



Parents' Forum, 21st March 2017

Our most recent Parents' Forum meeting was held in the Library on Tuesday 21st March. Around 40 parents attended, with children in different year groups but predominantly in Year 7. The evening began with presentations from: Mr Williams on the general position of the school at the moment – what's new, what is going well and what we are focusing on for improvement; Mrs Wardle on homework; and Mr Johnson on the new KS3 assessment and reporting system. The presentation can be found by [clicking here](#).

Parents then went off into groups to discuss and made notes on things they think are going well, as well as ways in which we could make things better. Mr Williams and other members of the senior leadership team circulated and had plenty of opportunity to discuss the issues. There were also two school governors present to listen to parents' views.

The notes below summarise the main points to emerge from the evening, along with a quick response from the school where appropriate. We specifically asked for feedback on homework and the new KS3 assessment and reporting system, but several other issues came up as well.

Many thanks again to all those who attended and please bear in mind that we are always keen to receive feedback from parents. One way in which you can do this is by completing the Parent View questionnaire, which is used by Ofsted to gather evidence about us: [please click here to do this](#). It takes a few moments to register at first but only seconds to complete the questionnaire.

Homework

What's working well:

- Compared to previous years, it is clear that a lot more homework is being set. Indeed, there were more parents who said *too much* is being set (especially in the first term of year 7) than those who felt there should be more. On the whole, the feeling seemed to be that the **amount of** homework being set is about right for most students. This compares very favourably to a year or two ago, when feedback consistently said that nowhere near enough homework was being set and we are pleased that our drive to raise expectations in this area seems to be working. (N.b. for those who would still like more to be set, our policy does suggest students should also read regularly at home and that this should be encouraged/supervised by parents. [Click here for more details](#) on homework policy, including FAQs).

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- The overall consensus was definitely that the **level of challenge** in homework is about right (with, inevitably, one or two thinking it sometimes too hard and one or two thinking it sometimes too easy). This is a very difficult thing for teachers to get consistently right and we'll keep working on it, but we were very pleased to hear this.
- Similarly, most parents felt the **quality of homework** was good, and appropriately varied. Two years ago, the strong feedback was that homework was far too often very easy or meaningless.
- **Show My Homework** is clearly very popular with parents, for all sorts of reasons!

It would be even better if:

- *More challenging homework or extension questions could be set more often.* We have been developing ideas for more enrichment and 'deeper learning' activities and these will be on our website shortly.
- *The setting of homework was more consistent between teachers/subjects.* We accept this can still be an issue (and likely always will be with over 100 teachers in the school) but it is a lot easier for school leaders to monitor now, with Show My Homework. As above, we feel very encouraged that the vast majority of parents say consistency has improved hugely in this area but this will remain a focus for leadership.
- *More guidance was provided on how to revise for exams (especially KS3 students).* We agree and have already started making plans to do more in school in this area, including assemblies and sessions in tutor time. There is already some information on the website in the exams section, including some advice on revision websites and other tips: [click here for more details](#).
- *Students were not given very short deadlines for homework.* We agree with this and our policy is that, unless there is a very good reason otherwise, teachers ought to give at least a week's notice. We have reiterated this to staff recently. Similarly, our policy says that students are not expected to do homework if it has not been posted on Show My Homework and we know that some teachers still need to be reminded of this from time-to-time.

KS3 Assessment

What's working well:

- Parents were almost unanimous in saying that the new system is far clearer and much easier to understand.
- The loose links to GCSE grades are appreciated in helping make sense of the levels.
- Giving percentages for exam grades, along with the year group average and 10th percentile score was also very popular.

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It would be even better if:

- *More feedback was given after exams.* It isn't really practical from a capacity point of view for teachers to provide detailed, written feedback to all parents after each exam; however, feedback is given to students in class and usually on the exam papers themselves.

Other questions:

- One group asked what criteria are used to measure 'attitude to learning'. The descriptors can be found on the progress reports themselves.
- Some year 7 parents asked why they don't get exam scores from subjects outside English, Maths and Science. The answer is that you will get them for other academic subjects towards the end of the year, but we did not feel it appropriate to have exams in all subjects twice a year at KS3.

Other issues/questions

- Lots of people were very positive about the new **School Gateway app**, saying they really appreciated the information it provides and the ease of use.
- The **Leadership Ladder** and points system for **rewards**, along with the work being done to encourage socially responsible citizens were repeatedly praised for celebrating students' achievements and encouraging participation and growing levels of confidence.
- Several groups praised staff in the school for the **speed and quality of response** when they have needed something, including from class teachers.
- One group asked for more information about the **new GCSE exams**, including the new grading system. We have already sent information to Year 11 parents (including on the latest progress reports) and will upload relevant information to the website shortly.
- We were delighted to hear so many parents tell us that they are very happy with the level of **communication** they receive from the school (indeed several year 7 parents commented that 'we get a lot more communication than we thought we would when they moved up to secondary school').
- On the other hand, one or two still commented that **communication** could be better and specifically in the area of sports fixtures. We have been trying very hard to improve this but do ask for some understanding in the light of the volume of fixtures we run in so many different sports. It is important that students take responsibility for passing on messages relating to

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fixtures and, in addition, please bear in mind that it is often entirely beyond the PE department's control if fixtures have to be cancelled at short notice.

- Some asked why we don't have **lockers**. This is something we have considered at length in the past but, on balance, don't think it would be helpful. They would take up a huge amount of space and experience tells us that – especially with such a large site – the novelty of having lockers usually soon wears off and students tire of trekking back and forth to their lockers so lockers end up being very much under-used. They also give too many students a convenient excuse for being late for lessons! N.b. if there are particular issues with individual students having to carry especially heavy items, please ask Student Services for support. Tutors may also be able to help at times.
- A couple of groups (especially with parents in older year groups) commented positively on the new '**FAR marking' policy** and how much better, and more frequent, marking is than it used to be.
- One group asked about the latest position on school **funding**. I can reassure parents that there are no short-term concerns about our budget. We have reserves in line with what experts consider sensible, are running ahead of budget for the current year and have no concerns about setting a balanced budget for next year. In short, we are in as healthy a position as most schools. However, there is no point pretending that the medium-long term picture is a positive one. I remain hopeful that the government will see sense and amend the National Funding Formula proposals. Even if they do, it is very likely that we are going to need to rely on parental support to help us fund some of the capital projects we would like to do. Your support and understanding here is much appreciated.
- A couple of parents commented that their child seems to have had a few **supply teachers** recently and asked whether there is a wider issue here. There certainly isn't a wider issue; we monitor absence rates very carefully and are consistently well below national averages for absences and spend less on supply costs than the vast majority of schools. Of course, there will always be times when individual teachers can't be in school for good reasons and the laws of probability mean that most students will have occasional days/weeks where they have more than one teacher off; this might give the impression of a wider issue, but that isn't really the case. Nevertheless, this is something we are always very conscious of and, especially for exam classes, do everything we can to make suitable arrangements if a teacher is going to be off for more than a day or two.
- Someone asked if more details could be given for the reasons **why points (or BfL grade 1s) have been awarded**. In practical terms, it wouldn't be manageable for teachers to make notes on this every time but, where they don't tell the student specifically, the BfL 1 will be for displaying an outstanding attitude to learning in that particular lesson – i.e. going above and beyond our usual high expectations for behaviour and workrate.

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- One group asked about using ballots for the **fair 'distribution' of school trips**. We are trying to use ballots more often and have had discussions about how this can be managed better but, to be absolutely honest, we are struggling to come up with a reliable system! This is partly because we run so many trips and they are not all known about from the beginning of the year, so we can't produce a comprehensive calendar of school trips in September. Another key problem is the danger that students do not sign up for some trips in the hope that they get drawn out of the ballot for a future trip... but then do not get drawn and therefore miss out altogether. We will keep looking at this.
- One group complained that tutors do not always read out the **daily bulletin** and so messages are missed. We accept this is an issue and have reminded tutors of their responsibilities again here.
- Many groups said they are impressed with how **behaviour** is dealt with in the school and like the fact that we are quick to set detentions for low-level misbehaviour and/or lack of homework!
- There was a lot of **praise for teachers** generally – and specifically how much they seem to care and how good relationships with students seem to be.
- One group felt the **timing of Year 7 exams** (straight after Christmas) was not right because children had been worrying over the holidays. We'd say here that we do not want or expect Year 7 students to worry too much about the exams in the first place and, for that reason, do not make a big deal of them in school. At the same time, we have to schedule exams for all year groups in a relatively short space of time in order for them to be meaningful and this necessarily means at least one year group doing exams soon after the holidays. Nevertheless, we will consider this for next year.
- Some parents felt **mobile phones** should be banned all day (we currently allow students to use them at break/lunch). This is something that some schools do and we have considered from time to time but, so far, we have tended to conclude that it is not necessary or desirable. More feedback from parents here would be useful.
- One person asked about **behaviour on buses**. As ever, we are keen for parents to know that we will deal with children who have behaved badly on buses when we have the evidence to demonstrate this. Given how many people are usually around, it is rarely hard to gather reliable evidence, but it does rely upon students (or parents) reporting things to us. On one or two buses, we already have sixth form monitors to perform this role. Please help us here – it is something we take very seriously.

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