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To: Parents of all pupils enrolled in Ballymena Academy

Dear Parents,

With the new term now underway I felt it appropriate to write to you to wish all our pupils – those who are joining, those who are returning, and the significant adults in their lives – well in the year ahead. There is always a special energy to the start of the year and this is especially true of this year which marks the 50th anniversary of the move from Thomas Street to our present site.

The school's good reputation in the community which we serve has evolved over many generations yet it is something we do not take for granted and consequently we continue to seek to improve what we do and how we do it. It is entirely appropriate at this early point in the school year to emphasise our shared determination to sustain Ballymena Academy as a school in which pupils feel valued as individuals and where they can succeed, in and out of the classroom, as they acquire qualifications and develop the skills for adult and working life. Effective engagement with parents is essential to achieving best standards and we acknowledge the importance of your support throughout all the stages of your child's education.

There are several specific issues addressed in the remainder of this letter but if you have any concerns about your child, or if you wish to discuss your child's progress, please do not hesitate to contact the school. The parents' information leaflet issued via ParentMail, provides further relevant information, including term dates and the Calendar of events for the year ahead. The school website www.ballymenaacademy.org.uk, which is currently being updated, is also a convenient source of information to which you may wish to refer from time-to-time.

Celebrating Achievement

Once again the outcomes of GCE 'A' level and GCSE examinations are very pleasing indeed, consolidating our reputation for academic excellence.

At 'A' level, an increased number of pupils have achieved 3 or more passes at Grades A* - C, with the percentage figure of 84% equalling our best ever figure and significantly above the N.I. Grammar School average of 76%. Over two-thirds of the year group achieved at least one A grade and all examinations sat by each pupil resulted in a pass grade.

Forty-four young people achieved 3 or more A* or A grades and the number of A* grades obtained is more than double the national average.

At GCSE, the results show a considerable increase in the number of A*/A grades and reveal that the percentage of pupils achieving 7 A* - C grades (including English and Mathematics) will once again well exceed N.I. Grammar School average performance.

Almost 95% of our young people achieved at least one A grade and forty-four pupils achieved A* or A grades in all nine full GCSE examinations, with six pupils achieving 9 A* grades.

While the results are extremely pleasing in themselves, more importantly they are empowering young people to gain entry to their chosen pathways with the vast majority of 'A' level students securing places on their first choice university courses. We celebrate all these achievements and also those of pupils who have attained considerable success outside the classroom over the summer months.

Mobile Electronic Devices

The key word, of which our pupils are frequently reminded, is 'respect'; indiscipline and poor behaviour are not common occurrences here. We know that situation is a consequence of the positive attitude of our young people, the support of their parents and the ethos of the school.

As a school we have made the decision that mobile electronic devices (MEDs) may be brought to school. These are part of powerful and developing technologies which children and young people must learn to use responsibly. They have great potential to enhance learning. However, the potential to misuse the technology is also there, so it would be appreciated if you, as parents, would take a moment or two every so often to remind your children that they should always use technology in a way that shows respect for others and for themselves. For example, unauthorised use in classrooms is not acceptable. We would also ask you to reinforce to your children that use of phones and other devices is only permitted before and after school, break and lunch times. For health and safety their use is not permitted in the corridors between classes. In another context, bullying is bullying, regardless of the medium. Cyber-bullying sounds like science fiction but it can bring just as much, if not more, unhappiness as verbal or physical bullying does in person. It is equally unacceptable and it will not be tolerated in this school. This includes inappropriate use of social network sites. In legal terms, by abusing the media young people also leave themselves open to breaking the law and finding themselves with a criminal record. This is no trivial matter and can have serious implications.

We continue to provide opportunity for pupils to explore issues surrounding these emerging technologies and would encourage parents to discuss such matters as part and parcel of family life. Two organisations which provide detailed help guides for parents are CEOP at www.thinkuknow.co.uk and Insafe at www.saferinternet.org.

School Transport

In recent years, it is good to be able to report that we have seen few instances of inappropriate behaviour at the Bus Depot and on transport to and from school. The record of Ballymena Academy pupils in this context has always been positive and it is important that it remains so. Please impress on your children that regardless of how others behave, or what others may be doing, they should stick to the standards they know to be right and not allow themselves to be misled, however difficult that may be at times. Withdrawal of bus passes and disciplinary action by the school can be incurred.

Pupils travelling off-site

With reference to pupils returning to school after trips off-site, including sporting fixtures, our practice has been to allow pupils to get off the bus at various points before reaching school – the final destination of the journey. We believe this is sensible practice and means that parents are not called upon for any unnecessary extra 'taxi' duties. However, we must have parental permission to allow any pupils to get off a bus before it reaches school.

If you are likely to need to seek such permission the relevant information and permission form are available on the school website www.ballymenaacademy.org.uk or from the school office.

Parents/Guardians of pupils who decline to use the school transport provided accept responsibility for making their own transport arrangements. Organising staff must be informed in advance and provided with evidence of parental permission, if a pupil wishes to make their own transport arrangements. **N.B.** For Senior Games (Wednesday p.m.) and for regular scheduled sporting practices off-site, a separate procedure applies. The appropriate form, to be signed by Parent/Guardian, should be obtained from and returned to the P.E. Department.

Uniform

Our expectations about uniform wearing remain as they have always been and all regulations relating to school uniform can be found within the Parents' Handbook (see school website). Pupils and parents support that standard, and it is an important visible sign of our school. We try to encourage the young people in this aspect of school life as in others, but persistent offenders can expect to be sanctioned. The wearing of uniform correctly, and according to school regulations, is as important on the way to and from school as it is during the school day. In that regard the wearing of 'hoodies', other than the school 'hoodie', on the way to and from school is not permitted.

As indicated in previous correspondence, a transition period for P.E. kit will operate for this school year during which Canterbury and G-force kit will be acceptable under the regulations. We thank you for your support in maintaining high standards in this area and trust that this will continue to be the case.

Attendance

The strong correlation between attendance and attainment continues to underline the importance of good attendance. The average attendance at Ballymena Academy is 97%, well above N.I. Grammar School averages. Closely linked to good attendance, and information requested by future employers and commented on in references, is the importance of good time-keeping and punctuality to school. Whilst we recognise that exceptional circumstances on a morning can lead to a pupil being late for school, it is expected that all pupils attend for registration commencing at 9.00 a.m.

When pupils are late they will have to account for this. Lateness will be closely monitored and the issue of repeated late-coming will be addressed through our normal procedures for positive behaviour.

Free School Meals and Uniform Allowance

Relevant forms for these allowances may be obtained from the School Office or from the Education Authority – North Easter Region.

Homework

Independent working at home is an essential component of educational success. It is important, from the onset of their school career, that pupils develop a “homework habit”, and a routine for study that will underpin future success. Like all habits, once acquired it is hard to lose; one of the great benefits of routine is that things are more easily and more efficiently accomplished than they are when we have to establish new and unfamiliar ways of doing them.

Traffic

In this annual reminder to parents I draw attention to the Parents’ Handbook and stress that the arrangements are there for safety reasons. In particular:

- Please do not use the area across the front of school **between 8.30 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.** as a ‘pick-up’ point; this includes the end of the school day.

It is pleasing to note the number of pupils getting out of their transport at the bottom of the drive and walking into school – not only is this better exercise and a healthier option, it also eases congestion in the school grounds.

School Facilities

Work has recently been completed on a new ICT Suite within the Sixth Form Centre with additional computers also being provided in a number of other areas. The refurbishment of the school toilets is expected to commence in November 2017. We trust that these considerable enhancements will prove beneficial to all our pupils.

Dining Hall

Payment for food and drinks in the Dining Hall and Sixth Form Centre continues to be via the biometric system. In the interests of avoiding unnecessary embarrassment to our young people, we would ask that your son/daughter ensures that they have sufficient funds on their account at all times to pay for items they wish to purchase. A print-out of Dining Hall spending by your son/daughter is available, on request, from the school office.

We plan to introduce +Pay which will enable parents to “top up” biometric accounts on-line. Further information will follow in this regard.

Education Enrichment Fund

Ballymena Academy, like most schools, has experienced significant reduction to its budget in recent years. We are proud that our achievements, as evidenced by this summer’s examination results and other pupil successes beyond the classroom, have not thus far been adversely affected by financial pressures. It remains our wish to maintain and develop the curricular and co-curricular provision which provides our young people with opportunities of a quality and quantity which few other schools can equal.

Current levels of funding from the Department of Education are insufficient to allow us to support and maintain such a high quality provision and in that context the Board of Governors would seek your support for the Education Enrichment Fund. We trust that, as parents, you will see the reasoning for the existence of the Fund and support this initiative.

Sixth Form Contribution

The Board of Governors has introduced, from 1st September, 2017, a Sixth Form levy in Year 13 which will be required from each pupil in Sixth Form to cover the maintenance of the Sixth Form Centre and related administration, staffing and catering services. This levy will be payable upon enrolment for each year of Sixth Form.

Co-Curricular Activities

The continued stance of the Department of Education in providing no funds to Grammar Schools for the provision of co-curricular activities places a significant burden on school finances. As a school we continue to raise this issue with our politicians as it is our belief that involvement in such activity is vital to the development of our young people. In the absence of such funding, as has been the custom, a small contribution will be requested in respect of transport to all 'away' fixtures and associated activities. The contribution for 2017/2018 will be £2.00 per return journey and this will be collected by the supervising teacher for each trip. Your support in this regard and for all aspects of our co-curricular programme is much appreciated

Transfer 2018

As in the previous two years, the AQE Common Entrance Assessment will be used to determine admission to Year 8 in Ballymena Academy for September, 2017.

The AQE Entrance Assessments this year will take place on **Saturday, 11th November, Saturday, 25th November and Saturday, 2ND December.**

If you have a child now in P.7, or if you know of a P.7 child who has not been registered for the Entrance Assessment, then it is important that registration is completed by the registration deadline, **Friday, 8th September, 2017.** Forms are available from the school, on request, or can be downloaded from the website www.aqe.org.uk Application Forms should be returned to the AQE office.

Child Protection

The school discharges its safeguarding and child protection responsibilities thoroughly and well. A copy of the Parental Procedure Summary is attached. (This information has already been issued to parents of pupils in Year 8.)

In this regard the Board of Governors has recently reviewed and adopted a revised Safeguarding and Child Protection policy. The full policy can be accessed on the school website www.ballymenaacademy.org.uk and a hard copy is available, upon request, from the School Office.

Finally, on behalf of Staff and Governors, I extend best wishes to all our pupils and their families and I look forward to meeting you during the year.

Yours sincerely,



S.W. Black (Principal)