and supporting their learning. Whilst administration staff, support staff and senior leaders may be able to access e-mails more routinely, their primary function is to support teachers and students. Constantly monitoring and responding to e-mail leads to what is commonly referred to in the aviation industry as 'task fixation'. In aircraft terms this leads pilots to be so fixated on the task in the flight deck that they forget to look out of the window. Whilst less dramatic, in a school it leads to staff focusing on the immediate task of responding to an email instead of concentrating on the delivering and supporting teaching and learning.

As parents we may feel that it is perfectly reasonable to ask for updates about our child's progress or behaviour. The occasional request might be manageable but 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 I cannot have parents trying to micro manage their child's education via e-mail.

The school is working hard to provide you with timely and informative information concerning your child's progress throughout the year. Currently these are: four progress and effort reports, one full report and one parent teacher meeting each year. In addition to this staff may also telephone, write or e-mail a parent to inform them of a serious incident or serious ongoing concerns about a child's behaviour or attitude to learning. They would not be expected to maintain a running dialogue about such matters, unless it has been agreed as part of a Pupil Support Plan.

We are currently working towards an online system that will significantly improve parent's ability to find out information about their child's attendance at lessons, behaviour and achievements by simply logging in online. I hope that we will be in a position to share this with you very soon.

From parents I would ask that when communicating with school you bear in mind that all staff, are putting their heart and soul, and many, many hours into trying to help our students achieve well. We would never wish to discourage parents from communicating with staff, establishing a relationship and working together. Parental communication is essential, we do not always get it right and we need your feedback to help us to continue to improve.

On occasions staff face criticism over an activity which they may be doing entirely out of goodwill, be it running a trip, or a team, or a concert, or a play and an ill crafted e-mail from an upset parent, even when the point is justified, can result in hurt being caused and a reluctance from staff to continue to go the extra mile, that we so much appreciate of them. Likewise, even when a communication is about a core school responsibility, our communications need to be respectful. Couching a point as being 'direct', 'blunt' or 'honest' does not make it any less destructive to a relationship that should be based on trust and mutual respect. This applies to all communication and as staff we need to be just as careful in how we show we value our students and parents. We do not always get it right but we constantly aim to do so and to improve when this is not the case.

For reasons stated, the school would normally expect a member of staff to respond to e-mail communications as follows:

1. Within 48 hours - acknowledge receipt of an email.
2. Within 5 working days - provide a response to the email by telephone or in writing (including an e-mail). This may include informing the sender that more time is required to provide a full response. If this is the case staff should indicate a timeframe in which a response should be expected.
3. If a member of staff is not able to deal with the e-mail directly then they will pass it on to the most appropriate person and inform the sender that they have done so.
4. Staff will not be expected to monitor or respond to e-mails out of their normal working hours (including weekends and published school holidays). Whilst parents may compose e-mails at all sorts of hours to suits their own needs I would ask that e-mails are not normally sent outside of a member of staff's normal working hours. Mobile phones and other electronic devices that enable staff to access their school e-mails when away from school can make it difficult to 'ignore' a message from a parent, leading to unnecessary worry and anxiety on the part of the staff.

5. Whilst this is rare, if a member of staff receives an e-mail 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 if consideration needs to be given to dealing with further communication under the schools 'Persistent Complaints and Harassment Policy'.

I know that many of you will be facing the same challenges in your own work place from an increasing expectation of anytime, 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 staffs' workload is manageable and does not unreasonably intrude in to their private life.

There are enough good teachers leaving the profession as a result of not feeling very valued, and there is no need for us to add to this. Indeed the letters and e-mails of thanks and appreciation that we do receive are very much appreciated. We have an incredibly dedicated team of staff at St George's and if we want to retain them and make them feel valued, then we must respect them and help them to maintain a sustainable workload.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Raymond McGovern'.

Raymond McGovern MA
Headmaster