

7th November 2016

Dear Parents & Carers,

Two months gone already!

It doesn't seem two minutes ago that it was the start of the new academic year, and yet here we are in November, with the clocks turned back again and the darker mornings and evenings encroaching ever further into the working day.

Last half term simply flew by. **It was one of the most packed since the school opened**, not least because we welcomed so many new students into the school, in Year 7 and elsewhere. We ran a number of evening events for families, to try and ensure useful information was given out as early as possible.

We also had **our busiest ever Open Evening, and a busy Open Morning too** – I wouldn't be surprised if we are oversubscribed for Year 7 once again next September as a result, even with parents having more secondary school choices than ever before.

(Clearly our excellent Ofsted outcome and strong GCSE results are making a difference in this regard.)

On the sporting front, things have continued at their usual cracking pace: **we played 36 fixtures in 35 school days, including our first ever rugby matches!** Around 100 different students have been involved in these too – being a smaller school, more students can get involved in our squads, they just need to show willing.

We are also seeing **more and more of our students achieving sporting success outside of school**, with a couple of our girls making the county football squad, and an old boy Ellery Balcombe being called up to play for England U18s!

I mentioned last time that **we have fifty electives running this term**, and this is one of the key ways we enable students to get involved with performing arts. Rehearsals for this year's school musical are well underway (more details below); we've also got a jazz ensemble, a choir and a guitar group running in these slots too. And of course, we've **our Music For All programme in Years 7, 8 and 9** – supported again this year by the local Salvation Army, who are delivering small-group brass lessons and loaning instruments, completely for free!

Of course, **our electives are not just about sport or arts** – and they're certainly not meant to be about formal learning either (although some does go on.) There's always a smile on my face when I wander past the more esoteric clubs (including Dungeons & Dragons, Pixar Life Lessons & Studio Ghibli...) Wednesday mornings and Friday afternoons really do see BFS at its best.

A relatively quiet run in to Xmas...

Recognising that the run in to Christmas is a really busy and tiring time for families already, this year we have deliberately tried to keep the number of additional evening events to a minimum. Please note though that we do have these, and it is essential that **ALL** students and their families attend them:

- 1st December: **Year 8 Progress Evening**
- 8th December: **Year 11 Progress Evening & Next Steps Event**

In particular, **I would like to point out how important the 8th December is for our Year 11 students.** Not only will they receive their mock exam results that night, they will have a chance to

immediately discuss them with their teachers, and then meet representatives from every single local sixth form, college and apprenticeships provider. It is vital that students and their families take this opportunity to find out more about the kind of options they have for when they leave BFS – and having it all under one roof is the easiest way to do it.

...and dates for the rest of the year

We were given some feedback that it would help families if we published dates for all Progress Evenings etc well in advance – so at the end of this newsletter I have listed pretty much everything that we can think of for the rest of the academic year. I hope you find this useful.

On the subject of dates – term dates for this year and the next, are available on our website in an easy-to-use format – you can find them here: <http://bedfordfreeschool.co.uk/students/term-dates.php>

“Once on this Island” – 14th and 15th December

A heads-up that the school musical will have two performances, on the 14th and 15th December. This year it will be just over the road, in Bedford College’s studio theatre. Tickets will go on sale next week, available from the main office. Unfortunately, Miss Damon has once again refused my request to be in the cast. However, I am learning all the words just in case anyone falls ill and they need a backup at the last minute...

Our range of after school support

During the course of last year, it became apparent that a growing number of staff were giving up more of their own time to work with students after school – especially when students hadn’t done as well as they’d liked in class tests and so on.

It is a sign of the dedication of our team that so much of this goes on – they genuinely do “go the extra mile” as our school motto exhorts everyone to do.

To keep track of these sort of things, we’ve formalised the process whereby staff keep students back for this – and **Mrs Herron has written a short update on this and a few other things**, which can be found at the end of the newsletter.

(We’re really grateful for the family feedback that has prompted this. While we do try to cover all bases, with 500 students and 60 staff, we won’t always manage to think of everything – so do please continue to get in touch if you need something clarified.)

Other external projects – a couple of updates

In recent newsletters, I mentioned that we are cautiously exploring some projects that would see us working with other schools. I thought I would update you on where we have got to with things.

At the end of September **we submitted a plan to the Department for Education for a new secondary school in St Neots**. We want to replicate BFS in that town, providing families there with the same kind of choice that we have here in Bedford. We won’t get a decision until next spring, but we are confident that we made a good case - and if nothing else, it will help to shine a light on an area that we feel would benefit from greater choice of schools and better standards.

Also, **we have been meeting with staff and governors from Elstow School, to explore coming together in a “multi-academy trust”**. A consultation for this will start very soon where we will invite all interest parties – in particular the families of BFS – to comment on our proposals.

Overall, **our plans are cautious, modest and with the best interests of our existing students, families and staff at their heart**. While we know that we are doing a pretty good job already, we want to do even better in future - and we are convinced that the best way to do this is through a family of smaller schools working together as a larger group, and have the best of both worlds.

As I mentioned before, we have been extremely careful in planning for these things, to ensure that they benefit everyone and don’t become a distraction. While I am spending a chunk of my time on

these projects, I'm still in school as much as ever, and Mrs Herron continues to oversee day-to-day things with the support of Mr Donald, Mrs Edge and the rest of the team. We are in a fortunate position, as an oversubscribed school with extremely healthy finances and a strong team of staff – and if we pull off the things we have in mind, we will be in an even better position to support BFS students into the future.

As ever, **if you have any comments, queries or feedback, don't hesitate to get in touch.**
Have a great week!

Mark Lehain.

BFS & student support – a couple of reminders from Mrs Herron

Winter wear

Our school uniform list states that in colder weather students should wear a ‘sensible school coat’. Please note that “hoodies” are not included in this as they are neither a coat nor waterproof – and we hate to see students suffering as a result of inappropriate outer wear. With this in mind, please ensure that your child(ren) do not wear and hoodies to school.

After school support

A few parents have requested that I pop some reminder details about our extended school day and what each session actually means. There are three main reasons why we would keep students back after school, and each of them has a positive purpose for your child behind them:

- If your child is in **Extended Prep** then this is because they have not done a specific homework that has been set, or not done it to the necessary standard. As we are passionate that they don’t fall behind as a result of this, we will keep them back and they will sit and carry the prep out independently.
- If your child is kept after school for an **‘intervention’** or **‘knowledge test’** this means that the subject teacher feels they need an extra session to ensure they have properly learnt the content of the current topic. It is not a punitive action, and carries no ‘behaviour points’ - it is just a form of ‘supported’ Extended Prep where staff have recognised that a student is struggling with some aspect of their study and rather than have them catch-up or struggle on their own the teacher can give them the support they need.
- If your child is has a **‘behaviour detention’** then this is because they have breached the school code of conduct. If you would like to discuss the matter to help your child appreciate where they have gone wrong then liaise with the teacher who placed them in the detention (your child will know who put them in).

I hope this helps to clarify some of the decisions we make for when asking students to remain in school a bit longer. We know what a difference these things make to our students and their future prospects, and

Attendance

We know that for our students to gain the greatest benefits from their education, it is vital that they attend school daily. We expect our students to attend on time every day - lined up on the playground by 8.25am - unless the reason for absence is absolutely unavoidable. It is very important that every family recognises their responsibility to ensure their child attends school regularly and on time.

At BFS we offer a unique level of support for our students, both to ensure that they can get as close to 100% attendance as possible, and also receive help in catching up should their attendance decline to a level where it is affecting their studies.

Attendance below 95%: ‘Catch-Up Club’ - to give them time to catch up on missed work, students attend this instead of electives, and they remain in school until the normal home time of 4.00pm on a Friday

Form tutors will make contact with students and their family

Attendance below 93%: the Pastoral Team will meet with students and their families for a supportive chat

Attendance below 90%: Educational Welfare Officer support is triggered and the student is lawfully deemed to be a “Persistent Absentee”.

Fixed Penalty Notices and court action may proceed from here

Golden Time will only be awarded if a signed sick note has been sent following any period of absence

Support for absence:

- Catch-up Club is a support for students to catch-up on any work missed, including class an homework, learning of knowledge maps and reading
- It is the students' responsibility to gather and independently complete any work missed during their period of absence
- Catch-up Club takes place in the elective periods and the last session on a Friday afternoon
- Attendance is monitored in ten week blocks – as long as attendance is above 90% generally and above 95% in the last 10 weeks then students will no longer need to attend Catch-up club
- There are rewards for improving attendance!!! It is possible to gain back Golden Time even if attendance is below 95/90% your child will be allowed home at 3.15pm on a Friday (provided they have achieved the other criteria to gain golden Time) once they have completed and sustain a full run of 20 days or more in school

It is easy to keep a regular check your child's current attendance level as it will be updated on their Achievement Card weekly!

Jane Herron
Head of School

Key dates for 2016-2017

10 th November	GCSE Awards Evening – for those who sat GCSEs this summer From 7pm, St Cuthberts Hall
w/c 14 th November	Year 11 - mock exams week
1 st December	Year 8 – Progress Evening (students leave 3.20pm, appointments from 5.30pm)
8 th December	Year 11 – Progress Evening AND Next Steps event (students leave 3.20pm, appointments from 5.30pm)
14 th & 15 th December	“Once on this Island” – school musical – at Bedford College Studio Theatre (over the road from BFS) – tickets on sale from 14 th December
14 th December	School Christmas dinner – details to follow
16 th December	Annual Christmas Assembly – St Paul’s Church – details to follow Last day of autumn term
3 rd January	Staff training day
4 th January	Students return for spring term
12 th January	Year 10 - Progress Evening (students leave 3.20pm, appointments from 5.30pm)
26 th January	Year 7 – Progress Evening (students leave 3.20pm, appointments from 5.30pm)
13 th – 17 th February	Half term holiday
w/c 20 th February	Year 11 - mock exams week
16 th March	Y 11 – Progress Evening (students leave 3.20pm, appointments from 5.30pm)
23 rd March	Y9 – Progress Evening AND GCSE Options presentation (students leave 3.20pm, appointments from 5.30pm)
31 st March	Last day of spring term
w/c 3 rd & 10 th April	Easter Holidays **Y11 GCSE revision sessions will run during this time**
18 th April	Start of summer term
27 th April	Y10 – Progress Evening (students leave 3.20pm, appointments from 5.30pm)
1 st May	Bank Holiday Monday – school closed
4 th May	Y8 – Progress Evening (students leave 3.20pm, appointments from 5.30pm)
29 th May – 2 nd June	Half term holiday (Venice trip also away during this week)
w/c 19 th June	Y10 – End of Year exam week
w/c 26 th June	Y7, 8 and 9 core subject exam week & Development Days Y10 – Work Experience week
21 st July	End of summer term