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Coronavirus: Lessons in leadership

Sharing the experiences of school leaders
from across the SSAT network

Coronavirus: Lessons in leadership

At SSAT we've been struck by how school leaders and their teams have responded to unprecedented challenge, change and uncertainty in recent weeks. The stories we have seen and heard of the fantastic work being done which acts in the very best interest of all children and staff are an inspiration.

We are keen to capture and share the experiences and reflections of leaders from schools in our network based on events of recent weeks. The thoughts and extracts from conversations you will read in this publication are framed around the seven questions below.

1. What has it been like to lead your school/academy/organisation through the Coronavirus crisis?
2. What have you learned about leadership or about yourself as a leader during this difficult time?
3. What has challenged you the most/what has been your main concern?
4. What positive from this situation would you like to highlight?
5. Share three emotions you've experienced in recent weeks and what's triggered them.
6. What one piece of advice or guidance would you give to others leading their school/academy/organisation through this or another crisis?
7. If you could ask for one piece of help or support for your school/academy/organisation as we go into the summer term what would it be, who would you ask?

A big thank you to everyone who has been in touch with us so far. Your open, honest contributions are appreciated and valued.

We hope that the lessons learned from and insights into the collective experience of leaders in schools will help to encourage, strengthen, support and sustain those working in and with our school communities as we start the summer term in a very different way.

We will continue to make your voices heard, share your experiences and support schools, students and teachers as much as we can at this difficult time through our webinars, email and online forums and other activities. Please send your stories to **hello@ssatuk.co.uk**.

Thank you for all that you and your teams are doing.

Question 1

What has it been like to lead your school/academy/organisation through the Coronavirus crisis?

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It has been exhausting and tense juggling everyone's reactions and anxieties while having to exude calm and positivity. I believe the lack of information from central government didn't support us as leaders.

A challenge but we have risen to it and it has been a major learning experience. I think the return to school will be more challenging, as we manage the fears of the community. It must change the way we think about accountability in the future and what we think is important.

Priorities have changed completely. We have focused on communication and wellbeing. Some of our staff have been directly affected by the virus and families are grieving. It is difficult to continue to set valuable work and time consuming in secondary settings to get pieces back in so that students get valuable feedback. Assessment is really difficult. We have made phone calls to hundreds of families to check on them, prioritising the year 10 and 12 first. Exam year groups are really hard to reassure – staff are having to make the hardest decisions of their career. Supporting them to do this is tough but we are.

Ensuring vulnerable families continue to get support is a real challenge, staff have spent hours doing home visits to deliver Free School Meals hampers weekly. Many of my leadership team cannot sleep because we take calls from families all through the day including over the bank holidays and weekends. It's genuinely the hardest situation I have ever been presented with – all that and trying to home school our own children too!

Challenging and inspiring. It has been challenging because of the lack of notice before government announcements. The lead up to the announcement of closure (Wednesday 18 March) and settling in to the 'closed, but-not-closed' time was the busiest period, with less time to think and plan.

We got most decisions right, particularly ensuring that vulnerable staff were given the option to work at home from the Tuesday (17th) even before schools were closed, with pregnant staff given direct instruction to stay at home. With hindsight I would have liked to have spent more time on Year 11. Gathering them altogether at a time when we were already meant to be avoiding physical contact was tricky: they were looking for hugs as reassurance from each other and from staff.

Managing different expectations from parents is tricky when parental experiences vary so much: some have no experience of illness, have online deliveries and are relatively safely (if not always happily) cocooned at home; others have family members working in the NHS, in the emergency services, or are bus drivers or other critical workers and are worried for their own safety or the safety of others in the family; some families have already experienced a death due to Covid19. It is no wonder the expectation of parents from schools is so variable.

Some parents are solely concerned with the quality of online teaching and learning, comparing one teacher's video-conferencing lessons with another who doesn't appear to set much work, or doesn't appear to use much software. This is despite having encouraged parents to be aware that some staff may be ill, some may even require hospitalisation. (I have not named staff who are ill or in hospital because I don't want parents

intruding during difficult times, but more consideration by a few parents would be helpful). Some parents want more work set, some want less work set; some are querying whether the work set in Y9 or Y10 will be sufficient for the top GCSE grades; some are raising concerns about the anxiety caused by work that is too hard, some are concerned that their child cannot access it (we have set up some laptops to lend out to students). I understand all these concerns since schools are meant to have education as their focus. Parents need to realise, however, that since there was no planning for this period of working from home, staff may have their own families present which makes it hard to do video-conferencing, may be ill, or may not have the software or broadband at home to allow all possibilities. For a very small number of parents I suspect that emailing school allows a vent for current frustration and anxiety.

This sounds as if all the parents are complaining which is not the case. We have children for whom both parents work at the hospital and they have told us how valuable it is to have the school open for their children so that the students get a normal day with staff they know and in familiar surroundings. I am astounded and deeply touched that these parents find both the time and the grace to say 'thank you', when we should be thanking them. There are many other parents who have taken the time and trouble to say thank you and I am grateful to every single one of them because when there are harder moments their words are a great inspiration and motivation.

The final group of parents are those who want to talk about a bereavement. We try to listen as best we can – sometimes that is all we can do – ask what we can do, as well as to send them cards, a leaflet (which feels a piti-

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fully small response), direct them to other information and to other services as appropriate.

Ultimately, it has been inspiring to see the staff response; for example, when I asked for volunteers to come in through the holidays the emails came straight back. (I had alerted staff this might be required in a socially distanced meeting before the school closed, but then sent an email to formally ask, making clear that there was no requirement at all to volunteer). That was the occasion when I sat in my office and cried.

There is a level of anxiety attached to this. Ultimately one is making decisions that could have life affecting implications for staff, pupils and their families, and all against a backdrop of uncertainty and the unknown. It is also hugely rewarding to be able to do something positive to help in the crisis. It is a real test of a school's culture, ethos, sense of community – seeing how supported and confident staff may be, what the atmosphere and 'temperature' of the staff mood and parental response is.

Initially very hectic but we have settled into a steady state of operation. All our students have iPads and digital learning is therefore a standard part of what we do.

I bet everyone puts 'challenging' to this question however I would say it has been an absolute privilege. I have experienced the best in my staff and the wider community.

Daunting to say the least. People look to you as if you know how to handle the situation. You're suddenly responsible for people's lives and the stakes are high.

Everyone is afraid as we are in 'the unknown'. I'm lucky as I'm one of 8 leaders who are not known for knee-jerk reactions. We met every day to discuss what should be done in terms of rotas, student safety, our PP students and our community and I think we were quick off the mark in making what I feel were rational, reasonable and effective decisions. We used as much information at our disposal to come to these conclusions, so I feel the efforts went beyond the 8 of us at SLT. Examples are our unions, the DfE website, BBC News, WHO etc and we always adhered to government advice.

It has been a challenge but also an honour to lead my academy through this crisis. I don't think any of us have ever experienced in our lifetimes this sort of situation, there was no manual or document on 'the key' that we could refer to, so to a certain extent you had to fly by the seat of your pants.

It has allowed me the opportunity to see a different side to both my staff and our students. Strength and resilience have been evident throughout our school community and although we prided ourselves on the strength of our community before this event, I think that coming out of it we will be far stronger and far closer. It has also given us all an opportunity to become involved in a different type of problem-solving and being solution driven as we look for better ways to support our learners and also extending that support to their families and to the families of our staff.

Very interesting and exciting.

Relatively calm, you simply must plough on and lead from the front.

I'm due to retire at the end of the school year. Nothing in the job description that governors and I have been reviewing suggests there might be a need to deal with a crisis of this scale. We've had individual schools close; we've had the heating go down in school. This is a novel situation.

It's about being creative and innovative about how you work, and in some ways, this is what's made me the proudest about my school. It's been incredible, the teachers and the staff have been amazing. I've got DT staff manufacturing PPE visors in the workshops. Staff have been creating lots of online resources. We've taken this way beyond what we've done before, exploiting a lot of the things that we were familiar with and knew to develop a single sign on platform where teachers and pupils can access a whole range of online resources in a one-stop shop.

I did an end of term virtual assembly which was sent out for all students and parents. It was important to have the end of term closure that we'd normally have and keep things as normal as possible. Sometimes it's about doing the things you would normally do in the school year but in a different way.

It was an emotional end and a bit of an anti-climax for year 11 and year 13. It's not how they would have wanted to end the year really with the uncertainty around exams as well. Our tutors ring every single student in their group once a week. We do lots of stuff on mental health and wellbeing. We speak to parents and keep in touch.

We have a virtual SLT daily. We have a virtual Inset day planned for Monday. We'll focus on what the last few weeks have taught us and revisit our school priorities. We don't want to lose our momentum on that.

QUESTION 1: What has it been like to lead your school/academy/organisation through the Coronavirus crisis?

It has been stressful. I lost my own mother suddenly and unexpectedly on March 15th, just as the crisis was starting. We had to wait for a Coronavirus test for her although it turned out to be negative. My co-head was marvellous and took many of the key decisions in the first week. Without her support it would have been impossible. Our staff have been wonderful, doing whatever has been asked with grace and initiative.

Thinking about the work now, it's been a privilege to work with my colleagues, the young people, their families and the community. When you face a new pressure in this role you just have to get on with it.

The other thing I'd say is that it's been humbling. The way that people have stepped up, the support that we have had from the local community, the parents, it's all been humbling. You get a sense of pride from the way everyone is pulling together and stepping up. Our school chef came into school on Bank Holiday Monday and when I thanked her, she said she wouldn't have thought of not being in because it's about us all being in it and pulling together. This reminded me of the story of how when JFK was visiting NASA. He introduced himself to one of the cleaners and asked him what he did at NASA. The man said he was helping to put a man on the moon. Staff have been amazing and I'm fighting off staff who want to come in. There are some with health conditions who want to help but I've had to tell them to stay at home.

In some ways, a different job. People in other sectors are waking up and realising what we do. Others are beginning to recognise that society would not function if we didn't do what we do. We are hubs of social care.

The whole experience has been challenging, on a whole new level. We are not talking about leading a school through a bad Ofsted or taking on a challenge because of falling standards. We are not dealing with poor quality teaching – but rather we are dealing with a national crisis, that not only affects your school, but every school in the country – oh, and your family too! So, what has it been like? It's been like nothing else. Ever.

To start with, it was a bit like steering through fog. You knew your own ship and what would be needed so you just got on with it. Unfortunately, then the Government and the Local Authority started to respond after you'd put arrangements into place, so the demands kept changing. Sometimes the parents and staff saw the news before me (mainly because I was still at work); I found out about some developments from parents sending me emails asking me what we were doing 5 minutes after the PM made a new announcement.

Unfortunately, no other agencies have managed to support, all are making new demands.

A challenge! The staying open to support keyworkers was unexpected but colleagues were more than happy to help as have I and my senior team.

Frustrating – having policy announced on TV as you watch and then have to wait for details while you are still having to work to implement eg – what is a keyworker advice.

It has been an interesting time leading my school through the current crisis but not all negative. It was clear the direction of travel in the week running up

to closure and staff anxieties were getting higher and louder. As the week progressed, staff started to self-isolate and decide not to attend work for safety concerns, not en masse, but on an individual basis. Communication to staff was essential as we had to calm nerves and keep staff going. I held staff briefings every evening and every morning to update them on what I knew and how we were progressing; there was a 'no blame' communication method and a 'no question a silly question' policy.

Any member of staff who felt that they had to self-isolate was allowed to, no questions asked – it is not my job to judge someone's ability to deal with this crisis and the threat to health. I'm not a psychologist, nor am I a medic.

Since closing to the majority of students, it was again very important to communicate effectively with staff, students and parents and therefore regular updates on social media, our website and staff briefing notes were, and continues to be, as important as previous communications. Being respectful to staff and their personal circumstances was an important part of my job and not to expect too much from homeworking.

My staff I believe, through the many messages I have received, have been very grateful and happy with what we have done.

In regards to students, this was very difficult. Year 11 were devastated. We celebrated their time at the college in the traditional way, assemblies, prizes and I managed to get 200 Easter Eggs on the Thursday night, Tesco allowed me to purchase that many. The staff then sang the students out and wished them luck for the future. We have continued to keep in touch with all our students through this process weekly.

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Parents were anxious in the first two weeks of lock-down due to the amount of work expected of the young people. At the start of Easter, we advised that no work was expected and that after Easter we would send further information out. I believe parents have been grateful for the open and honest communication from all members of the community.

It has been a testing 4 weeks, working from home is not easy but it feels like through the use of online portals, we are getting there.

This has been a challenging time, as you are trying to balance day to day operations with planning for a majorly disruptive event to everyone within the school community. I have strived to be informative, sharing all I know as soon as possible in an effective manner, so all stakeholders feel they are well informed.

It has been a challenging time having to make so many decisions based on a variety of sources and opinions. Balancing following government guidelines with reassuring and keeping staff safe has been quite difficult and there has been unhelpful input from the local NEU which has not been as supportive as one would have hoped in this current climate. It has required a great deal of positivity so that no matter what I am feeling, I do not let any anxieties or worry show through and it has also required me to be quite firm – you are key workers and unless you are self-isolating or are shielded you will be expected to contribute. Communication has been vital, but it has been hard to know if all staff are engaging in this – most are texting me weekly but there are some who are incommunicado and that is a worry. It has required me to be creative, think out

of the box, to be brave enough to buck a trend and say that [this approach] works for my school and my SEND pupils regardless of what you are doing; it has required me to find ways of telling staff bad news through the medium of email which is more clinical than my usual personal style and it has required me to deal with 100 staff and 114 pupils and families on a case by case blanket. One size just cannot fit all.

It has been certainly testing, trying and challenging. Staff absences, either through 14 days self-isolating or 12-week social distancing, has made producing a fair staffing rota difficult, especially at senior leader level. Parent and pupil contact has proved difficult and quite emotional, and trying to keep everyone as safe as possible is stressful to say the least. The amount of emails and conflicting information from the DfE and LA particularly, is not helpful. PPE guidance for special school staff is different to health & care guidance leading to a 'two tier' system which is leading to issues with staff safety; all of which impact on me as the 'lead' for the school. Also, as the head, I am attending school every day, as I believe staff need to see leaders 'leading from the front'.

Question 2

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In difficult times I have an automatic pilot which switches in and allows me to continue to work. One of my first principles is never ask anyone to do something I am not willing to do myself. If you want them in work, then be in work (actually I knew these things before).

I really have learnt a couple of important characteristics of my own leadership, or what has been really important in the last few weeks. The key has been, firstly, good communication. Communication has taken on a whole new meaning. Communicating with parents, carers, staff, children. Being measured and certain in everything you say. Communicating at the right time. Communicating not too much, but not too little. I have really enjoyed challenging myself about the best ways to communicate with all stakeholders. I have found it to be a strength of our trust that communication has been strong – but this is only because we have thought so much about it. We have planned excellent communication.

I have learned that the success of what I do is based on established systems. When those systems are thrown into disarray by a crisis like this you must start from first principles again, which is exhausting. It has brought home to me the importance of the 'hive mind', whether that be at school, borough or national level.

Just when you think you've done it all you ask yourself "Wow, where did that come from"! It's a wonderful, terrible part of the job that after 17 years there's still things that you haven't foreseen. You learn to adapt and look at and use your leadership skills you've gathered over the years.

Accepting that we won't always do everything right, but we are doing our best. We'll get some things wrong and that's OK as well so let's not worry about getting things wrong.

Having a fantastic leadership team. It's reaffirmed my faith in distributed leadership and the idea that it's the team that does it, which is brilliant.

How calm I have been under a crisis, the strength of delegating areas of responsibility to members of the Middle and Senior Leadership in the school. I was able to switch leadership style to adapt to the situation, becoming more directive as time was limited.

I would say it's less about what I've learnt about leadership but more about how important it is to have a school community working together. You become so reliant on the goodwill of your staff during these times. It is less about direction but more about what you can do together to support the learners and each other. This crisis has given everyone an opportunity to show the best of themselves.

I think that my staff have sought comfort in clear leadership, in strong leadership and in confident leadership so that they can put their trust in you. That you will lead them through these difficult times, reducing uncertainty as much as you can and keeping everyone informed so that nobody – including students and families – are left to create their own reality of the situation.

That I have managed to stay calm under pressure. Leadership is definitely about a group of people who are prepared to make brave decisions, challenge each other and forget their own egos for the greater good.

There's an inner resilience you find when you're under pressure and most need it. The other side of this is in the midst of finding that resilience you have to recognise that you're not superhuman. You have to accept help from others and listen to the voices saying sometimes you have got to stop. There was an interesting talk I went to at an ASCL Conference some years ago where I listened to a speaker who was Head of MI5 at the time of the 7/7 bombing. When asked about how she copes in a crisis situation one of the things she said make sure you get enough sleep because whatever decision you have to make, you'll be better if you've been able to get some sleep or rest. You're no use to anybody if you are falling apart from exhaustion.

I think these two are intertwined, as a leader I have learnt the importance of emotional intelligence; empathy, sympathy, humour, guidance and well thought-out communications. I have also experienced the negativity when these factors are not paramount to your organisation's culture. I am also a mum, a daughter, a wife and a sister – it has been vital that I see others through the same lens.

The importance of ensuring that colleagues, parents and students hear a consistent message from me about what we are doing and why and when we are going to do it.

The value of having ensured distributed leadership is central to the operation of my school. I can be confident in the ability of others to get on without reference to me.

It is all a little surreal at the moment, and this may

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be something I will be better able to reflect on in the months to come. I have always seen my role as that of the facilitator for the staff with whom I work, that it is my role to support them, to clear the obstacles for them to be the best they can be, and this is certainly an opportunity to see how successful one may have been and to further embed that care balanced with expectation. The latter I see as the fruits of building individual's confidence in themselves, their resilience and consequently, their ability to respond to leadership, but equally be responsible themselves as adults for their decisions, not reliant for everything on another's decisions. Consequently, when faced with managing personal care with no PPE, I have been able to outline the issue, the limitations on what we can do about it and make it clear I will support whatever individual choice each person makes as to their agreement or otherwise to undertake certain aspects of the role.

Ultimately it reinforces the need for those key guiding values of what one stands for. We are making daily decisions based on little concrete information, often with conflicting pressures, such as meeting needs of individuals while keeping people safe as far as possible. I can only make those decisions based on those core principles and values that guide me in my work at any time and fundamentally that I have thought it through and on balance taken the decisions that I believe work for the benefit of staff, children and families.

That it is so important to be calm and to take time to measure your words, without sounding formulaic. (I knew this before, but it is so evident now).

After answering question 1 it is also clear that managing parental expectations is critical.

The most important part of our job is holding our community together. I am heartbroken that my school is almost empty and I miss our children more each day. I am so very sad at our empty corridors but so very proud of our dedicated staff and resolute families supporting us from home or dedicating time with our key worker children in school. Having spent hours calling home to students to see how they are, I have felt more of a sense of love and connection than ever before – our families are struggling but they are strong. They are losing loved ones but still supporting us and their children in educating them from home. Many of my staff have volunteered for the NHS and I am so proud of every one of them for their support of our school and our wider community. To my family, my children and friends in school and more widely, I have sent them thanks for all they are doing and for their love at this time. My God we all need it.

Quickly developing a clear vision for teaching and learning during lockdown provided leadership and helped to provide purpose and focus for the staff team.

Communication. Parents want to hear the truth and quickly. Our video messages have gone down very well. It is important that corporate is diluted, and the human comes through.

To always remain calm, look after your staff and ask for help from others. This experience has brought our local secondary headteacher network even closer.

It is hard work working from a distance, especially when communication is what is needed. Important to

keep in touch and beyond the work issues and requirements.

I have learnt that I can plan, prepare and communicate policy and practice very quickly if required and that my staff are behind me. It has made me consider my reactions to some staff who are constantly sick or have illnesses that may not be what they say and be more empathetic with them.

Control, delegating and trusting others and having a great team – it has proved what I have built over the last 10 years.

In some respects, I would not say that I have had to change my leadership style much – I have an open-door policy always and that has been very helpful in this climate. I think that I have learnt that I have more resilience than perhaps I acknowledged; that I am not and cannot be Wonder Woman but that my staff and parents require me to be 'me', offering strong leadership, staying positive, being respectful to others' anxieties and worries, and being prepared to adapt and be flexible when necessary. I think in schools we spend a lot of our time dealing with crises – this is a little more unusual in that it is more widespread, but ultimately we continue as heads to be in partnership with the government, our LA, our governors, our parents, our staff and our pupils.

I have learned that I can cope in a crisis and am adaptable; that I can make appropriate decisions in the face of some resistance; that the balancing act between meeting the needs of pupils and staff availability, and both pupil and staff safety has never been more impor-

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tant and can keep me awake at nights! I have learned that it is ok to check with others, eg SLT, other heads, that what I am doing is the right thing and not just me being 'stubborn'. I already knew that seeking advice from more experienced heads, the trust or colleagues, was a sign of strength, and I have had to do this on several occasions. I have also discovered that I am also seen as someone others can come to for advice, support and guidance.

The school's vision and values of 'Aspire, Achieve, Excel' can be applied to get through all eventualities. As a leader you must live and breathe those core values in all that you do.

Question 3

**What has challenged you the most/
what has been your main concern?**

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Keeping the students and staff safe. Ensuring the students who do not fall into the FSM and Pupil Premium group have food and feel safe. With the help and support of staff we call each family weekly to check in and just listen, from this we have been able to support a lot of families whose circumstances have changed during this difficult time. I call the staff and touch base with everyone at least once to check they and their families are safe and well. I find it difficult at the thought of having to make a decision about opening the school again when the risks are still relatively high.

Students without internet. Students in poverty. Food parcels. Staff welfare. Contact with students. All of these are more important than schoolwork, although that has been a concern.

Getting online school going effectively asap. We run a Google infrastructure for our Edtech and therefore we had the basis for moving forward. However, staff parents and children had lots of learning to do, but the crisis provided motivation and the outcomes have been impressive across these different groups. Using Google Meet for video conferencing provides a safe tool for video conferencing and therefore lessons and group tutorials have been able to continue relatively successfully.

Exam grades – making sure grade criteria are consistently applied. BTEC – still no clear guidance. Communication and supporting students who are not classed as vulnerable but are really struggling eg alcoholic parents/domestic abuse. We have had more children in than are classed as vulnerable as we know they need us. Staff are scared – some are not coping at home

but it is hard to support as well as we normally would. Keeping up with the learning almost seems secondary! The one thing that is a real challenge is making appointments for staffing – we are doing Skype interviews but it's not the same as meeting someone and seeing them teach and interact with children. I am also concerned about the year 6 children who should join us in September – they are going to feel really anxious.

Helping FSM students! We have a large catchment area so expecting families to come into school or staff to deliver was not going to work.

The lack of clarity regarding FSM vouchers has been a great frustration, along with the time spent over the Easter weekend to try and discover when the Edred vouchers would actually come. We had tried other sources before for vouchers, each with their own issues, so a government scheme seemed helpful.

To make sure I have safety nets in place for my vulnerable pupils and my vulnerable staff.

Most challenging was the initial set up of the expectations and structure of how remote teaching and learning was going to work. Aiming to set things up that wouldn't need changing in a week/two weeks' time.

A couple of real concerns; children and families that I know are hungry – as a trust we have provided supermarket vouchers weeks before the Department for Education and vulnerable children. The team and I are calling and checking in with these families every week (at least) to make sure they are OK. My other concern is the wellbeing of my staff. Zoom has been a great tool

but as SLT, we make wellbeing calls to everyone every week – not just teachers but TAs, site staff, caterers etc.

The main concerns I've had have genuinely been for the safety and health of the staff and students, sadly to a certain degree, this was not always in our control. As we waited for guidance, unable to tell staff with any certainty what would happen regarding school, I felt like I should have been doing a 'better job'.

Being an alternative provision, we have lots of vulnerable students and the greatest challenge has been to maintain their safety and welfare throughout this period. Many of our students however are not identified as being within the vulnerable groups identified. This I believe makes them even more vulnerable.

As a result of our concerns about the vulnerability of all our young people, we have sought to maintain contact with all 80 throughout this time and we have created a virtual academy to do this. In the lead up to the closure of schools, we developed virtual platforms from the systems that we were already utilising in school, we trained, we prepared, and we monitored its success. After we became a virtual school, the challenge was to maintain normality as much as possible. We maintained the same school day; we maintained the same school timetable; and staff and students worked tirelessly to maintain this structure.

Keeping staff and students safe and having hand sanitiser etc in sufficient amounts. Dealing with conflicting advice.

Making sure that when we're working with external

QUESTION 3: What has challenged you the most/what has been your main concern?

agencies, they're delivering what they should be delivering. Things like the free school meals vouchers and the hiccups around that.

We can't do everything. We have good liaison set up now. We've been worried about things like domestic violence and we hope the reporting system to the Police will work if we must use it. We've been very worried about some of our vulnerable students when we're not there to look after them. We're a highly inclusive school and we rely totally on our relationships we've built.

Information overload. The same information coming at us undigested from many different sources. It has been overwhelming at times. The failure of the government FSM voucher scheme has been a major challenge. I'm not sure why it was left to the last minute to put this in place when we knew what was coming. Opening the school's ASD resource provision has been very difficult due to staff illness, family vulnerabilities and risk assessment issues. Enforcing social distancing in school has been extremely difficult, even though the number of students coming into school has been in single figures - heaven alone knows how we'll manage it if the number of students increase.

The immediate fear was sending the kids home. As a school we never shut and for just a moment there was a sense of panic and worry about how on earth we were going to look after our most vulnerable. There's a lot of gang activity locally – there are children with real child protection issues. And then you pick up after 5 minutes which is ok and then you go into pragmatic mode and think, what are we going to do. Again, people stepping up has been amazing and you realise that if you've em-

powered people, have trust in them and delegate to them, they will step up in an incredible way. I can't do it all and I've never believed that anyway. My SENCo for example has organised visits. It's a military operation with laptops going out, phone calls being made. You have to trust people and they will go way beyond expectations.

The biggest challenge has come from things we can't control (e.g. Free School Meals vouchers!) as well as some unclear advice or guidance coming from the government. Leaving heads to make decisions for themselves at the beginning of this crisis, and then for those decisions to be superseded by government decisions has been tough.

It is perhaps important that I have no children of my own and its easy for me to put work first. I have been taken absolutely by surprise by team members whose first thought was to list the reasons they themselves could not attend. I am learning about priorities and trying to learn more about the balance of support and demand required to inspire the best from staff. The challenge is how work demands can be fair and undue work not fall on the willing few.

The challenge of not having the tech skills to switch to remote working. It's the video conferencing thing. No idea.

Working to keep up with government policy, everything announced publicly, and the community expect action when there is still little detail, eg FSM, grading, school closure (but staying open).

Biggest challenges:
Staff

- Those who are unwell, live on their own and dealing with their mental health issues and ensuring that they are staying safe.
- Ensuring that we did not overdo the expectations on staff at home and remove staff from rotas to reduce stress.
- Deal with staff who just wanted to come into work as they were lonely – had to manage situations that were difficult.
- Replacing staff who are leaving during the next term.
- Induction of new staff and making sure they are not worried about their new job.

Students

- Students on FSM, only 90 out of 300 were collecting/being delivered to by request. Concerned that some may not be eating. The lack of coordination due to academies within the town due to cost measures not supplying lunches to students whose siblings were in the school, would have reduced social movement and stress on families.
- FSM vouchers are an absolute nightmare.
- Vulnerable students are not attending and coordinating with Social Services had been difficult at times. RAG ratings being different and actions and expectations of school staff being very detailed, though no PPE.
- Mental health of all students, particularly Year 11 and maintaining contact so we know they are safe and well.

QUESTION 3: What has challenged you the most/what has been your main concern?

Parents

- Managing their expectations of work.
- Managing domestic violence and supporting families within their homes.
- Communicating and keeping in contact and in particular with our hard to reach parents.

wondering if those students are okay when their parents have chosen to educate them at home.

Governors

- Keeping governors informed with what is happening.
- Coordinating communication to governors through Chair of Governors.
- Managing expectations and responding to concerns raised about staff and students.

Following government guidelines and being equitable and fair for all - EHCPs, social workers, safeguarding issues really apply to most of my school. This coupled with how to keep my staff safe whilst meeting those guidelines too. And a real concern that I might be missing something or not acting appropriately and commensurately.

Meeting pupil needs and keeping everyone safe. The amount of emails and conflicting guidance has also caused consternation at times.

Supporting our most vulnerable students – the dedicated team of pastoral support officers have worked so hard since the day the school closed to make sure our most vulnerable students are cared for. I don't think I truly understood what it would be like not having those face-to-face debriefs after dealing with the discussions of those meeting daily. In addition to the worries of

Question 4

What positive from this situation would you like to highlight?

QUESTION 4: What positive from this situation would you like to highlight?

The positive staff.

When there are difficult times, trust people. People come into teaching because they have a social conscience and their moral compass really drives what they are doing and at times like this you need to enable them. When people feel they are trusted as individuals and as professionals and feel cared for and valued they feel able and supported to step up.

Sense of TEAM.

Losing the commute has given me more time to practice the piano, compose, write and watch opera (wonderful free streams from the Met in New York!). That has been wonderful. Going out with my wife on our bikes very early every morning has been lovely. Whilst I am gutted that the best Year 11 I have ever presided over will not get to show what they can do, I am starting to realise how liberating it will be to go through the summer holiday this year without the terror of what the exam results day might hold. Ditto going through this term without the threat of Ofsted hanging round my neck.

The way staff have responded has been brilliant and amazing.

Support of staff, parents and governors.

We have seen some amazing outcomes for students during this period, we found that even year 11 students who had been told that they would no longer sit exams still maintained engagement with us at the academy. Within the virtual school platform, they would still

produce work, they were still engaged, and they still wanted to maintain those relationships which was heartwarming.

Our attendance to our virtual school was daily around 90% which is amazing for an alternative provision and testament to the relationships that our learners maintain with our staff.

It is also giving us a great opportunity to pilot a virtual school which is something that we will be developing further once we return to normality.

The absolute determination and commitment from staff to help in any way they can to protect each other and our college community.

Something like this really tests your values, when everything is OK talk is cheap, this has been the opportunity to model our values and demonstrate what is truly important. In terms of positives the impact of online tools, not just for learning but for keeping in touch and connecting. Also, the importance of the little things – a text message to a child or a phone call to a lonely parent is so appreciated.

Willingness of staff to go the extra mile. Being able to donate 300 pairs of goggles from our Science and DT departments to local hospital's ICU and Midwife teams.

The manner in which staff have grown, stepped forward, showing genuine commitment to each other and to the children, their families and the school as a community.

People appreciate each other. We have called every child and staff member who has had a birthday each

day. One of my biggest positives has been the support from the other secondaries in the area – they have been great.

The willingness of staff to work together and the desire for the common good even where there have been frustrations in the past.

Online school provides a structured day for children which has important benefits during lockdown. Each day has an organisation, a timetable, learning tasks are new every day and there's a safe opportunity for communication with important trusted adults. My experience is that the interaction between staff and children is prolonged, purposeful and without distraction. Learning is focused.

A bi-product of this opportunity is that children learn the need for precision of timekeeping - they must be on time for Meets. Learning is tracked thoroughly, and feedback is easily provided via Google classroom and/or small group meets.

All small group meets with one staff member are recorded for safeguarding purposes. High rate of participation... 85%+. We've loaned out our Chromebooks to families. Children and parents are very positive about the experience so far.

That a school community is real, well thought of and a source of comfort and identity in a crisis. But what we used to think was important isn't.

The staff, parents, the volunteers. Working collaboratively with the local authority and the local head-teachers.

QUESTION 4: What positive from this situation would you like to highlight?

Colleagues willing to do above and beyond the call of duty. Recognition that teaching is a real vocation and talent, it is not something which everyone can do!

The positives are absolutely the “Team” ethos and the way in which the whole college, including staff, governors, students and parents, are working in harmony without question to get things right for the young people. Staff have not questioned their role, worked over the bank holiday without question and supported students as required.

It has shown me what an amazing bunch of caring, thoughtful, empathetic and professional staff I have, and that this crisis has engendered a greater sense of belonging than before. I believe that we will benefit from this and that we will reassess our priorities as a school when we return – we have always highlighted wellbeing as being significant but now we realise that as a hub we are more crucial than maybe we had realised.

That I can cope in a crisis and I am adaptable. But, the way those members of SLT who are able to work, have ‘stepped up’ has been a joy to witness. As has the way all staff have responded in such positive ways (eg volunteering to work during the holidays etc). Also, collaborative working, across the trust, LA and region, has been another positive outcome from this crisis.

The sense of community that surrounds our school is truly heartwarming, so many of our staff have stepped up, volunteering to carry out a wide variety of tasks to support others. Our site staff have been amazing, dropping off PPE at the hospitals, delivering

food from our café to the soup kitchens, D&T staff have made face shields, teachers have gone out of their way to plan engaging activities for our key workers, children who have attended throughout the school holidays. One of our governors said “I have never been prouder in all my 35 years as a governor”.

Question 5

Share three emotions you've experienced in recent weeks and what's triggered them.

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Fear – when a number of staff have called in with symptoms. Hope and joy – when I spent the first week of the holidays with volunteer teachers from our school distributing food parcels to families. Proving our school is more than just a school but a huge part of this community.

Love for all the staff and students who put others first. Anxiety that we have not missed anything. Worry for disadvantaged students who see the outside talking about being online when they do not have access, either because they have no internet or lack of devices.

Satisfaction because teaching and learning continues, it's different but we're all doing a great job. Excitement because it's been great to have to plan and implement a new approach to schooling in a short time. Determination has driven me to lead our school community to adapt to the crisis successfully.

Sadness when hearing of the death of a parent of students and knowing how greatly that will affect the family and perhaps alter lives; concern when hearing of members of our school community being taken to hospital by ambulance and the deep relief (joy) when you know they are recovering; an intrinsic calmness as we moved towards Easter and a sudden realisation that, having never planned to be a headteacher, I now feel as if I am in the right place at this time.

Fear - what if I get it wrong, what if a choice I make, places someone in danger and they fall ill and die.

Annoyance/frustration - with the almost daily barrage of information from government and different or-

ganisations, very little is ever 'new information' so why can't we just have new information highlighted rather than wading through endless documents, attachments etc. Normally I wouldn't bother, but this is too important, and what if I miss something and then make a wrong decision – I would have to live with that, basically I'm trying to do the job as well as wade through what feels like *War and Peace* on a daily basis.

Gratitude - for the humour, support, kind words of others. Seeing how people who have previously been last to put themselves forward, have found their moment and stepped forward and seeing their sense of accomplishment and fortitude, basically grateful to work with such an amazing group of colleagues.

Disappointment – an unsatisfactory way for our Year 11 to leave.

Pride – following the announcement that schools were going to close we converted our sports hall and put our Year 11 through some final controlled condition exams in English, Maths and Science to help confirm the evidence around predicted grades. Other schools put on impromptu leavers' assemblies etc but that didn't seem the right thing to do. Our Year 11 rose to the challenge – they were brilliant!

Anger – that there is even a discussion about letting Year 10 students be put forward for GCSE grades this summer. It is so obviously the right thing to do.

Sadness – the number of families affected by this is beyond belief. The number of deaths is beyond anything I could ever imagine in my lifetime and that really saddens me. Gratitude – myself and my loved ones are healthy, we have a garden to escape to and still get paid

every month! Everything else is manageable! Solidarity – I always say my school is made up of amazing people, whilst battling through their own circumstances they are still a strong team putting the students at the heart of their priorities.

I'm not certain that disbelief is an emotion but I've woken in the middle of the night frantically searching through BBC News and then trying to go back to sleep whilst feeling like we're in a dystopian novel. Triggered I think by the sheer gravity of this situation hitting me! This second emotion may seem a little odd but, motivated. I have to say that I have had the opportunity to think creatively in my planning and have been inspired and challenged to set engaging, meaningful and enjoyable work for students at home. When in college, the day to day tasks often impact so much on your time that you can rarely 'sit back and plan' for hours at a time. I've been able to do this and it's really motivated me. Lastly, I've felt lost. Like everyone alive on the planet today, we have not been in this situation before and there is no one we can go to, to ensure we're doing the best job we can.

Sad: that our Year 11 students had their last year at the academy cut short. They didn't get the opportunity to prove themselves in an exam situation for their GCSEs and finally that we didn't get an opportunity to say our goodbyes in our true fashion.

Proud: of the effort and commitment and resilience that our students and staff have shown to ensure that even with the current situation our students continue to learn and continue to be safe. Proud of the unwavering support that all our staff, teaching, support and

QUESTION 5: Share three emotions you've experienced in recent weeks and what's triggered them.

operational have given to the academy. Without question, all staff have gone above and beyond for the learners that they support, regardless of the time of day or whether indeed it is term time, weekend or holiday.

Excited: to see and speak in person to all members of our school community. Looking forward to the future with a renewed vigour to do the best and achieve the best for every learner.

Frustration – changing advice and lack of sanitiser etc available to purchase. Anger – health service have not got basics to protect themselves, I am mother to a medic. Pride and joy – outstanding behaviour of students and stakeholder support.

Curiosity – you find yourself smiling at the fact that you didn't see this coming. A sense of action and desire to fix it. The feeling that we're responsible. Pride at all that the staff have done.

Bewilderment, when I've waded through pages of vague advice that make me wonder whether I'm doing enough to support the students.

Sadness, when I've heard of colleagues suffering from illness and losing loved ones, unable to attend funerals.

A degree of fear, as I'm a man in my fifties - we seem to be a vulnerable group. I am on the rota weekly, spending a lot of time with key worker children who could have viral loading.

When it started and it's OK to admit this it was fear. Then you go into pragmatic, doing mode and the fear is superseded by awe and then pride.

As I sit here today, we've now got this machine working. Our children and staff are all looked after. We're planning for the next 5 weeks and there's a degree of calm. You feel on top of it.

Fear – fear for my own family (one of our sons is highly vulnerable) and what the future may hold. Pride – pride in the senior team that I have in the trust. Frustration – frustration with unreasonable expectations of others (parents and community).

Confidence; luckily, we have excellent strategic plans, and this means we are well ahead with actions to ensure September can happen smoothly.

Disappointment; just some reactions/lack of support/more demands. Despite what people say, an emergency only brings out the best in some of the people, in reality an emergency also brings out the worst in others. Reality isn't always what you expected or hoped for.

Anxiety – about colleagues, family, children, community and self-illness.

Worry – about workload for colleagues, staff suffering from isolation, parents struggling financially.

Pride – from a school community which is not bound by a building.

Anxiety – am I doing all the right things through the lack of guidance and support. Not wanting to give staff too much to do, but also balance the fact that they should still be supporting. Hoping all staff that have been ill are ok.

Relief – when plans work and staff are happy with what we are doing, students are engaging, and parents thank you.

Happiness – the engagement of the students when our online tool tells us that the students have answered nearly 800,000 questions since we closed – phenomenal.

Sadness - when colleagues' relations have died, and I cannot afford them the personal and bereavement support that I would usually offer and not being able to share the sad news until they are able to give me permission. This is hard when everyone knows and assumes you don't because you haven't shared.

Sense of fellowship - virtual meetings with managers, LA, other schools, other heads have moved from purely professional discussions to ones where we really have become professional soulmates. There is no competitive edge and generosity of colleagues sharing ideas, resources etc has been overwhelmingly positive.

Frustration - when colleagues assume that I haven't considered aspects of how the school is to be run and tell me how to do my job. Frustration at the lack of understanding that leadership is done by human beings also in a similar position to everyone else; frustration that the world outside hasn't picked up that schools are open and comment on us being paid for not doing any work.

Stress/anxiety - this from trying to calm parents, organise provision, produce staffing rotas and establishing safety guidelines that are workable and manageable.

Concern/worry - relating to asking the question 'what more can we do for our parents and pupils?' Are we meeting all their needs as best we can?

Joy/pride - in seeing staff going 'above and beyond'

QUESTION 5: Share three emotions you've experienced in recent weeks and what's triggered them.

job descriptions and expectations. Seeing particular members of the SLT demonstrate their full potential under quite debilitating pressure has been extremely gratifying.

Sadness, when I sat and watched the PM announce that summer examinations were cancelled. I remember my little boy asking later in the evening "Mummy when will you stop crying?"

Panic, waiting for the sad moment when someone from the school was faced with losing a loved one to the Covid-19 virus and offering them my deepest sympathy.

Warmth, from the staggering amount of support the school has received from the community.

Question 6

What one piece of advice or guidance would you give to others leading their school/academy/organisation through this or another crisis?

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You know your school, you know your families, you know your staff. You are best placed to decide what is needed and what can be achieved. State clearly the support you need from others and the result of that support not being available.

Plan for the recovery now. The return to school is the first priority, how to make that work successfully.

Don't set expectations of home learning too high. The whole country is dealing with this in different ways. We can't be expecting kids to be taking part in the learning that schools expect for 5 or 6 hours per day. If they are happy, reading, playing and getting some exercise, that's good enough for now.

It's OK to have that initial emotional response. Take a breath and dust yourself down and you'll go into pragmatic mode.

Something that has been powerful and helpful and I'm glad I set up is a Headteacher WhatsApp group. It's been so useful, so don't feel that you're on your own. The group and that system leadership has been vital. We've supported each other and helped each other out and now there's a sense of calm and things are under control. Don't be afraid to ask for help, no question is a stupid question.

Our relationship as a school with the unions is usually good and has been even better. Open, honest togetherness.

It's important to convey a sense of hope and optimism as well. I talk very upbeat and say to students, parents and staff that this will be over soon, there'll be a hangover from all of this, but lockdown won't last forever, and we need to look to the future with hope and opti-

mism. One of my students was saying what an amazing period of history to live through this is. When we look back as I've said to colleagues, we'll want to be able to say I did my bit during this national crisis and I helped young people make it through.

Radiate that sense of optimism to keep people going.

I think we need to build things into our lives to look forward to, whether they are Zoom conversations with family and friends, supporting people in the community, online cultural events or self-development projects.

Do the best you can. Don't worry about what you can't do and what you might get wrong. Most people will rise to it. Try not to flap about, have a wry smile, keep laughing with your SLT, keep calm.

Do the basics well. Innovation will follow this crisis but now is the time to get fundamentals such as safeguarding correct.

Don't underestimate the importance of staff and student morale. Ensure that you think of new and innovative ways to bring a smile to everyone's faces, release the tension and reduce anxiety. Keep connected!

Look at the facts, don't second guess. Challenge each other in a healthy manner but more importantly than anything else, look after yourselves and each other.

You cannot get through any crisis on your own. This will test the strength of the relationships you build (both personally and professionally) so be authentic,

be emotionally intelligent, be resilient, be self-aware and be kind!

Most of the best things to do in a crisis are simple things. If what you are doing feels complicated, it is probably much too complicated.

Be clear on your core values and in each decision, for me, be clear you put the vulnerable first in those decisions. One can't simply follow guidance when it changes so rapidly, it would reflect indecision and lack of foresight and undermine trust and confidence. You must do things in the best interests of the vulnerable based on the information to hand and your core values.

Know your staff well – their strengths, their developing skills and trust them. Model what you would like to see and be kind to yourself and to others when we can't always achieve everything we would like to achieve.

Do what you can and let others help. There is no rule book for this – just keep doing the next right thing.

Decide on a route forward and lead!

Use everything – website, Instagram, Facebook. Be caring first. Video messages.

Take it one step at a time and always ask for help – you are only one person.

Cliché, but take time to put on your own oxygen mask and to breathe, no need to rush, take time to think and then act.

QUESTION 6: What one piece of advice or guidance would you give to others leading their school/academy/organisation through this or another crisis?

Go with what you believe is right, have high but realistic expectations and take advice when it is offered.

Remember your school is a community in its own right – we have 190 staff, 1200 students, 2000 plus adults and 270 new students to consider – it's big and they need you to stand up and be counted and communicate well.

Be honest – do not hide anything from your community – it will come back to burn you.

Remember why you came into the profession – to teach and develop young people, not for league tables and accountability measures.

Be true to yourself - you know your school, your staff, your pupils and your parents. Do what you think is right for all of them and don't beat yourself up about what others are doing. You are unique.

Talk to and include your senior leaders in your decisions; reach out for support and advice; remember, you are not in this alone - no one has gone through this before and we will all have the same worries, concerns, anxieties and questions.

Be as prepared as you can be, remember you are only human and even though you have a very important role in school you also need to think of your own family and people who may need support in your own community.

Question 7

If you could ask for one piece of help or support for your school/academy/organisation as we go into the summer term what would it be, who would you ask?

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How do we support families who may be grieving if we cannot visit or let them into school?

Ofsted paused. Progress 8 for Year 11 2021 paused. Let us rebuild. Own devices made easier for schools, or free for FSM. Internet for some?

Ensuring purposeful involvement of all staff in on-line school is quite difficult... so what to do with surplus staff?

It would be good to have a planner – key things that schools are doing in the summer term to ensure they are ready for return. More webinars like the one Tom presented about exam grading would also be useful. A central list of good online platforms that are free and suitable for subjects outside of core areas would also be helpful.

More information regarding examinations next year (summer 2021). Will there be changes to specifications/examinations? Eg:

- Will Y10 still be required to have done fieldwork for GCSE Geography – we have just cancelled our fieldwork trip?
- Will there be any reduction in content for GCSE Maths – if so, what would be omitted? It would be necessary to know in order to adjust the scheme of work promptly.

When schools can re-open there must be a clear announcement well in advance – it will take time to get the school buildings opened up again (we have only used a small part and would like it all thoroughly cleaned, something that is not happening at the mo-

ment to avoid cleaners coming in by public transport). Headteachers and governors need to be trusted to re-open schools at a time, and in a way that suits them – this may vary according to what has happened during closure, as well as by situation, stage etc.

A short concise daily summary of what is new information, nothing else.

To the government – please give us ample time to prepare for reopening if it is going to be before the start of the summer holidays.

I would ask for help longer term, I think the impact of this will not only be felt by current year 11 and 13 students but equally (if not more so) by years 10 and 12 as well as younger students. I also think the impact of this on people of all ages will take time to emerge and as leaders we need to be prepared for that. I would ask for mental health support in all schools as well as a fresh perspective on curriculum design and assessment procedures moving forward.

Not sure on this one, just for Ofqual/the DfE/government to seriously consider whether the current education model we have in place is right?

I wouldn't specifically ask for anything. Our school community in Nottingham has been superb, and I have nothing but praise for our local authority and the community of schools that we work with. Without exception, everyone has put students at the heart of everything we do. In times like this you can ask no more.

Clarity and listening to what school leaders are say-

ing. If ASCL and NEU are saying something they know what they're talking about and their advice should be taken as should the advice of people who work in schools.

The last few weeks have re-emphasised that schools are at the heart of their communities and that needs to be remembered and recognised well beyond the end of this pandemic.

Lobby Ofqual so we cannot be open to appeals on grades.

Lobby the government over not reopening schools too quickly or in a manner that is unsustainable.

It's hard as we don't know when we're coming back or how we're coming back. We're planning ahead, thinking that we could be back in June but knowing that could change. Practical and technological stuff, resources, would enable us to provide near normal service with a reduced staff complement if we need to.

The ways schools work in the future is going to be very different, the way we collaborate, the way we use technology and intelligent accountability. The system is ripe for positive change. Our relationship between school, home and the wider community is stronger than ever, and we must cling on to that and all the hope and optimism.

I'd ask Ofsted to clearly outline their expectations for inspection moving forward.

Clarity. Tell us first what is needed so we can make it available. Do not announce what schools are going to do on national television before you have told the schools themselves!!!

QUESTION 7: If you could ask for one piece of help or support for your school/academy/organisation as we go into the summer term what would it be, who would you ask?

Commitment to future eg how we manage year 10s into GCSEs who have lost a term, no P8 next year but what about in 5 years when we are being judged against KS2 scores which were not validated either, likewise for A-level in 2 years' time.

A plan for reopening and a structure to do so in dealing with:

- staff and student mental health issues
- bereavement
- re-engaging students in their learning
- Understanding the future accountability systems around data for the next 6 years.

Would request support from the following people:

- Professional associations
- SSAT
- Local authorities
- Government
- Regional Schools Commissioners.

We are well supported by our LA; we have bought into the Education Partnership Charity so counselling is available - I think we may need some specific bereavement counselling for some colleagues. I also worry that our children and families will be getting more fraught as the days go by and we will need support from the LA/ DCT to help us decide how many more children we can or should accommodate.

To have definitive advice on PPE use in special schools either from the DfE and/or LA. Being able to tell parents when things will 'return to normal' and their child can return to school.

ssat the schools, students
and teachers network

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