

Dear boys, parents and staff

28 May 2020

I trust that you and your family are well and continue to cope with the many diverse challenges that are being faced by each and every one of us during these difficult times.

From the outset of this global crisis, two principles have shaped my rationale and strategy for the recovery of our school.

Our parents are partners

A fundamental building block of Catholic Education is the implicit understanding that our parents are our partners in the educational endeavour. This understanding runs so deeply that we refer to parents as the “primary” educator. The work we do at school every day is secondary to the far more important role that parents and guardians play in the education of your son.

In the current situation, I believe that each parent has every right to make whatever decision it is that they deem best in the interests of their son’s health and well being. We will acquiesce. As a school, our task is to do everything in our power to continue to support your decision and continue to provide for the education of your son.

We understand implicitly that we are teachers trying our best to cope with a situation for which no rulebook exists.

We are teachers.

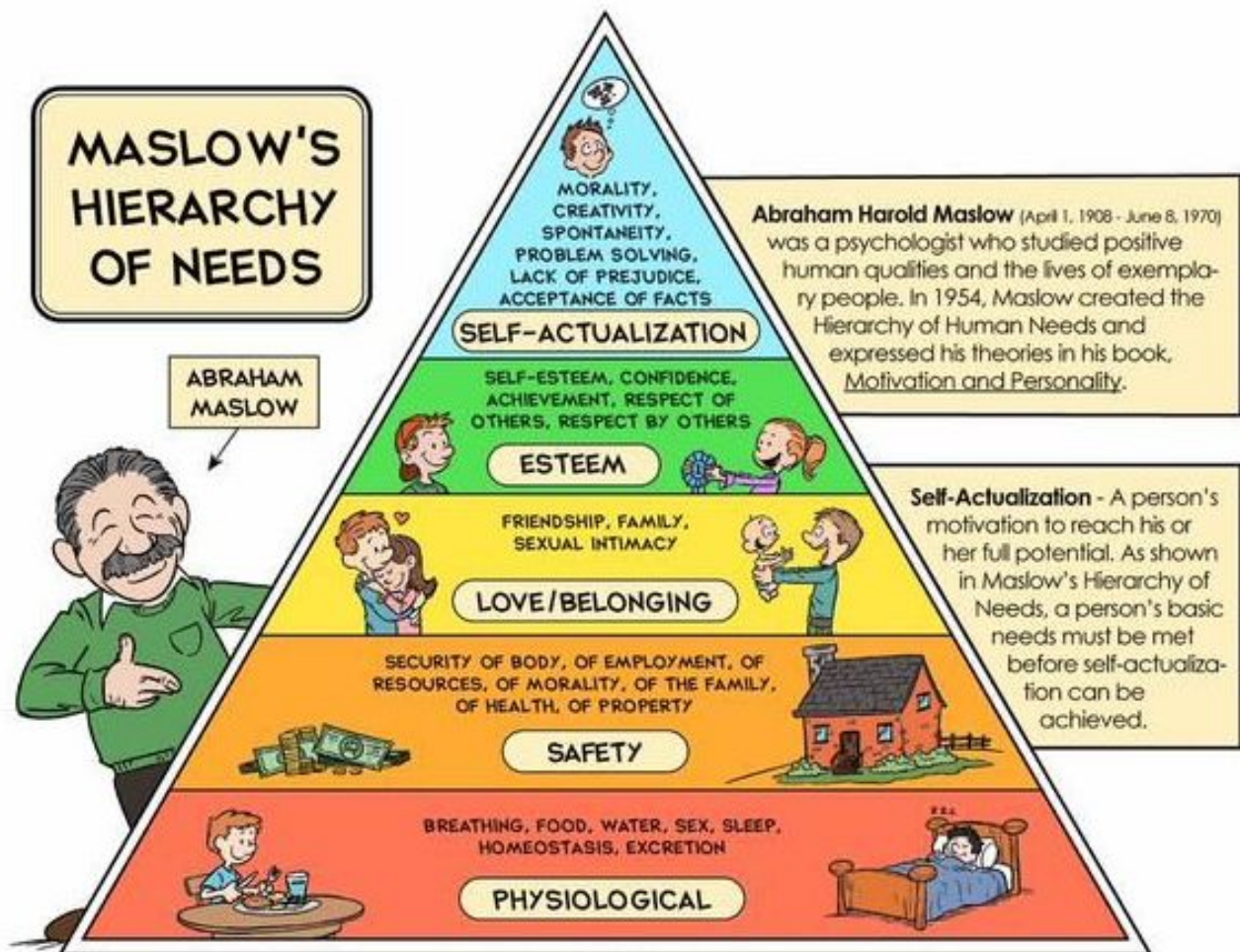
We are not virologists or epidemiologists. Parents have no reason to respect our opinion regarding what is best for the health and safety of their son in the middle of a pandemic which is baffling even the best medical minds.

Our task is to implement - to the best of our ability - all the recommended and necessary Covid-19 protocols and procedures to safeguard our school community and to continue to service the needs of our boys and parents until they once again feel comfortable enough to come to school and fully reintegrate into academic life at St Benedict’s. In the interim, until each boy and his family is ready to make that decision, we will continue to provide the best possible learning experiences and emotional support for each of our boys.

We will not adopt an authoritarian or dictatorial approach and instruct or command any parent to send their son back to school. The decision is yours and nobody else’s.

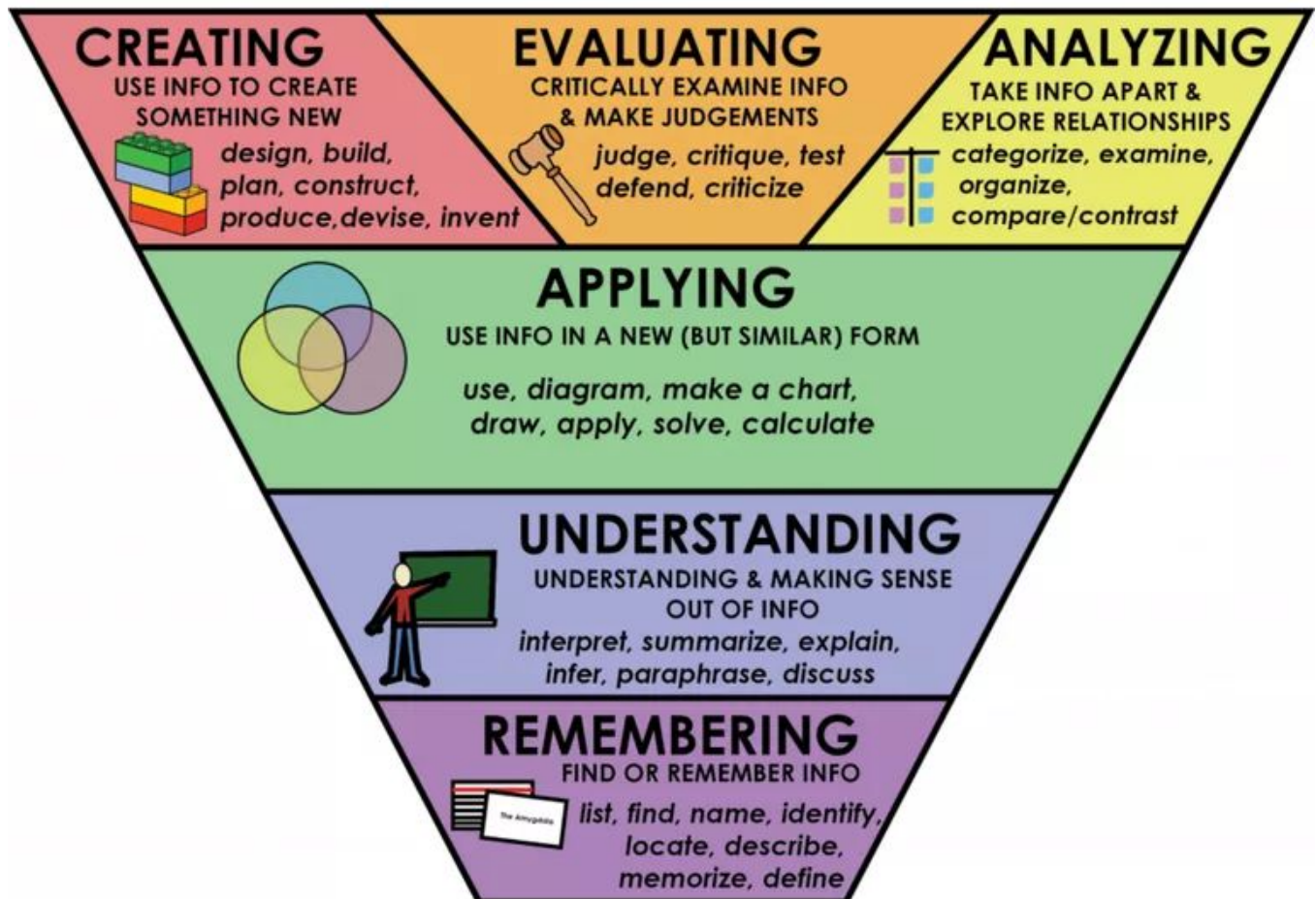
We will Maslow before we Bloom

Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* demonstrates that as human beings we can only self-actualise and perform to our fullest potential when a number of our more basic needs as human beings have been met.



Bloom's taxonomy is a hierarchical ordering of cognitive skills that underlie the way in which students learn. Even the simplest of these skills is compromised if our basic needs as human beings are not met.

BLOOM'S TAXONOMY



Our boys need to have their basic physiological needs attended to first; they need to feel safe and secure; they need access to all the resources of family, health and home. They need the deep embrace of family and the warm hug of friendship. They need to have self-esteem and feel confident. Only once all these needs are met, can they once again begin to self-actualise as learners. Covid-19 has robbed them of many of those basic needs.

We cannot find or remember information; we cannot understand and make sense out of information, we cannot apply and use information we have acquired; we cannot analyse, evaluate and create unless we are able to breathe properly and sleep well, unless we feel safe, unless we feel loved and cared for and unless we feel confident within an environment.

This, I believe, remains the fundamental problem with the South African education system. The vast majority of our country's pupils arrive at school each day hungry and cold, they are asked to study in unsafe and overcrowded environments, without the necessary physical resources and emotional and psychological support.

It is for this reason that - as a school - we will need to operate in two educational worlds for the foreseeable future, simultaneously providing similar learning experiences both at school and at home.

There are boys and parents who are asking "why must I come to school if it is going to be only a babysitting service"?

School - at the simplest of levels - does precisely that and has done so since it was first "invented" in the industrial age. We partner with parents to keep their kids safe, supervised and constructively busy so that parents can go to work and earn a salary in order to support their family. Covid-19 has highlighted this basic function of education in unusual ways and it has also given us a peek into a range of new and exciting ways to exist and function as families and as a society.

I need, therefore, to make it clear that as a school we will shift our educational approach and methodology according to the response we receive from the majority of parents within a grade. Bearing in mind the new constraints of social distancing, our modus operandi will be as follows:

- (1) Allocate 15 boys to a venue
- (2) Allow the numbers to increase until the available venues for a particular grade all accommodate 15 boys, then
- (3) Switch over to a platooning system which introduces a morning and an afternoon school, and/or
- (4) Switch over to a platooning system which sees boys attend school only on alternate days.

Our Grade 12 parents have indicated that we can expect 75 of our 110 young men to return on Monday, 1 June. One needs to remember that for some boys and parents, there is no choice in this matter because comorbidities preclude their return. With close on 70% of the matriculants in attendance, we must - by necessity - modify the timetable and learning programme.

The matrices' weekly schedule looks very different but will include:

- 180 minutes / 3 hours of face-to-face tuition with each of their subject teachers
- 90 minutes of self-study and independent application of learning in English and Afrikaans
- 180 minutes of self-study and independent application of learning in Mathematics
- One day a week working remotely at home and following a prescribed 6 hour work schedule

It's a "blended" approach and it is the hybrid that will emerge for the foreseeable future in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic. I use the Grade 12's by way of example. We will attempt to devise similarly rich learning schedules for each of our grades as the number of boys continue to increase.

It's going to be new and different and is going to have to shift and change as we think on our feet but, rest assured, it's not only babysitting.

Our greatest challenges are the availability of sufficient venues and staff and our parents are asked to understand that we will prioritise the academic needs of the most senior of the grades in each of our schools.

Parents, once *you* are ready and comfortable for your son to return to school, send him. We will warmly welcome him back and do our best to offer you the highest possible academic standards and rigour to which you are acquainted at St Benedict's.

I must conclude with an appeal.

I had no idea that I had the capacity to work harder as a teacher. I have been proven wrong. The last two months of my life have been the busiest of my career. I have been busier now than I was in the late 1990's, when - as a far younger man and working in a state school - I was teaching English to over 200 matriculants; producing a major production with a cast of 112 and managing and transporting the school's Open A soccer team to fixtures twice a week. Lesson preps which used to take an hour now take up to four hours. I am not blowing my own trumpet. I am sharing from my personal experience.

In the midst of the confusion and chaos of this Covid-19 pandemic, something amazing has happened at our school. Teachers have stepped up in ways that I have never seen. Even those teachers who have been uncomfortable with rapid change and new technology, even those who have been frustrated by our rich programme of professional development, All our teachers have risen to the challenges of remote learning. Digital and virtual communication and teaching skills have become a priority and they have acquired these through independent learning and development over what was supposed to be their Easter break.

I am in awe of our St Benedict's staff.

They have been given a brand-new job. Something that no-one has done before and something for which they were never trained. They have done everything in their ability to help our boys. I wonder how many other professions would have been able to adapt so quickly. This is why I love our teachers. They display a depth and heart that is often undervalued but is now apparent for all to see.

Please parents and boys, appreciate and support them. We need each and every one of them.

In the interests of complete transparency and with the conviction that knowledge is power, this letter is accompanied by two documents prepared in anticipation of our reopening: Our Proposal to Reopen and the Final Criteria with which we have complied. These documents with accompanying certificates evidence will be readily available for whatever officials may arrive from the municipal offices, the Department of Health and/or the Department of Education.

I am confident that we have done all we can to ensure that our school is ready for reopening. The safety of our boys remains our primary concern and I look forward to welcoming our Grade 12, 7 and 3 boys back to school from Monday, 1 June 2020.

VERITAS IN CARITATE



A C Oosthuysen
Executive Headmaster