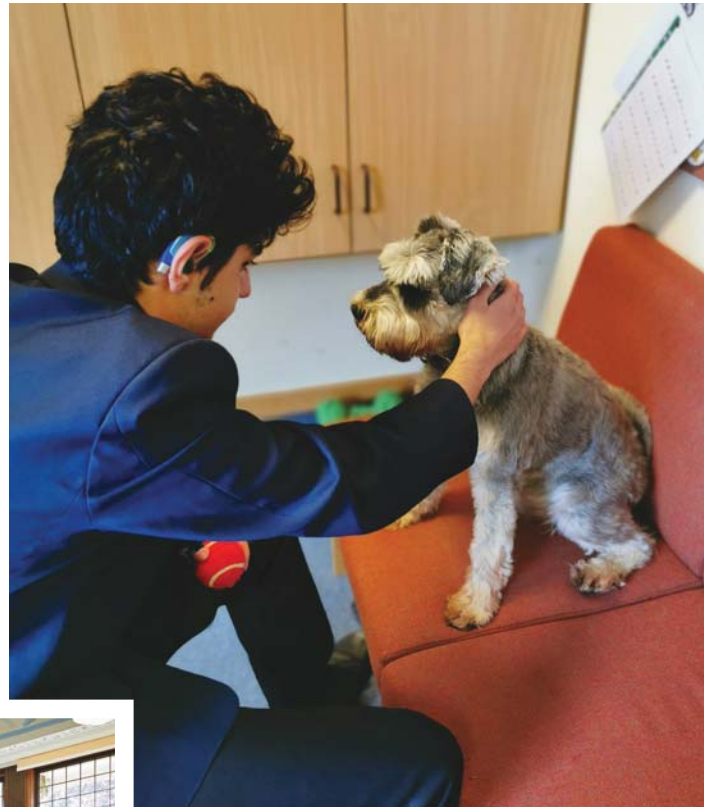


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A year in the life of a special school

Danny Bidwell, Assistant Headteacher, shares an insight to Knightsfield School community during a pandemic

Knightsfield School is a secondary* special school in Hertfordshire for deaf students. For all schools across the country, it has been a year like no other. Words such as 'lockdown', 'bubbles', 'social distancing' and 'remote learning' have become part of our everyday vernacular and the after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic may impact how schools are organised forever.

The first murmurings of Covid-19 were in January 2020 (which seems like a very long time ago now), when very few could have predicted the impact the virus would have on schools and for how long they would be affected. As the virus took hold across the country and with a seemingly limited knowledge of the symptoms and effects nationwide, schools were getting a taste of things to come – a mere glimpse of the disruption and upheaval they would face.

By March, and with the impending announcement of the first national lockdown, it was all hands on deck at Knightsfield. In a small school, any staff absence has a knock-on effect across the school. With multiple absences due to shielding and self-isolation, the forbearance and resilience of the team were tested to the full. One thing I have learnt in my time at Knightsfield is that the team always pulls together when their backs are against the wall. Staff everywhere went above and beyond the call of duty to keep the school open. The list of jobs staff have taken on is staggering and makes for interesting reading if discussing 'things I'd never thought I'd do as a teacher...'. By no means exhaustive, the list has included: cleaning the school at 05:30 to just be able to open for the day, clearing car parks and playgrounds of snow, grocery shopping, delivery driving, cooking, creating podcast publications, virtual quiz night hosting and even hairdressing!

The first lockdown arrived just before the Easter holidays. In anticipation of this, staff had prepared work packs for students to take home with them. This was coupled with check-in phone calls to ensure that all students and their families were well and able to do the work. Regular podcasts were recorded and sent to students to ensure they remained in contact with the school. Soon, it was announced that students of key-workers should return to school, closely followed by vulnerable students, the term defined by whether a student had an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP). This meant students began to return straight after the Easter holidays. At first, only a few returned but the number of students attending school increased rapidly week-by-week.

By the start of June, over 95% of the students had returned to school with the remaining 5% attending before the summer holiday. Everybody looked forward to a return to relative normality in September; however, this

meant that the summer holidays were dominated by planning, risk-assessing and the implementation of protocols that would keep staff and students safe. The ever-moving goalposts ensured that this was easier said than done.

Although all students had returned to school before the summer, lessons and school life looked very different then. Classes were split into smaller bubbles, the timetable was changed on a weekly basis with staff on rotas, and deep cleaning of the school scheduled for Mondays. Subsequently, it was felt that our students needed to learn how to be students again.

We have a wonderful team of teachers and teaching assistants and would never want to quash their ideas and creativity by demanding a completely rigid structure to lessons. However, it was felt that all lessons should start and end the same way with the goal being to settle students to learn quickly and to recap learning when the lesson ended. In discussions with staff, we developed a starter activity called 'Engage' that would form part of every lesson for students. The activity needed to be one





where the students could come in, settle quickly and work independently, thus allowing the teacher to prepare for the rest of the lesson. The second prerequisite for all lessons was the 'End & Send' that formed a plenary of the lesson. Staff would have to set aside time in their lesson planning to allow for this activity to finish lessons. The exercise would ensure that teachers could check in with classes very quickly to assess learning and their understanding from the lesson. These tasks continue to form part of every lesson at Knightsfield and the routine has formed good habits.

Acoustically compliant classrooms at Knightsfield normally have a seating configuration in the shape of a horseshoe to maximise the opportunity for students to hear the teacher and each other. Social-distancing regulations meant that desks needed to be spread out across the classroom with rows staggered to ensure that all students could at least lipread the teacher if not each other.

Other significant changes included the school playground and surrounding field space and astro-turf pitch becoming zones where students could only mix and play outside with one other year group, with the different cohorts accessing the different zones on a rota. Classes would stay in the same classroom, in a primary school model, with the specialist teacher travelling to them. All indoor clubs and targeted interventions would have to be delivered to single bubbles rather than to multiple year groups at once.

Meticulous cleaning rotas were implemented to ensure

that facilities were cleaned multiple times per day. After school meetings were temporarily postponed. No whole-school assemblies would occur in a physical sense (how I miss all students coming together in the hall) but would be replaced by virtual assemblies delivered to the interactive screens in their classrooms. The hall would become a temporary second staffroom to ensure that staff could be adequately socially distanced throughout the day. The school day would be restructured to allow students to visit the canteen at Monk's Walk** (our co-sited mainstream school) at an allocated time slot. In turn, this led to the introduction of an 'Enrichment' period at the end of lunch, which would encompass assemblies, reading, form activities and homework support. An afternoon break would be added as it was acknowledged that with students staying in the same classroom, they really should be able to stretch their legs and have a change of scenery at some point in the afternoon! The list could go on and on.

Students and staff took all of the changes in their stride and things settled very quickly in September. All was going swimmingly until the Christmas holidays when ... another national lockdown was announced following a second surge of Covid-19 cases across the country. With news of further school closures arriving on the eve of the new term in January, it was initially unknown as to whether these closures included all children. It became apparent that, once again, all vulnerable students would be entitled to attend school; however, parents could keep their child at

home should they see fit. The caveat to this was the can of worms that was 'remote learning'. All schools would be required to have a Remote Learning policy that would detail how students who remained at home would continue to be educated without being disadvantaged. Having discussed this with mainstream peers, it became apparent as the early weeks of the new term went by, that very few students were attending school. These were catered for by staff on a rota with those



at home being taught virtually by their teacher (often through live lessons on Microsoft Teams or Google Classroom). At Knightsfield, those early weeks of the new year were possibly the most challenging for the teachers, particularly regarding the logistics. Not only had teachers been required across the country to learn about this new technology and way of delivering to students, but now they had to simultaneously deliver lessons face-to-face to the students in their classroom whilst streaming live and providing resources to those tuning in from home. Trust me when I say this is much easier said than done. I am immensely proud of the way our staff faced up to this challenge and overcame any technical issues they had with determination and good grace. All of this without even mentioning the small matter of lateral flow testing for all staff and students twice a week!

With parallels to the first lockdown, week-by-week attendance began to rise with parents and students seeing the benefit of actually being in school. When analysing the progress of students, it was noted that those learning remotely made significantly less progress than those in school, even though the content of the lessons was exactly the same. Furthermore, students ordinarily at the top of the class fared much worse in tests than those with lower target grades when they were learning from home. Suffice to say that the teaching profession is safe for the foreseeable future and will not be replaced by computers or robots any time soon. Remote learning and live lessons were definitely better than nothing, but we had proof that they were absolutely no substitute for the real thing.

As we pass the one-year anniversary of the first national lockdown, it has been good to reflect on a year like no other (in my 24 years of teaching). Lessons have

undoubtedly been learnt and changes that have been made may become permanent due to their positive impact. For instance, due to a combination of the rigid structure to the start and end of lessons, students staying in the same classroom, thus minimising corridor traffic between lessons, and with playground zoning and the reconfigured seating plans, we have seen a huge improvement in student behaviour. A simple comparison between the number of behaviour incidents between January to March of 2020 and January to March of 2021 shows a stark difference. In 2020, over 150 behaviour incidents (the vast majority being low-level, disruption, homework and other minor issues, I hasten to add) were reported by staff in comparison to just 16 in 2021. This gives us food for thought as we plan for the next academic year and reflect on the vast changes and upheaval of the last 12 months. Just don't tell us that schools have been shut this year as appears to be the popular narrative in the media!



Danny Bidwell, at the time of writing this article, was coming to the end of his third year as Deputy Headteacher at Knightsfield having previously worked in mainstream education for over 20 years. He hopes to have gained his QToD status in September after training at the University of Birmingham.

* With a Year 6 class.

** Monk's Walk School is our co-sited mainstream school. In key stage 3, Knightsfield students attend lessons there for drama, PE and art. In key stages 4 and 5, students can opt in to subjects there to ensure as broad a range of subjects as possible is offered.