

May 17th 2020

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I hope that this message finds you and your family well. As you are aware, a survey of parents was conducted towards the end of last week. The aim of this was to inform us of parents' views on the distance-learning that has been put in place by the school to date and to gain some further insight into pressures, difficulties and obstacles that parents may be encountering in the home.

Rather than going into every question in minute detail, I will try to give a broad overview of the findings. We got a good response, giving us a good sample size and even if you didn't get a chance to complete it, we hope that the survey is reflective of most parents' views.

Seesaw and Some Points About It

I will address a few points about Seesaw first. The vast majority of children have signed up for Seesaw. We are glad to see this but realise that it may not suit all households to do so and parents may be just as happy to continue their child's education at home without Seesaw. We accept this and in no way are we saying that Seesaw is a better means of education. You will know your child better than anyone; you are best placed to make this decision.

Most parents think that Seesaw is working well; their child finds it (relatively) easy to use; their enjoys sending work in via Seesaw (insofar as any child enjoys schoolwork!); most parents would like the school to continue to use Seesaw for the duration of the closure; breaking the work into days has been mostly helpful. Most of this is positive and heartening to see. I have no doubt that it has taken some time and effort to get into the swing of Seesaw (if you'll pardon the pun!) and I would imagine if this survey had been conducted in the first week of its use, we would have seen a much higher percentage of parents who found it difficult to use. As with most things, over time you get more familiar and at ease with it. However, as is to be expected, some feel that Seesaw is not working so well and their child has not taken to it as well as we would have hoped. We have to concede that Seesaw will not suit everybody. Perhaps Google Classroom would suit some and not others. Perhaps Webex would suit some and not others. There are dozens of options out there. Is Seesaw perfect? I doubt it. Are any of the other options better? Maybe. Are any of the other options perfect? Again, I doubt it. We had to decide and choose one; we chose Seesaw. For now, we will stick with it. I think to change horses midstream would be a mistake. I have been asked about the possibility of using conference call platforms, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. I have been advised not to use such platforms due in part to concerns regarding security, privacy, GDPR and Child Protection.

I would stress that if the use of Seesaw is the cause of undue stress in your household, perhaps consider using it a little less in the day; perhaps take a break from it for a few days or for a week; perhaps you might decide that you will continue on with your child doing a bit of work at home but not submitting it on Seesaw at all. Any of those decisions is fine with the school. And, I might point out, you don't need to explain your decisions to the school. Right now, I cannot tell you what is best for your child. I can merely advise. And my advice would be that you should not let Seesaw, or indeed any distance education, become a source of stress in your household. Please; put health, happiness and contentedness first.

SET/Leaning Support/Resource

If your child attends SET/Leaning Support/Resource in school, they are a member of two Seesaw classes; a Seesaw class with their mainstream class teacher and a Seesaw class with their SET/Leaning Support/Resource teacher. Some parents were not aware of this. Perhaps we did not communicate this as well as we should have. I will try to rectify that now. If your child attends SET/Leaning Support/Resource, they can log in to their mainstream class and they can also log in to their SET/Leaning Support/Resource class. To do this, they will need the Seesaw access codes to both classes. These codes will be different. They will need to log out of one class before they log in to another. To do this, they will need to keep both codes nearby, perhaps written on the front of their copybook. We realise that some children may find it difficult to input the codes themselves, they may not be able to do it independently. And, without you standing over them all day (which is unrealistic and impractical) they might simply forget to do it. It is fair to say that having to use two codes is a bit of a hassle, we fully realise that; but, right now, it is the best we can do. Of course, logging in to both classes is only an option; you do not have to do it. As teachers, our recommendation is that your child attends both their mainstream and SET/Leaning Support/Resource Seesaw classes, as they would when they are in school. But, on the ground at home, you might find that your child is getting on well enough with the work assigned by their mainstream class teacher and they have enough work there to keep them ticking along and they can manage it well enough. If you decide this, fair enough. But, most especially if you find your child is struggling with the difficulty of the work, I would strongly advise that you check in with their SET/Leaning Support/Resource teacher. If you need codes, email info@patricianprimary.ie and we will send them out to you.

Seesaw Family Accounts

Seesaw allows teachers to set parents up with Family Accounts. I would ask that all parents take the opportunity to set up these accounts. Many have already done so. If you have not gotten around to it yet, a text will be sent out during the week with a link to set one up. It is a very simple and quick process. If your child attends SET/Leaning Support/Resource, you will get two links, allowing you to set up Family Accounts with both your child's mainstream teacher and their SET/Leaning Support/Resource teacher. Family Accounts are a means of communication with your child's teacher(s). If you have any issues, you can easily contact the teacher via the Family Account messaging service. You might be at home, struggling to do maths with your child, unable to figure out the 'modern' way that they do it ("That's not the

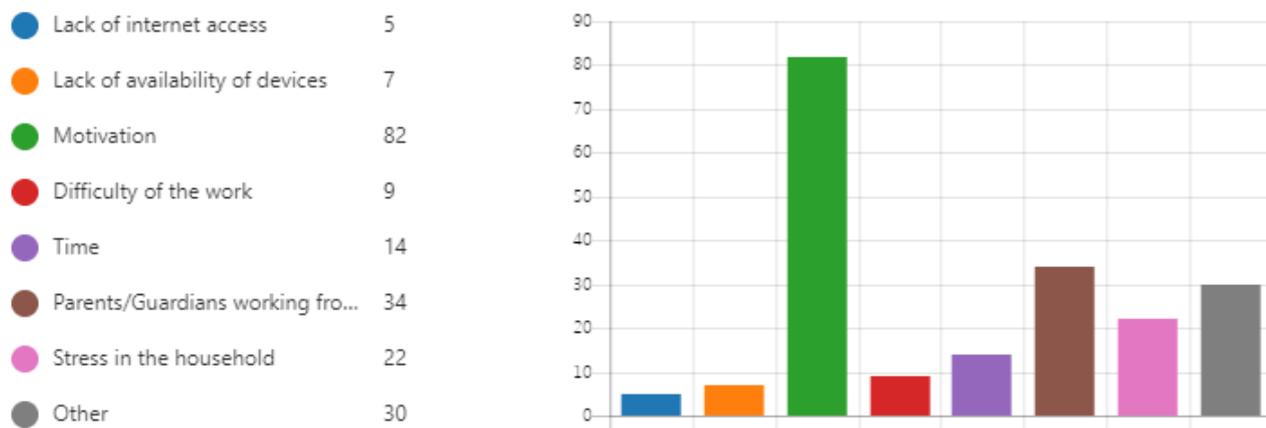
way we do it in school!”); a message to the teacher might help you out. If you don’t get a text link by Wednesday 20th May, please email info@patricianprimary.ie and we will send one out to you.

Suggested Work

Whilst I have said it elsewhere before, I will say it again here; the work the school supplies is just a suggestion. It is hoped that by supplying these suggestions we can help alleviate some of the massive burden that is on parents right now. And I know that some parents will see a list in front of them and, naturally enough, want to work their way through the complete list, ticking it off as they go. If this works for you and your child and you’re both happy to do this, then go on ahead. But please, do not feel obliged or under pressure to get it all done. Try not to think, “It’s on the list, it must be beneficial, so to get the most benefit I should complete it all”. Do not feel disheartened if the list is not all ticked off. Do not think that this makes you a less able or competent parent. If completing half the list instead of the full list allowed you and your child to be twice as happy, which would you choose? If they were doing a state exam this year, maybe I’d be singing a different tune. But they’re not. Even our 6th Class children will have plenty of time to ‘catch up’ on anything they miss. They’re young; they have time on their side.

Learning from home: the challenges

Learning from home has obviously posed numerous challenges. This was obvious before the survey but we now have a clearer picture of those challenges. I can say without much doubt that any challenges you have in your household are being replicated in households across Newbridge and, indeed, I would say across the country. Across the world, even, if that is not too grand a statement. I have included the graph of results here; in many ways the graph speaks for itself. But, at the risk of contradiction, I’ll add some comments that come to mind.



Motivation is, by a long way, the main challenge. I don’t think anyone will be surprised by this. If you’ve ever had to coax a child to get their homework done, you’ll know that getting them to do work at home can be, at the best of times, a challenge. Your child comes to school each day with an understanding and an expectation that they will be required to do some work. They don’t have the same expectation of home. Okay, they’ve done a bit of homework in the past, but largely their expectation of home is one of relaxation; meals served, telly to watch, toys and xBox to play, siblings to fight with to think you can turn this completely around is largely unrealistic. It can be hard enough to get them to work in school, never mind get them to work when the telly is in the next room. If you were in your child’s position, how would you be in this situation? I imagine most of us would have to admit that we would find it hard to put our minds to schoolwork. Have you had a row with your child, trying to get them to do schoolwork? I’d imagine most of you are nodding ‘yes’. I do not imagine there are many, if any, parents who can manage to get their child to begin work at 9:10, take a 15 minute break at 10:45, work ‘til 12:30, have their lunch and then work on to 2:50, Monday to Friday. If you can manage this, I suggest you run for Taoiseach. I’d vote for you. But seriously; in the vast majority of households, it is simply unrealistic to think your child will stick rigidly to this sort of plan. You will have to make allowances. Do I suggest that your child stays in bed ‘til 1 pm? No, I do not. Do I suggest that, whilst they work, you stand over them with a bell and ring it to signal break times? No, I do not. You will have to find a medium that maybe allows them to get some work done and maybe allows you to maintain your sanity. Where this medium is, only you can decide. If you feel the work is taking up too much of the day, I would advise choosing to do less. Instead of doing four things on the list of suggested work, do three. If the motivation on that day is particularly lacking, you might choose some of their more favoured subjects.

As the graph shows, there are other issues that make the current situation difficult. Many parents will be working from home. This, I can imagine, is problematic for any number of reasons. If you have not done it before, you have probably had to get used to new technology. You may be working from the sitting room or the kitchen table. Your child might be trying to work from the same table. You might have to leave a Zoom meeting to break up a row between your children. You might have one computer in the house, that you need for work but you’re also trying to share it with your child for their Seesaw work. Trying to juggle a day’s work while helping your child will be incredibly difficult; there is no escaping this. It might be made harder by having two children who need help. It might be made slightly easier by having an older child who can help the younger child. But it will be difficult. Something might have to give. If the child can’t complete their maths because you had to get some work done, it’s not the end of the world. Putting food on the table is probably more important than adding fractions.

Other households have both parents working outside the home, some in frontline services. To do a day's work, often in difficult circumstances, arrive home at 7pm and then face into home-learning I'm not sure how sustainable this would be. Parents will want to do the best by their child but if you're tired and irritable after a day's work, inside or outside the home, perhaps it is not the best time to tackle schoolwork. Maybe a bit of family time would be a better use of your time.

Stress in the household also deserves attention. Health concerns are obviously there for everyone. Probably more so if you or your family have members in 'at risk' groups. Many of you will be looking after, and worrying about, elderly parents. Some of you will be sleep deprived as a result of having a new-born in the house. Many families in Newbridge will have lost jobs. Many more will be worried about whether they will have a job or a business to go back to. Some of you may be business-owners facing an uncertain future, perhaps forced into the difficult position of having to lay off staff, knowing full well the impact this will have. For all, being cooped up for the last two months at home will obviously have caused moments of tension. I doubt there is a house in the country that has not experienced some fraying of tempers. Stress at this time will probably be unavoidable. It is a fact of adult life; we worry about our family's health, we worry about paying the mortgage, we worry about paying the bills. But, please, I would ask you, insofar as you can, not to worry about your child's education. They will not fall behind. When we go back to school we will start again from where we left off at 2:50pm on March 12th. Let this be one less thing to worry about; God knows you have enough else on your mind.

I'm going to paraphrase just a sample of some of the comments that we received in the survey. I think an awful lot of parents will be able to relate to these comments. Hopefully by posting them here you might see that what's going on in your house is not unique; there are difficulties of one sort or another in most households.

- "Sometimes interested and sometimes I have to fight with him to do the work"
- "Both parents front line workers so it's difficult juggling schoolwork with our work"
- "He would prefer to be in school"
- "School environment is more fun and interesting than me standing above the child telling him to write for ten minutes"
- "Parents are working from home so difficult to manage"
- "Parent working from home on laptop"
- "Some days motivation is lacking so we do his nicer subjects on these days"
- "A little more guidance on 'Family Accounts' would be appreciated"
- "Sometimes difficult to teach kids modern ways of learning/different to my ways"
- "Can't understand some maths and gets frustrated"
- "Seems to take my child a very long time to complete the work"
- "Difficult juggling teaching different kids with both parents working"
- "It's a busy home with 5 people"
- "Stress caused by trying to motivate child to work at home"
- "Not sure how much time he should spend on each section"
- "Both parents Frontline working outside the home "
- "One parent is working at home using the internet all day for calls and meetings and the other parent is travelling to work outside the home"
- "Trying to help four children and work outside the home"
- "The workload seems to take up the whole day"
- "I know the work is just a suggestion but I feel obliged to get through all the work on the list"
- "Missing her friends"
- "Missing his friends"

I think at this stage I've certainly gone on long enough. I'll include some links below that you may find useful. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I hope that it has gone some way towards addressing any issues that you may have. If you need to contact the school for any reason, please email info@patricianprimary.ie and we will get back to you.

In the meantime, do take care of yourself and your family

As ever, stay safe,

John O' Donovan

Principal

You might find these sites useful:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/together/?referrer=together/>

<https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>