



EASINGWOLD SCHOOL & SIXTH FORM

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17 May 2017

Dear Parents/Carers

Three of our parent governors were invited to visit two schools in the Outwood Grange Academies Trust (OGAT) last Wednesday, 10th May. The purpose was to show us how the OGAT approach works, to see the reality of life in OGAT schools for pupils and staff and to reassure us about areas where we as parents and as governors had concerns.

At our board meeting on Monday I was asked to share their impressions with you and their report is included within this letter.

In summary, Chris, Elaine and Fiona came away impressed and most importantly confident and excited about the new direction our school will be taking. There will clearly be a requirement for change, much of it building on the excellent work set in motion by Mr Pritchard and Mr Brockwell. Some of the change will be significant, but in their view it will be change for the better. There is still more to understand, especially about the curriculum, and they didn't see much of Special Educational Needs or Sixth Form provision, but the door is open for all members of the school community to find out more and assure themselves where they have doubts.

I hope you find this interesting and reassuring.

Yours faithfully

Neil Hawkins
Chair of Governors

Letter to Students, Staff and Parents/Carers of Easingwold School

Introduction

Three school parent governors were invited to visit two schools in the Outwood Grange Academies Trust (OGAT) last Wednesday, 10th May. The purpose was to show us how the OGAT approach works, to see the reality of life in OGAT schools for pupils and staff and to reassure us about areas where we as parents and as governors had concerns. We wanted to share our impressions with you.

Summary

We began our visits with varying degrees of uncertainty about the OGAT approach and its potential impact on our school. As a group, we came away impressed and most importantly, we were confident and excited about the new direction our school will be taking. There will clearly be a requirement for change, much of it building on the excellent work set in motion by Mr Pritchard and Mr Brockwell. Some of the change will be significant, but it will be change for the better, in our view. There is still more to understand, especially about the curriculum, and we didn't see much of Special Educational Needs or Sixth Form provision, but the door is open for all members of the school community to find out more and assure themselves where they have doubts.

The visits

We visited Outwood Academies at Acklam and Ormesby, both in Middlesbrough and having been under OGAT leadership for 3.5 years and 1.5 years, respectively. We were accompanied by Sir Michael Wilkins, former OGAT CEO, who will be involved at Easingwold School from June. We met members of staff, students and senior management during the day. Everyone we spoke to was welcoming, open and willing to answer questions on areas that we know are of concern. All of us would be happy to talk further with you about these matters.

Learning

At Outwood Acklam especially, there was a real buzz and atmosphere of learning. Teaching was taking place in full classes, in small groups and one-to-one. There were clearly lots of different approaches being taken to teaching in school, depending on individual student needs.

Corridors were covered in material promoting learning and celebrating success. Classrooms had fantastic displays and many were really stimulating. One particular English classroom made you want to be a student again and experience that teacher's enthusiasm to teach - the walls and ceiling were covered with clear and thought-provoking ideas, displaying both creativity and imagination.

Many classrooms had open doors and students and staff were comfortable being observed and questioned. We heard about one of the ways OGAT encourage teachers to try new approaches in their classrooms. Teachers could display symbols on their window about the type of lesson they were providing which invited senior leaders to come in and observe. One of the signs meant 'trying a new idea' which indicated that observers should not be too judgemental!

We saw other examples of classroom innovation. There was a trial of five different ways of learning from peers: 'magpie minutes' was being tested, where students could take a minute to go round the class and steal ideas from other students. Another example saw an English teacher organising a Macbeth 'Quote off' to help Y11 learn all the required quotes for the new English GCSE.

At the same time, there was consistency: each lesson had the learning objectives displayed and you could see how teachers were using the standardised lessons that OGAT provide to develop their teaching and be more creative. In every lesson we saw how interactive whiteboards were being used to deliver the teaching. We also saw how following the same curriculum for each subject enables sharing of resources, ideas and support.

We were impressed with the library at Acklam – at break time, it was a hive of activity. All students take part in the Accelerated Reader programme which tracks and develops reading for individual students and encourages them to use the library. One student was proud to have read 35 books this year. 750 books have already been taken out of the library already this term. The Accelerated Reader programme has been introduced in our school this year for a small group of students and it is exciting to see the benefits of rolling it out more widely.

We touched on the curriculum and heard how Y8 children choose the subjects they want to take and the timetable is built around that, rather than limiting options. We heard that over the three years for Key Stage 4, students might sometimes have extra Maths or English lessons in place of an option. This is designed to ensure that appropriate standards are met in these two core subjects. Most children will probably receive extra Maths and English interventions for things they haven't picked up.

Finally, discussions with multiple staff members, who had been in exactly the same situation that Easingwold staff are now, suggested that the OGAT transition experience can be daunting and challenging at first, but once in place, frees teachers to teach. And for teachers who adapt to the OGAT model, there is a new opportunity for professional development built around immersion in OGAT systems and approaches, ongoing and extensive CPD, combined with the culture of sharing good practice, learning from each other and constantly innovating.

Behaviour policy

We had plenty of opportunity to see the OGAT behaviour policy in action, including at the school gate and classroom practice with staff upholding standards. Teachers had help on hand at all times for behaviour, as senior leaders and members of the behaviour team were available in the classrooms and corridors. A small board in each classroom indicated whether there had been any disruption allowing senior leaders to intervene quickly and calmly without interrupting the lesson.

Students were obviously being held responsible for their own behaviour. When asked a direct question by a member of staff, a student was expected to provide a clear explanation of their behaviour. Most interventions were calm and many were good-humoured. We visited the consequences room, where we saw seven pupils in separate booths; some working, some sitting quietly. It was not frightening, but had a real feel that once you had visited it, you would look to avoid returning. We saw a senior leader quickly follow up when one of the students suggested she had been sent there unfairly.

We asked about exclusions. Fixed term (short) exclusions are used to reinforce behavioural expectations, without apology, as they currently are in our school. However, OGAT are categorical that staff work relentlessly to keep students in school, which we saw plenty of evidence of, and only permanently exclude as a last resort. It would still be good to know more detail about how pupils that fall into these categories are supported.

In Acklam, we observed the atmosphere of calm and straightforward compliance as students had adapted to the policy. In Ormesby, it still needed to be applied more assertively, but this was not seen to be draconian. We felt that our school would adapt very quickly to this approach. We also noted that the correction of poor compliance with rules was significantly outweighed by positive affirmation of success and focus on future challenges.

Support for pupils

We were all struck by how well leaders and teachers knew the students and paid attention to their needs and by the commitment the staff have towards the students they teach. We saw and heard lots of examples where staff were going above and beyond the call of duty. There was concern about a student who had arrived at 7.30am, with staff wanting to know the reason for this - she was made welcome and

was able to sit, have breakfast and wait for her friends inside. We met Audrey Sutcliffe, who was really inspiring and has recently received an MBE for the extreme lengths she had gone to safeguarding children at Acklam. A couple of times, staff had tears in their eyes talking about the children and so did Fiona! We have seen this as governors at our school and were reassured to know this will not change.

Safeguarding and security are high priorities for OGAT, unapologetically so. Fences, security gates, reception and school entry systems, increased visibility in school and locked classrooms all featured heavily and have clearly been an area of investment in both schools we visited. This was an aspect that felt unnerving and will be an adjustment for everyone at Easingwold School.

At both schools, we spent time in the Bridge and the Personalised Learning Centre (PLC). These are places where individual and groups of students work independently, with support and supervision, for a variety of reasons. The Bridge had some students struggling with school or staying in lessons, students with injuries who couldn't get around school or were missing PE. There was also a snack area for students with a lovely smell of toast! There were probably about 20 students working in these environments in each school we visited. These were also places of safety and refuge at social times or when a student was experiencing difficulties. The Bridge and the PLC are the OGAT versions of our Learning Resource Centre and Youthie – they were different, but were meeting the same and wider needs. At Easingwold, these will be in place from the start.

OGAT have an impressive progress tracking and monitoring system and we saw this in action. They look at every child individually and frequently and put in place whatever adjustment or intervention it is that child needs to help them progress. We also heard about the unconventional ways the Executive Head sometimes uses to motivate students and to encourage them to attend extra lessons – at Ormesby, they have an account with the local Domino's Pizza outlet!

OGAT approach

OGAT were keen to demonstrate to us the integrated manner in which all aspects of their approach combine to drive and sustain improvement. The benefits of their system can only be achieved if all the elements of the model are in place. This is why OGAT are so insistent on their disciplinary process, school uniform, timetabling, security, IT philosophy and curriculum-led financial model. The reasons for this are practical in that the same systems and approaches allow for frequent transfer of resources, good practice and staff across the OGAT group. Also, the consistency of standards, expectations and approaches is fundamental to their ethos. Once this is in place, student results can be expected to improve.

We were impressed by the professionalism of the OGAT organisation and the clear focus on maximising pupils' time with teachers, with systems that protect the learning process from disruption. Senior members of the OGAT team are very visible within school and it is their principal objective to know students' names, their needs and any issues which might impact on their abilities to learn. Staff continually drive performance and improvement and where it isn't happening resources are deployed rapidly. Contact with pupils happens regularly and with purpose.

The OGAT management system is highly developed which means that staff know what their jobs are, have clear expectations and can get issues resolved quickly. There is a large and capable central resource of curriculum subject leaders and expertise, which is constantly and proactively working across schools and can rapidly address any issues e.g. absence of key staff members. Sound financial management underpins the OGAT approach. When this is in place, OGAT is able to develop the school and importantly for us, address issues with facilities, equipment and the fabric of school buildings. This level of stewardship, intervention and leadership is impressive.

Transition to OGAT

OGAT will begin running our school on Monday, 26th June, after the exam period has finished. We have been assured that whilst the process will be focused and energetic, it will include a high level of

engagement with all members of the school community. There will be separate meetings with all the relevant groups including parents for each year group, frequent open 1:1 surgeries for parents to meet senior OGAT leaders with questions and concerns and opportunities for staff and governors to visit OGAT schools.

A few things that students might like to know:

- Students were able to be both inside and outside at break /social times
- Three separate lunchtime sittings mean students queuing is minimised
- Food could be ordered and delivered to those studying at lunch
- Y11 have a prom and Y8 graduate from Key Stage 3 into Key Stage 4
- There are plenty of school trips, mostly in holidays and weekends rather than school time
- There are a set of objectives for students, known as 'Pledges' - "10 things to do before you go to university."

The school commits to supporting these and we saw students wearing bronze, silver and gold badges to denote how many pledges they had completed.

Thank you to Sir Michael Wilkins and colleagues for welcoming us last Wednesday. And to those who have read all the way through this rather long communication - we hope you have found it useful.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Platt, Fiona Rafferty and Elaine Walker
Parent Governors
16 May 2017