

Sunday 26th February 2023

Dear parents/carers,

I wanted to reach out to you today to correct some of the misinformation that is circulating on social media connected to events at many national and local schools, including ours, on Friday. Apologies for the length and detail included but we feel it is vitally important to keep you accurately informed.

I am sure you are aware that TikTok is encouraging pupils to stage protests at their schools on whichever topic they choose, but many appear to be about skirt length and locked toilets. This has affected one local school, where police were called and on Friday at Risedale someone set off the fire alarm, which seems to have been construed as a 'protest'. Many of the videos circulating on social media show the pupils making their way to the top yard as per the fire alarm protocol we have in school. There was no 'riot' and school resumed for the afternoon session. Senior Leaders circulated to make sure all our young people were safe and I conducted an assembly to outline key messages about the event and the concept of 'protest'.

The post connected to Risedale suggests that pupils wanted to protest about two things; privacy in the toilets and mental health.

Let me explain why the protests, which are social media-led and national, are very wrong in our context.

Toilets at Risedale are very much private. Cubicles are floor-to-ceiling and designed for one person at a time. Complete privacy is guaranteed. Despite the rumours, pupils are allowed to go to the toilet. They simply need to ask for, and are given, a pass by their teacher so that they are able to go unchallenged to the toilets while walking through the corridors. We do record those pupils who use the toilet for two main reasons. These are;

- 1) to prevent abuse by a very few pupils who simply want to get out of lessons, wander corridors and, sadly, smoke or vape (and yes there are some we identify who need to be escorted to the toilet by the duty teacher to make sure that they go direct and do not wander corridors to avoid lessons)
- 2) to enable us to identify any individual child who may be presenting with a medical issue so we can therefore work with parents and carers to support any problems that may need the support of their doctor.



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Again, despite rumours, Risedale will never punish the majority of pupils for the actions of a very few, regardless of the misguided comments you may read on social media. Where we do identify anyone who vandalises or abuses facilities, action is taken against them, not everyone.

We have already identified a pupil as the main instigator of trying to start a 'protest 2' this week and they will be dealt with appropriately. It is, however, not helpful, for even the majority of well-behaved children, to further spread that post on their social media. I would ask all parents and carers to help their children to understand the harm caused by such 'promotion' and the potential for people to actually get hurt, as happened in one local school on Friday. In fact, as parents and carers, you also have a responsibility to your child and help them to understand the difference between peaceful protest and non-peaceful.

At Risedale we do promote each child's right to an opinion. This is part of being an adult and we will not be hypocritical in our approach. For example, during assembly on Friday, it was emphasised that some teachers are carrying out their own protest by striking on Tuesday. The main difference is that teachers have a lawful protest that is at the end of a very long process of negotiation with their employers. In this case the government. But their protest is peaceful.

Pupils have many ways in which they can air their thoughts and views. With their direct mentors, their form tutor each morning, or identified mentors or with the senior staff. They also have the School Council to raise issues with. For example, through their council, the school has provided more benches, at great cost, in the yard to answer their concern about eating outside during the summer months. Risedale always encourages young people to share their views and concerns and to find their 'voice' in an appropriate manner - it is one of the key pillars of our curriculum.

Mental health is also a major concern of us at Risedale. As with all of our colleagues in other schools, we have become alarmed at the rise in the number of young people suffering mental health issues, particularly since covid but more so due to the harm caused by social media and the need to be 'liked' and to 'dress and look' good. We are also extremely alarmed at the lack of readily-available support for young people in the community. So much so that we have had to invest in our own full-time and nationally registered school counsellor, something no other local school has, as well as instigating a large mentoring programme for identified children.

What were the key messages?

It is really important that young people have opinions and are allowed to express them appropriately. Protests, in the right context, can be important for big issues such as human rights, oppressive regimes etc. But, there is a difference between a protest and a riot, and should pupils need to use the





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idea of a protest within schools as a vehicle for change? In theory, the answer to that question should be 'No' but:-

- 1) We know that pupils won't like all whole school decisions made by school leaders.
- 2) How do we make ALL pupils feel able to communicate with teachers/adults within school about issues that concern them?

In truth, we will never have a perfect solution to the above but in terms of actions going forward we will do the following:-

- 1) Share what we do and why more explicitly with pupils e.g. we don't lock toilets, but other schools do this due to vandalism and vaping. So an understandable response you could argue is trying to stop unsafe behaviours. Our solution is to have staff members on duty at breaks and lunchtimes to try and keep toilets free from overuse or vaping and to minimise the potential for vandalism. Is our solution foolproof? No! Do pupils like two members of staff on duty outside? No! But, for us, this feels like a better alternative than locking toilets. There are still pupils unhappy with our decision, but until there is no vaping, vandalism etc. this is why we need to do what we do. At least by sharing our rationales more explicitly, pupils can learn to realise that we genuinely don't make decisions simply to annoy them!
- 2) Continue to strengthen teacher/pupil relationships so that there is a culture of communication and open discussion.
- 3) Provide more opportunities for pupil voice.
- 4) Share good news stories involving 'pupil power' such as the school benches.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this letter. If we all work together we can help our young people navigate the complex and at times rather manipulative social media world. Please do talk to your child about the issues that have arisen and rest assured we have a full programme in place for Monday morning to ensure that healthy and positive discussions can take place in tutor groups.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Colin D Scott
Headteacher

