



St John's Highbury Vale C of E Primary School

Conewood Street, London N5 1DL

Tel: 020 7226 4906

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Interim Head of School: Mrs Alice Shaw

Interim Executive Head: Mrs Tonnie Read

Governors' Bulletin: Dec 2020

Dear parents and carers,

I hope you are all well, and are managing to navigate the difficult and time-consuming waters of Covid. With all the rules and regulations surrounding what we can and can't do, I find it even more important to remember that the logistical headaches caused by Government toing and froing are of little importance when weighed against the human cost of this pandemic.

The last time I wrote to you was before the summer break, when we were all concerned about exactly how we were going to get your children's learning back on track. I am happy to say that despite social distancing, bubbles, masks, one way traffic streams and no whole school assemblies, your children are catching up really well. It's no surprise that they are so adaptable, but their willingness to learn, coupled with their focus and positive attitudes, have turned a daunting task into a pleasure. I am certainly not counting any chickens, but as it seems we may be nearing the end of the beginning, perhaps even the beginning of the end, let's look forward to next year and a gradual transition to a much changed normal. I'm anticipating the day when I can enjoy the different Lego faces on the pavement without being reminded of their purpose! Let's move on from Covid to some other news.

Update on long-term planning for St John's

As many of you know, St John's went through a difficult time financially in the five years leading up to the 2018/19 school year, which required us to make changes to the way we run the school, and how we plan to operate moving forward. When the Governors and I first met with you eighteen months ago we were looking at a number of different scenarios that we could implement over the coming years, and I want to share the latest news on our progress.

To recap: we identified three areas we needed to address: improve our financial position, provide operational stability, and ensure that the solutions to both those problems would be sustainable in the long term. This meant





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looking at ourselves fundamentally as an organisation, as well as a school. The reasons for this affect schools all over the UK. We need 100% of our income from the government to operate the school. That income is calculated by looking at the number of children we have on roll. Fewer children means less income. The majority of our expenditure (70%) is on staff salaries and that remains the same regardless of how many children are in school. For example, a reduction in roll of 13 children (perhaps as a result of leaving London, or going to private schools) would mean a yearly drop in income of at least £65,000.

As we outlined before, one practical solution to this ongoing financial uncertainty was to get bigger by merging with another school, or by expanding ourselves. Becoming a two-form entry school would've doubled our income, and while that would mean an increase in teaching staff, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) would remain largely the same. We looked at expansion, but ruled it out on the grounds that falling demand for primary school places in Islington would have meant us taking children from other local schools, which we did not feel comfortable doing.

That left the possibility of joining with other local schools, either in a federation or an academy. Federating means forming a close collaboration with another school or schools, sharing teaching and support staff, and having a joint Governing Body. Academisation is a more formal process involving the legal and binding merger of two or more schools into a Academy Trust. This is a big step, and would mean the loss of a large part of our autonomy and ability to operate independently. We asked for your support to explore these two models further and have had further conversations on both.

Following that meeting, there were several extremely generous pledges of support, both financial and in terms of time volunteered. While I would stress that this didn't solve all our problems, or necessarily represent a sustainable solution, the generosity of our parent body gave us the room to operate more freely. As a Governing Board, we were able to carry out the work of investigating all options thoroughly without having to take measures that might have adversely affected the quality of the education we provide.

Academisation: several parents showed interest in the idea of us joining The Hive (the academy chain comprising St Mary Madgalene primary and secondary schools) with a view to ensuring a seamless transition to the secondary





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school. While that is an attractive proposition, on balance the Governors feel that this potential guarantee of access is outweighed by a combination of the negative cost, disruption and risk involved in academisation, and the positives of retaining our independence. This is particularly because a considerable number of our Year 6 cohort already go to St Mary Magdalene for their secondary education, and we believe that this will continue, regardless of our decision not to join The Hive at this stage. If you wish to challenge this, or indeed want to know more about how we reached this conclusion, then please do not hesitate to let me know and I can respond to any questions either in writing, or, Covid-permitting, in person.

Moving forward into 2021

As it stands, as a result of the structural changes we made and a big push on fundraising by Friends of St John's (FOSJ), I am happy to report that we are now financially and operationally stable. We have not had to formally federate with another school, but we have been able to adopt certain aspects of the federation model without having to go all in, such as a more flexible and cost-effective SLT structure. As you know, we currently have an experienced interim Executive Head Teacher (Mrs Tonnie Read), who we share with another Church of England primary school, and she is supported by a full-time Head of School (Mrs Alice Shaw, covering Mrs Lindsey Hodgson's maternity leave) and two Assistant Head Teachers (Miss Hayley Jones and Miss Lena Dalal).

Our three year budget projection looks positive, and coupled with the sharing of resources (we also share a school business manager), this structure allows for more flexibility with no demonstrable loss in the quality of our teaching provision. We have achieved some of the financial benefits of becoming a two-form entry school, while remaining essentially the same.

To that end, the Governing Board have offered Mrs Read the post of full time Executive Head, and I am very pleased to be able to tell you that she has accepted the position on a permanent basis. From September 2021, she will become our full time Executive Head Teacher, moving beyond the "interim" phase of these exceptional past 18 months, and our structure as outlined above will continue with Mrs Hodgson, Miss Jones and Miss Dalal helping lead the school. I hope you will be as pleased about this outcome as we are.





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Inclusivity at St John's

In other important matters, you will know from Mrs Read's letter that there will be a big push on inclusivity at St John's from now through 2021 and beyond. Alongside Covid, the Black Lives Matter movement has been a global phenomenon this year and we all have our part to play in educating ourselves and our children about how we can be allies in our bid to strengthen our communities. All staff and Governors are having unconscious bias training and I believe FOSJ are looking at ways to support parents. Whether it is matters of governance, education or community support; myself, the school leadership and FOSJ are always open to your comments, ideas and suggestions and we encourage you to get in touch.

It only remains for me to wish you a pleasant and enjoyable festive season. I fear this Christmas will be particularly hard, as so many of us will be reflecting on those we've lost, and those who can't be with us. Our thoughts are with each other, and I would also like to thank our teachers for their fortitude during this very difficult year.

Let's hope that 2021 brings comfort and a brighter future. Best wishes for a peaceful and refreshing Christmas break,

Harry Oulton

Chair of Governors

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