

7th April 2020

Dear families,

This is the first Holy week in my life that I have not attended Mass, it is quite surreal to reach my 50th Easter and to experience it so differently. So much of what has been our normal experience is changing at the moment, and I hope that you as Damascus families are well and coping with this significant upheaval.

It is important that I reiterate from the outset of this communication that the safety of the Damascus Community and social responsibility to the wider community is the first priority in decision making for the Leadership Team and Board. I also wish to reiterate that we are aware that life has become challenging for many within our school community and that this Christ-centred school community wants to provide the best support and connection that we can achieve in these difficult times.

This morning at a press conference, the Premier, Daniel Andrews and Education Minister, James Merlino announced that if students can learn from home, they must learn from home in Term 2. That is from Wednesday 15th April until Friday 26th June.
<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/victorian-students-to-learn-from-home-as-vce-timelines-revised/>

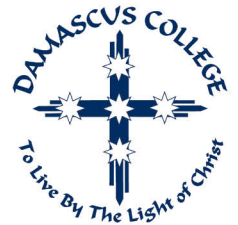
The Damascus College staff team worked very hard at the end of Term 1 to prepare for this possibility, and have developed the Damascus Remote Learning plan to support continuity of learning for Damascus students. Damascus College will work hard to ensure the best opportunities are available for our school community through this time of change.

There are a number of implications of today's decision from the Victorian Government. Our College Leadership team is working through the announcement and how this will impact our delivery. I will provide a further update to families this Thursday. The majority of staff are currently on holidays, and they will return virtually, next Tuesday, 14th April. On Wednesday, 15th April, Damascus will begin remote learning.

Damascus College supports the Governments position to provide educational supervision to the dependents of essential workers who cannot work from home and/or vulnerable students (students in out-of-home care, students deemed by Child Protection/Family Services to be at risk of harm and students identified by the school as vulnerable for reasons of violence, homelessness, mental health or disability) throughout Term 2, where no other arrangements can be made. These people play a critical role in the safety of our community. **If you believe your family is unable to facilitate learning from home due to being essential workers or for other specific reasons where no other arrangements can be made, could you please complete the following survey by midday Thursday 9th April to enable us to plan appropriate supervision and support on campus. Later requests will be considered, but we are trying to ascertain the level of current need for next week.** A member of the Leadership team or Wellbeing team will contact families seeking supervised on-campus education services to discuss your specific needs.
<https://forms.gle/Vk6uDb43xeA3mGWE8>

DAMASCUS COLLEGE LTD ACN 609066775

1412 Geelong Road, Mt. Clear 3350 P 03 5337 2222 F 03 5330 2366 E info@damascus.vic.edu.au www.damascus.vic.edu.au



I must reiterate that Damascus can provide on-campus supervision only to support students to access the Remote Learning program. The supervisors will not be actively engaged in teaching; the student's regular teachers will do this remotely as per the manual that has been circulated to parents. Damascus will continue to provide faith, wellbeing and academic support as outlined in the Remote Learning Manual, which can be accessed through the Parent Access Module (PAM). The manual outlines that students need to be ready for TA each day at 8.55am, with the first set of work delivered via email at 9:00am.

In the interest of community safety, we will be working to minimise the number of people who need to come onsite at Damascus. Once we ascertain the number of people seeking supervision, we will provide more information about what that will look like.

I am aware of the concern that exists for senior students, particularly Year 12's for their VCE and VCAL certificates. The Premier provided a range of changes and concessions today to ensure students will receive an ATAR and their senior certificates. We will provide a specific communique to senior students and their families over the coming days.

I am aware that many parents will have lost significant employment or business income due to Coronavirus. At this time, our position as a Catholic school, in the Mercy and Diocesan tradition, is very clear that families will be supported in times of need. The school's immediate priority is to provide as much stability as possible for your young person/people, and with this in mind, we are committed to providing flexible and confidential financial assistance to support you with managing your school fee commitments for 2020. If this is an issue for you, please get in touch with us to discuss the options. We do care, and if you need help, please reach out by contacting fees@damascus.vic.edu.au

Finally, today will be a difficult day for all those impacted by the scourge of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church with the High Court's decision regarding George Pell. We remember and pray for all the victims at this difficult time.

Bishop Paul Bird shared the following prayer he composed at the request of a parishioner;

Loving God, we pray for all those affected by the coronavirus pandemic in Australia and around the world. We pray for those who have died and for their families and friends who are grieving. We pray for those who are sick and for the doctors and nurses and all who are caring for them. May Mary and Joseph and all the saints pray for us that we may have health of body and peace of heart and a spirit of kindness to one another. Amen.

Kind regards

Matthew Byrne
Principal

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