

What is happening in schools in England?

Mark Thomas is the Headteacher of a primary school in England.

Tell us about your school:

Our primary school was built in 2002 to serve a new housing area near the town of Northampton (midway between London and Birmingham). I was the founding Headteacher and have remained there ever since, as I am fully committed to my local community.

The school has pupils from ages 4 to 11. There are 60 children in each year group, in two classes per year group (30 in each class). There are 420 pupils in total.



Our ethos is driven by positive relationships within a culture of high aspirations for all pupils in academic learning but also in the performing arts, sports and technology.

In England children take national tests at ages 7 and 11 and these results are published. Our results are always in the top 20% of schools, for attainment and progress. All schools are inspected with reports published nationally. Our school is currently rated “outstanding”, the highest possible rate.

What is the Covid19 situation in England?

Our growth in deaths is similar to France, but a week or two behind. At the time of writing this article France has about 8,911 deaths, UK 5,373 deaths. The UK government has received some praise for handling the crisis, but also criticism for not doing enough testing or not being quick enough to get protective clothing to the front line medical workers. Several members of the government have had the virus and the Prime Minister is in intensive care.

What has happened in schools?

All schools were closed on 20th March, I believe one week after schools were closed in France. The government produced a long list of “critical workers” whose children could still attend schools (but in a childcare provision, not education). This was not fully clear and led to requests for 72 children (out of 420) to still attend school. Places are also given for vulnerable pupils.

Two days later the government introduced the “lock down” measures and explained how serious the virus was. More families opted to keep their children at home so the average number of pupils attending every day is actually 15, not 72. Schools remain open over the Easter holidays.

The government will review its strategy after Easter but schools are expected to remain closed for three months at least. All examinations for June have been cancelled.

How is the school managing the situation?

The school has around 55 staff (teachers, assistants, administration, premises, etc). Around a third of these are not available due to illness with virus symptoms, 14 day self-isolation because a family member has symptoms or being in 12 week isolation for medical reasons.

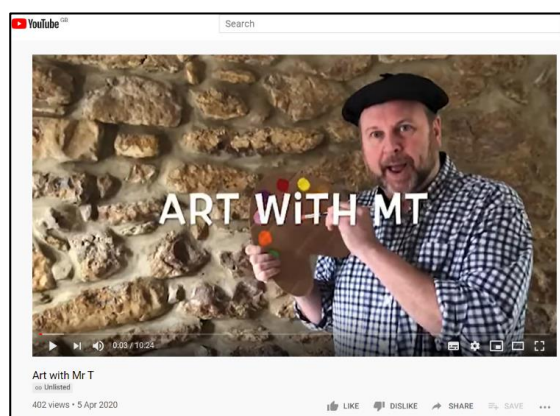
A rota is used so that available staff have very few sessions in school, but senior leaders and premises staff are in school regularly.

What is happening about home learning?

Before the school closed, the staff created “home learning packs” which gave enough work for the first two weeks up to the Easter holidays, as well as extra reading books. Children also have access to several online learning Apps from home to help with maths, spellings and multiplication.

After Easter the school is launching Google Classroom where teachers can set work for children and can get replies. They will use videos of themselves teaching new concepts.

As Headteacher, I also send out a weekly video with a fun activity (fitness class, art activity, etc). The aim is to keep spirits high when mental health issues are possible and children are missing their friends and a routine. Parents email me with examples of what their children are doing so I can mention them in the videos.



How is the community coping?

Overall it seems that things are going well, and families are following the “lock down” instructions. There is a concern about some pupils who are families with issues (those involved with social workers or domestic violence) and so the school contacts those families regularly.

In the local community, people are doing some great things. People are allowed out once per day for exercise and lots of our families are now running or cycling in Super Hero costumes. It makes people smile out of their windows and more are joining in (at different times or at a distance!).

Parents are sending in examples of how their children are being wonderful – for example, two young children realised their mother was having a bad day and secretly made lunch for her. I can share these stories through the videos to promote other good deeds from the other children. In this way good things can come out of difficult times.



How are you feeling about the situation?

It is very sad to see the school with no children, it feels like it has lost its soul. We miss them every day.

I am so proud of my staff team for all they are doing to support those children in school, as well as planning the home learning. They are learning new skills and approaches!

I have strong hope for the future where pupils can return to school in strong spirits and desperate to learn, where more adults work from home more often (to help the environment) and where parents will fully value the work of schools and their teachers!