



## MIDDLEWICH HIGH SCHOOL

HEIDI THURLAND BA (HONS 1<sup>ST</sup> CLASS) NPQH HEADTEACHER

6<sup>th</sup> Jan 2021

Dear Yr11 OCR PE students, Parents & Carers,

On Tuesday the 5<sup>th</sup> January we received the following statement (relevant part extracted) from the DfE regarding vocational exams in January

‘In light of the evolving public health measures, schools and colleges can continue with the vocational and technical exams that are due to take place in January, where they judge it right to do so.’

As a statement in itself this allows schools to apply their discretion as to whether January exams run or not. For our school this only affects your PE group taking the OCR national qualification with your exam scheduled for 9.00am Monday the 11<sup>th</sup> Jan.

I have carefully considered the following:

- Availability of invigilators and risk to these staff (who are in the high risk category for age)
- Room set-up i.e. ventilation, distancing of desks
- Logistical management of written papers to minimise risk of transmission through contact with exam papers
- Risk to staff & students with a cohort of 52 students on site
- Risk to community due to increased movement of students to and from school. The need to carefully manage students on and off site and in the community on the way to and from the exam
- Current known positive community cases and the potential impact of this
- The impact of stress and anxiety on performance in the exam and to student wellbeing in general
- Risk to families where other members of the household may be critically vulnerable and shielding
- The fact that we are dealing with a new variant that is 70% more transmissible than previously
- Consider how we ensure a ‘level playing field’ for our students – or at least try to ensure it is as ‘level/fair’ as it can be
- The fact that I have to have complete confidence in my decision from a public health and fairness to students viewpoint

I have carefully reviewed guidance, listened to my community and considered our position in terms of both protecting public health and sustaining education. I have to have confidence in my decision making at this time for our students. Therefore for the following reasons I believe the only decision I can make with full confidence is to cancel the exam on Monday.

- **Community transmission** – I cannot guarantee that the movement of students to and from school will not compromise our community. This is NOT because I do not trust our students to behave responsibly, I simply cannot guarantee it and as a school leader I feel I must be in a position to do this at *this point in time*.
- **Cases within the community** – over the last 12 hours we have been made aware of positive cases within Yr11. Therefore I believe there is increased risk to students within the group by bringing them together on Monday. We could test them on Friday however the exam is at 9am on Monday so we would not be able to do the second test which would identify positive cases. Our DfE portal for registering testing is still not live despite having applied to be a testing site last

Saturday. This means we cannot test students today. On that basis alone I am not prepared to risk bringing this group together

- **Families shielding / currently isolating** – due to students being members of household with critically vulnerable families and some households currently being positive it would mean that not every student will be able to sit the exam Monday. This immediately creates a divide in the group for those that can and cannot sit the test. In my view I want to treat the cohort with absolute fairness – the same offer for all.
- **Risk to staff** – our invigilators are in a high risk group due to age, some are not able to support the exam due to medical conditions, if another member of the team dropped out in the next few days we would not be able to run the exam. I need confidence that the exam will happen with appropriately trained staff – I do not have this confidence.
- **Mental Health & Anxiety** – I am aware of the significant pressure on our Yr11 students at the moment. We have already spoken to families where students have contacted us to tell us how anxious they are. Many are conflicted about wanting to take an exam but also coming together as a group and potentially the risk to their own families as a result. Students who are unnecessarily anxious in an exam do not usually perform as well. Therefore would the exam result really demonstrate the true potential of our students? Perhaps not – again this is a risk I do not want to take for our young people.
- **Exam assessments nationally** – My experience of exam assessments from last year is that a great deal will change in the coming weeks and even perhaps after the grades are submitted (however they are collected!). Therefore I do not see it as a risk to assessing overall student performance in this subject. There is also the risk that as so many centres are taking different approaches the result will not be able to be compared nationally in any case – therefore how valid is it?

I must state that I am appalled that school leaders across the country are having to make decisions like these. The anxiety our Yr11 students are feeling nationally and locally has not been helped by this. I am frustrated that school leaders have been left to make decisions that in themselves create variance nationally for students with some able to sit exams and others not. I do hope that you can understand my rationale for cancelling the exam in this instance. I appreciate that other schools are making different decisions, these are very much based on their own contexts.

I do hope that by being clear and decisive, something that is utterly lacking at national level, even if the decision is a tough one it helps you understand what the position is and to move forward accordingly.

If you wish to discuss this decision please contact [kholt@middlewichhigh.cheshire.sch.uk](mailto:kholt@middlewichhigh.cheshire.sch.uk)

Mr Denham will be running a live keep in touch / reassurance session in google Friday 8<sup>th</sup> Jan P4 (12.00pm) for all OCR PE students.

Best wishes,



Heidi Thurland  
Headteacher  
Middlewich High School  
Excellence in Learning – Achievement for All