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Head's pride as teachers and pupils cope with fresh challenges

FAMILIES in Witham are being closely supported by their children's schools during the unsettling time.

Damian Lee, executive head teacher of New Rickstones Academy and Maltings Academy in Witham, is proud students and teachers from both schools are carrying on regardless of the uncertainty around the coronavirus outbreak.

Up to 14 students of key worker parents have been attending each school each day since the doors closed on Friday.

The schools are being staffed each day by two teachers - on a rota - and three members of the senior leadership team. Teachers are scheduled to work on site one day per fortnight.

For those not on site, it is business as usual as students follow their school timetable, with work set for them each day by their subject teachers.

The schools are using the Google Classroom programme, so that English, maths, science and PE work can be uploaded daily to be completed within their normal lesson time.

Students are keeping a daily online learning journal, so teachers can respond with a phone call if they are

unable to complete a piece of work.

PE teacher Dean Gilder has recorded lessons that students can complete in their living rooms or gardens at home to ensure they keep physically active.

Mr Lee said: "Staff are not on holiday. They are working from home, planning, setting and marking work. They are supporting parents and encouraging students with their daily routines, such as getting up in the morning, getting dressed, doing exercise and having three square meals a day rather than snacking."

The schools have introduced a raft of practices to ensure students are kept in touch with their schools, that parents are supported in teaching and taking care of their children and that learning continues:

Students entitled to free school meals are being provided with them by their schools. A total of 273 students across both schools are being offered the opportunity to have their meals delivered to their doors by the schools until the government introduces e-vouchers for food.

Thirty-two laptops have been given to students who did not have online access at home.

A weekly virtual assembly will be held for students to watch online.

The most vulnerable families are receiving phone calls from teachers every 48 hours.

Every child will receive a call from their school once a week.

While schools have a contingency plan in cases of school closures, this is an unprecedented time and Mr Lee has nothing but praise for his teams.

He said: "The biggest thing for me was how ridiculously good and mature our students were on the days leading up to the closure. They were upset at not getting to finish the school year.

"Staff have gone above and beyond, working to run the sessions. The students who are in are doing art, cooking and outdoor activities. The staff are being so creative with their ideas for all students.

"The advantages of being part of a Trust is that we can all share and pick out the best practises for us. The Academies Enterprise Trust has been really good; we have a daily conference call with the CEO to discuss the Prime Minister's latest announcements.

"We are doing as much as we can to keep everyone motivated."

Damian Lee, executive head teacher of New Rickstones Academy and Maltings Academy in Witham



School's teaching and caring reaches far and wide

The music department at Felsted School has been continuing to deliver individual lessons over video call



DURING a time of uncertainty, Felsted School's community is embracing the new need for distance learning using both new and previously established online resources.

Felsted was already an active user of Google for education and is currently using Google Classroom to deliver online lessons on the same school timetable for all students, with live video talks and messaging between students and staff to keep active communication going.

Felsted Prep teachers are using Clickview, an educational video library for creating and sharing videos, to continue class reading and deliver learning exercises.

Clickview is also being used across the school to deliver mindfulness sessions, assemblies, PSHE and drama, as well as videos of best practice to support parents.

The music department has been continuing to deliver individual lessons over video call and have even managed a virtual orchestra, with everyone recording their individual pieces to be put together as a final recording.

They will also be aiming to use technology to continue the weekly Thursday breaktime recital,

showcasing the musical talents of individuals or groups.

The school chaplain, Nigel Little, is continuing to deliver remote Chapel services, posted on the website and through Twitter.

Social media is playing a big part in distance learning, with different departments sharing their successes and providing guidance to help everyone stay connected.

PE sessions have been getting creative, with pupils choosing their favourite way to exercise, from running, sporting activities in the garden, exercise videos, dog-walks, bike rides and gardening.

Meanwhile for those in sports teams, remote practice has continued as much as possible with coaches coming up with inventive ways of encouraging people to keep fit, including a 'hockey home challenge' with a number of simple workout routines to do daily.

Felsted also recognises the importance of supporting positive mental wellbeing in these uncertain times. Our pioneering Wellbeing Centre is now open in cyberspace with our wellbeing professionals available to support students and staff with any concerns they may have.