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RHENISH GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL

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Dear Parents / Guardians

Phase 3

It has been quite a roller coaster for all of us, but eventually, the Minister of Education spoke to the nation on 19 May (after a few postponements). Unfortunately, her statement did not provide a lot of information. We knew the Grade 12s were set to return to school on 1 June, but no other information about the plan for the remaining grades has been shared. As educators, learners and parents, we have many questions that remain unanswered and I trust these questions will be answered very soon.

The SMT and Support staff have been back at school since 14 May, preparing the way forward for a clean school as teachers, then the Grade 12s and eventually all the Grades return to the campus.

As the time away from school has evolved – from an extended break, into Lockdown, into extended Lockdown, into Stage 4 Lockdown – so too has our approach to school work. Initially, meaningful tasks were set for all Grades. Going into lockdown this was refined as online learning became more interactive through our online elearning platforms. Work was submitted and responded to and classes met with their teachers via Google Meet, Zoom or whatsapp. As lockdown was extended with no end in sight, we have worked constantly on trying to support our girls, on ensuring that every girl had connectivity and was able to engage with her teachers and classmates in a meaningful way and that we delivered on our desire that no girl should be left behind. Refining and improving systems, procedures and practices as we go, learning and, yes, making mistakes.

For our girls AND for our teachers, this has been a very sharp learning curve and I am so grateful that Rhenish had the vision and the resources to take the measures towards elearning that we have taken since 2015. Without the planning and commitment that started way back then, we would have been even more at sea in this dreadful period – at least we have life rafts, oars, life jackets and we all know how to swim. We will get there. Together.

We moved from phase 1 to phase 2 and now we are ready to move onto phase 3. What is phase three you might ask? More on that shortly.

The fact that Grade 12s and staff will be returning to school means that a normal school day (including the two breaks) will be followed and school will therefore start at 7:30. Staff and Grade 12 learners will be screened before they enter the school building and teaching will start at 8am every morning. Bus girls will arrive, the hostel girls will be on the property and staff will arrive from 7am in the mornings.

Concern has been expressed that this is during the exercise window of 6:00 – 9:00. Exercise will need to be done before school starts at 8:00. It is not viable to start school at 9:00 as the buses arrive at 7:00 and our Hostel Grade 12s will already be back in hostel. From **Wednesday 27 May** Grade 8 – Grade 12 will start with online /blended learning according to the normal school time table. It will be an earlier start for all of us but the girls must be at their desks, tablets or laptops ready to engage with their teacher at 8:00.

What does this mean?

Teachers have been “teaching” and working from home. Now, teachers will be in their classrooms at school and



they will teach lessons according to the normal school time table. We are aware that some learners may have difficulty joining class online – these girls have been identified and data has been provided so that they can join the daily online school. It is quite possible that there are more learners with difficulties relating to access to data - I appeal to parents to contact your daughter's Grade Head so that alternative arrangements can be made. Every live lesson will be recorded and then posted on Classroom for the girls to refer to again or if they miss the online teaching lesson for some reason. Attendance of classes is automatically recorded when the learner logs on at the start of the lesson – when she joins the google classroom meeting - so the teacher has a record of who attended which lessons. Teachers will communicate with the learners if, for example, they will not teach on a particular day and if the girls need to do homework in a specific lesson, but staff will be available online for any questions.

This means that we will not send out the link to parents on a Sunday evening as in the past – your daughter will be in direct contact with the staff member as from Wednesday. I appeal to parents to start getting the girls back into a routine so that they can attend the daily classes and I even invite parents to sit next to your daughter for the first few days, to experience our new phase.

The staff have had a few training sessions regarding blended / online teaching and I want to emphasise that this is also new to staff members. Teaching is a unique profession and so much of what a teacher does is also dependent on the group of people sitting in front of her / him and how they respond to what she /he is teaching. This element will still be absent from online teaching, but I believe that this process will get better and better as we do it more frequently and as the teacher becomes more comfortable with this form of delivery. Technical issues might be a problem at times and for this the staff cannot be blamed. Our ICT department will be on standby to help and support on a daily basis.

I accept that we cannot satisfy everyone at any given time. I trust that all of you who have sent through mails with suggestions - all of which have been taken into consideration by the SMT – will put your faith in the management and the teachers of the school you chose to send your daughter to and you will support our phase 3 approach. It is a difficult situation and we have to consider many factors and 736 learners. You, quite understandably, are concerned about your child. Believe me, so are we.

I believe that this option is the best at this moment and, as we all know by now, things can change quickly in this challenging time. The staff is prepared and eager to get the academic year back on track and to get the girls back in their classrooms – even if for some grades this remains a virtual classroom – working to a timetable geared at a known curriculum. Rhenish Girls' High remains committed to giving our girls the best possible education in different and difficult times.

I have been in regular contact throughout this period with Principals of schools across the region and the country. We have shared best practice and assisted and supported each other. Through this I have been reminded how very fortunate Rhenish is to have educators who have tackled this daunting task with many unknowns without hesitation, with enthusiasm, with energy and above all, with love and understanding for their learners. They are determined not to fail our girls. I am very proud of our staff, who also have families, many with small children whom they have also had to teach and entertain while they have been teaching your children.

To the many parents who have reached out in support with positive advice and genuine understanding, thank you. It has been a very humbling experience. Thank you for your patience and for your support – the three pillars of your daughter's education (school, parent, learner) only stand strong when we all work together.

A specific Grade 12 letter will go out to all Grade 12 learners and parents to explain the following:

1. Screening process
2. Classroom layout
3. Sanitizing the school
4. Responsibility of every person on the property
5. Social distancing and responsibilities of the staff and learners
6. Academic matters

This type of letter will be send to every specific Grade as the different grades start to return to school in the future.

I have received many questions from parents regarding the return of their daughters and what will happen if they



do not return. Please take note that we do have girls and staff members who – as a result of existing illnesses/conditions or concerns for their health – may not return to school. Two staff members are pregnant - in the third trimester - and will not return to school. Fortunately, I made arrangements before lockdown and appointed 2 teachers in their place. I want to wish Ms Marais and Mrs Serfontein all the best with their new adventures with new babies in this difficult time. I am also negotiating with another 2 staff members regarding their health issues and how this will impact on their teaching from home.

We are sure to have learners who should not return to school as they are ‘at risk’. Parents need to let me know of such learners – with a letter from their doctor explaining their condition. These learners will be supported as best as possible, therefore parents need to contact me urgently so that we can look at different options.

If for any other reason you decide not to allow your daughter to return to Rhenish, please contact me as soon as possible so that I can discuss your options with you. Please take note that after the Minister’s speech I received questions regarding online teaching vs home schooling – there is a big difference.

I am not an expert on Home Schooling and am not going to explain the different options of Home Schooling, but, in short, Home Schooling means that you withdraw your daughter from the school and then apply to a Home School institution to follow their curriculum. Your daughter will be leaving Rhenish to study at home. This is a very different choice to the online learning that Rhenish will provide where the staff will teach the girls via Google meet every day by following the normal school time table.

We all have fears and concerns about returning to school. We share your concerns, but the staff is prepared and committed to coming back to school and to teaching. I also know many parents are willing to send their girls back to school, but feel unsure and this is normal. I cannot guarantee that everyone will be safe. But my staff and I will follow the protocols set out by the state and we will try our best. Staff will teach with girls in front of them and will also try to record lessons as far as possible, but this eventually will not be possible as more grades return to school.

We are all uncertain and will have to approach this situation on a daily basis. We have learned a lot and will certainly learn much more as this situation evolves. The girls have lost out on so much of this year and for this we are very sad. But, Rhenish Girls’ High survived the two World Wars; we shall overcome this COVID-19 war as well and hopefully next year or even by the end of this year we will share all our lockdown experiences at school.

Yours sincerely



EH Slabber

