George Stephenson High School

8th January 2021

Dear Year 11 and Sixth Form Parents and Students

2021 Summer Exams

You will have heard in the Prime Minister's statement about national lockdown on Monday that the summer 2021 exams will not be going ahead as planned. The Department for Education statement to schools says: *"in these circumstances, we do not think it is possible or fair for all exams this summer to go ahead as planned. The Secretary of State for Education will therefore work with OFQUAL to put in place alternative arrangements after consultation with the sector."* Gavin Williamson has since confirmed that this is the case and that teacher's estimated grades will be used in place of exams.

Schools have not been given **any** further details from either DfE or OFQUAL regarding this yet, and with a consultation beginning next week, it is likely to be a while until we know more detail as to how grades will be awarded. We would have hoped that these consultations would have already happened and that a national contingency plan would have been in place to deal with this situation, but sadly that is not the case. We will of course let you know when anything further is announced but as you are aware, the situation with this is extremely fluid and new information often arrives on a daily basis.

This puts us in all in a very difficult position and we find ourselves in the same position as you: watching the news to see what is said next. We understand how frustrated, worried and anxious you will be at hearing this news and will of course be wondering what happens next. It is a shame that they will be denied their usual examination experience as they have worked extremely hard and we were expecting very good results. The key message to students in both Year 11 and Year 13 is that you must continue to attend online lessons and engage in learning!

The work and assessments you undertake this term will help add to the evidence base your teachers already have in determining how well you are doing. It is more important than ever that you put the maximum effort into your studies and aim to produce work of the highest quality. Whichever method the government uses to award grades, it will certainly be based on hard evidence and this means that any assessed work from now could potentially contribute to final grades.

January Vocational Exams

You may have also seen that in the same statement the Secretary of State for Education said that the Vocational exams due to take place in January would still go ahead as planned. However, late on Tuesday evening the Department for Education issued a tweet stating that: "Schools and colleges can continue with the vocational and technical exams that are due to take place in January, where they judge it is right to do so" effectively placing the decision on these exams in our hands. This was not confirmed by BTEC until after 10.30pm on Tuesday evening. This put us in a difficult position as we had our first BTEC Exam (Sport) due to take place at 9am the following morning. We decided to go ahead with the exams scheduled for this week, as we felt in unfair to deny students the opportunity to take the exams they had

being preparing for, at such short notice. As for the vocational exams scheduled to take place in the coming weeks we are aware that a number of students and parents are anxious about students coming into school to sit these in the current circumstances. We have consulted with subject teachers on the best decision around these exams. In some subjects such as Health and Social Care, staff feel that students would be better served focusing on coursework, rather than the now 'optional' exams and a decision has been made to cancel exams in this subject. In other subjects, discussions are still ongoing but we must make it clear that students will not be pressurised into taking an exam at the current time. Subject staff will be in touch to discuss arrangements for other subjects with the students concerned. We are disappointed that this decision has been left to individual schools and struggle to understand why different decisions have been made for vocational exams to those made in GCSE and A Level subjects.

Mock Exams

Year 12 and 13 mock assessments will go ahead as planned over the next two weeks, but of course students will now be completing these at home. Teachers will be explaining to students how these will work and we have left it up to subject leaders to decide how best to deliver and mark these assessments. The results of these assessments will add to the body of assessment information we have on students but will not be used on their own to determine final grades. Students should therefore continue to prepare for these assessments, and to take them seriously, but should not stress unduly about them either! It is also worth noting that the UCAS deadline has been extended to 29th January for those in Year 13 yet to complete their applications.

Year 11 mock exams were due to begin just before February half term. Clearly, these will no longer take place in the planned way as school will be still be closed to most students at that point. As soon as we get more detail about how teacher assessed grades will be awarded, we will decide whether to run the mock exams at a later date or put alternative arrangements in place. We will let you know as soon as such a decision is made.

Parent Evenings

The parent evenings scheduled for this term will not be able to go ahead as face-to-face events, and alternative arrangements will be put in place.

Year 11 parents will receive the latest Progress Report on Monday 18th January. This will contain latest 'Currently working at' grades as well as effort grades. This will be followed by communication from subject staff via the Parent SIMS App. If you are not already signed up for this please contact us on simsparent@gshs.org.uk In some cases subject staff may contact you by telephone instead.

Year 12 and Year 13 parents will have received the latest Progress Report in early December. The next Progress Report will be issued in early March. We are still finalising the alternative arrangements for the Sixth Form Parent Evening with Longbenton High School and we will let you know further details as soon as we can.

NE12 Sixth Form Open Evening

We have had some enquiries from Year 11 parents about Sixth Form Open Evening. Although this cannot clearly go ahead as a face-to-face event, we can confirm that there will alternative arrangements put in place remotely. Again, we will let you know further details as soon as we can and we will be in touch with Year 11 students shortly to explain arrangements for those students who would like to find out more information about joining our Sixth Form next year.

We are sorry that it has taken until the end of the first week to get this information to you but we wanted to wait as long as we could, so that we could provide you with as much information as possible. We hope that this provides you with greater clarity as to how things are likely to evolve, although I am sure that we would all have preferred a return to some kind of normality.

Thank you for your continued support.

Yours sincerely

Mr I Wilkinson
Headteacher

Mr S Tyson
Assistant Headteacher