

REACH ACADEMY FELTHAM'S WHOLE-SCHOOL, WHOLE-COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO COVID-19

1. SCHOOL CONTEXT

Reach Academy Feltham (RAF) is in West London. It has 900 pupils from ages 2 to 18. It is a Free School, meaning it is funded directly by the Department for Education and is independent of local government. The school serves a community with high levels of disadvantage, where many families find it difficult to access professional support services. RAF's mission is to help all its pupils lead lives of choice and opportunity. It works closely with pupils and their families to overcome any barriers to doing well, at home and in the community. To support this, in 2017 RAF created Reach Children's Hub, an organisation dedicated to extending RAF's work with families, the local community, and other professional services in the area. The Hub works both with pupils and families from RAF and who attend other local schools. Ofsted, the English schools inspectorate, has graded RAF as an outstanding school.

2. RESPONDING TO COVID-19

A week and a half before the UK went into lockdown, RAF's leadership team (the principals and senior staff) began planning their response to the crisis. Their priorities were to:

- provide high-quality, engaging learning for all pupils
- look after families' well-being
- support the wider community
- look after the well-being of RAF staff.

RAF's work to develop Reach Children's Hub meant it already had some good links with other services and community groups locally. As a Free School, it was also used to working quickly and flexibly to respond to pupils' and families' needs. These factors meant RAF was able to act much more quickly in response to COVID-19 than was possible for local government organisations. RAF has stepped forward to take the lead on co-ordinating a multi-agency response to the crisis across the community. By taking this role, it has been able to secure a renewed commitment for services, community groups and schools to work together to meet people's increasing needs.

3. HIGH-QUALITY ENGAGING LEARNING FOR ALL

HOW LEARNING IS ORGANISED

All 900 pupils at RAF are continuing their education online. There is a clear structure for pupils' daily learning. This is the same for all primary aged (ages 4-11) and secondary aged pupils (11-16) and has:

- A short physical exercise activity for pupils to do before starting their learning activities.
- Pupils are expected to complete 3 x 1 hour learning sessions a day: one maths, one English, and one other subject.
- For each 1 hour learning session, teachers make a 20 minute instructional video. The videos all follow the same structure and ask pupils to pause at certain points to complete some independent activities using the skills and ideas the teachers have presented. When RAF closed, each pupil was given an exercise book to take home where they could complete their independent work. The videos have also been designed for pupils to be able to study independently without help or supervision from parents. Promoting pupils' independence as learners is also important to help RAF support parents who may also be working from home, or lack confidence in supporting school work, or have more than one child.
- Teachers are available online for 1 hour a day to answer pupils' questions. At the end of the day, pupils or their parents take a photograph of their work and send it to their teacher or teaching assistant to check and give feedback quickly. In the feedback, there is an emphasis on praise and positive reinforcement to give pupils' confidence in their abilities as learners.
- Because pupils have to submit photographs of their work every day, there is a very clear and strong expectation they will engage in learning. If work is not submitted, pupils know teachers will phone their parents to check why. This also means the school can know very quickly if anyone becomes ill and needs help, or if there any other difficulties the pupil or family needs support with.
- RAF has now set up its own YouTube channel, publishing its video learning sessions for primary aged children for anyone to access.

Working in this way appears to be sustainable and to provide high quality learning experiences. Two weeks into lockdown, pupils are actively engaged in their learning: 98% of primary pupils (ages 4-11) and 85% of secondary aged pupils (11-16) complete their work every day.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO LEARNING

- The UK government still requires schools to be open for a very small number of children whose parents are 'key workers' (for example, the children of doctors and nurses, or supermarket staff), or who are especially vulnerable (for example, children who live in state care, or who have complex needs). There are currently 15 pupils attending school who also follow the video learning sessions. This arrangement also means that if any pupil at home consistently refuses to complete their work, their teachers and parents may agree for the pupil to come to school to work. In this very small number of cases, this measure will help to prevent school drop-out.
- An obvious barrier to online learning is not having home internet access or a computer. Before RAF closed, the leadership team conducted a survey of families' ICT access and found only 12 pupils had no broadband access. In these cases, the school either bought dongles, or helped to negotiate temporary internet access arrangements. RAF also lent all 200 school-owned laptops to families. The instructional videos have been designed so they can be viewed on a mobile phone, and as pupils do their work in an exercise book, they do not need to type into a computer. These arrangements have allowed all pupils to access the videos, either on a phone or computer. In exceptional cases where pupils are temporarily without online access, they might also be able to come to school to complete work.
- When the lock down ends, RAF hopes to re-open to its most vulnerable pupils first – preferably over the summer before the start of the new academic year in September. This is to support these pupils to readjust to being in school.

(Resource: Access RAF's YouTube channel for online learning:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiai-MqUoEe-IQ2FbApQChw/playlists>)

4. LOOKING AFTER FAMILIES' WELL-BEING

Building strong relationships with pupils and parents has always been important at RAF and the school is finding ways to continue this.

- For younger pupils of kindergarten or primary age, their class teacher will phone the family at least once a week to check everyone is doing well and address any difficulties. For older children who have different teachers for different subjects, a teacher they know will do this.
- For the most vulnerable parents, a member of staff from RAF's pastoral or safeguarding team will phone every day. These staff are specialists in addressing families' complex needs and working with other support services, for example, social workers. In addition to the children of key workers, the school is also open for the very

small number of children who are recognised to be especially vulnerable – for example, who live in state care, or have very complex learning needs, or who are in an unsafe situation at home.

- Just over one third of pupils at RAF usually receive a free school meal for lunch (and sometimes also for breakfast). This service has been adapted and will also continue in the school Easter holidays. RAF has its own onsite catering facilities and is in charge of providing its own meals to pupils. It is now providing meals every day for 400 families, including families at three other local schools. Those who can walk to the school can collect their free meals outside RAF on a Monday and a Thursday. School staff and volunteers also deliver food to 50 local families who are not able to do this. In the UK, it is a requirement that all school staff have a police check. This means staff can deliver food and contact pupils and their families at home, without having to wait for security checks to be completed.

(Resource: Watch a video about RAF's school meal service made for BBC London News - School meal distribution: <https://vimeo.com/404738534>)

5. SUPPORT FOR THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Reach Children's Hub had already made good links with some local services and organisations. It was able to build on these links to help lead and co-ordinate a whole area response to the impacts of COVID-19 on the local community.

- RAF invited 35 different organisations working in the local area to a virtual meeting about how they could work together to support the local community during the crisis. These included: charities, churches, local government officers, schools, and youth groups. RAF asked them all to complete a survey to say which groups of people in the community they were most worried about, and the support they thought would be most needed. Three working groups were then created to work on the priorities identified in the survey. They focus on:
 1. Food and essentials
 2. Mental health and well-being
 3. Financial information and advice
- RAF helps to co-ordinate the working groups and provides administrative support for their activities. The leader of Reach Children's Hub also sends daily updates about the support being made available locally around these themes to the working groups and other community contacts. To date:
 - RAF has supported three local foodbanks to develop and use a single referral form. This helps to ensure that food is allocated to those who need it most across the community.
 - RAF has also extended its free school meal deliveries to include 25 vulnerable elderly people who have been told by government they must self-isolate because of pre-existing health conditions.

- The mental health and well-being group has created a well-being information pack. This contains a wide range of activities, videos and blogs with strategies for supporting mental health. It also has details of where to seek professional help.
- The financial information and advice group has compiled information on financial support for individuals and businesses. This has been made available on community websites. RAF anticipates that families will soon require advice on how to access the government's economic relief support due to a high number of job losses amongst the family population as a result of COVID-19.

6. LOOKING AFTER THE WELL-BEING OF RAF STAFF

RAF's whole-school, whole-community response to COVID-19 makes many demands on its staff. Recognising this, RAF is also focused on looking after staff well-being.

- To ensure staff have a manageable workload during this period, they have been asked to work for four hours per day. This includes preparing videos, making phone calls, and providing feed-back on pupil work. Staff will also have the usual Easter school holiday.
- RAF has arranged for every staff member to have a daily phone call from a colleague to check they are doing well and address any difficulties. All staff attend a virtual meeting every morning at 08:30 and there is an optional daily chat from 15:30-16:00. Staff have also set up an online social group which meets on Friday from 16.00-18.00.
- Staff who usually travel to school by public transport, or have young children, or live with someone with a health condition, have been asked to work at home. RAF has a rota for staff who are able to come to school. To meet social distancing requirements, in school, staff are organised in teams which work separately in the building, and everyone respects the 2-metre distance rule.

7. FEEDBACK FROM PARENTS

Parents have posted many positive messages online about RAF's whole-school response to COVID-19, and given feedback to staff. Some examples include:

Reach staff is keeping our kids on priority while managing their families, it is a commendable work.

We all should learn from teacher's community, how to keep calm in this difficult time and keep doing our roles. Once again, many thanks to your staff for supporting our kids.

We highly appreciate what you are doing and I don't know what I could have done if [my daughter] was not in Reach. It makes our life easy, especially for the working parents.

Thank you very much for checking on us [over the phone], I really appreciate it.

During this time it's always nice to be part of school [from a parent who is volunteering at school with food deliveries on Mondays and Thursdays].

Related links

BBC London News - School meal distribution: <https://vimeo.com/404738534>

BBC London News - Reach preparing for lockdown: <https://vimeo.com/399376527>

BBC London News - Lessons during lockdown: <https://vimeo.com/399376356>

Guardian article: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/20/schools-are-ready-for-this-challenge-if-we-have-clarity>

Twitter – The Reach Children’s Hub: <https://twitter.com/ReachHubFeltham>

Twitter – Reach Academy Feltham: <https://twitter.com/reachfeltham>

RAF’s YouTube channel for online learning: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiai-MqUoEe-IQ2FbApQChw/playlists>