

## **Y12 PARENTS' EVENING** **Address by the Head Master (Adam Pettitt)**

**SEPTEMBER 2011**

A warm welcome to you all: an evening of two halves! First, the opportunity to hear from senior staff and from the Parents' Association; second, an opportunity to meet housemasters and house tutors and other parent and carers of pupils in your own child's tutor group informally. We have shifted the emphasis of these meetings from welcoming you – which is still important – to informing and welcoming you. Your children will have heard a lot of key messages from us and it is useful, we believe, if you hear these from us, from the horse's mouth, as it were. However, having drawn on our experience of recent years, my colleagues and I feel that we should outline some advice which parents and carers of past pupils wished they had had early on. There's no intention to scare-monger – rather the reverse; this evening is about reassuring you that parents and carers have more influence and power than they give themselves credit for, and peer and societal pressure is less persuasive than you might think, if we avail ourselves of the advantages which fall to well-informed adults in the business of bringing up children.

### **Monday's assembly**

On Monday, the whole school met in the Mallinson Sport Centre for a whole-school assembly. During that assembly, the Heads of School, Iona Davey and Kostas Chryssanthopoulos, and I spoke to the pupils about the school's aims and priorities for them and for us. I took as my theme a quotation from the American writer, Kurt Vonnegut:

**I can think of no more stirring symbol of man's humanity to man than a fire truck.**

Don't worry: I am not going to inflict a Head Master's assembly on you at the end of a busy working day! But the gist of my words was to ask whether the pre-condition to a well-ordered and harmonious community is empathy, which can be developed and nurtured, to question the value of empathy if it is not converted to action. School life and growing up are about many things, but developing as a person, and flexing one's good instincts, these are critical experiences. I argued that the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 bombings and the heroism of the fire-fighters give us a perfect exemplification of turning empathy into action. I asked the pupils where they were on the spectrum from empathy to action, empathy to service, and how they might lead a life which was determined less by their UCAS statement but by what they felt was right.

David Fotheringham, Director of Studies will set out how that aim finds its expression in the academic work which your children have embarked on, and Simon Brunskill, Head

of Sixth Form, will explain how you and the School can co-operate to ensure that your children live successful and healthy lives; Simon will outline the realities which face our pupils as they prepare for higher education and/or employment.

Before they do that, a word about fund-raising; don't worry: no hat will be passed round! If we, the School, are to set an example to our pupils of service to others, the School as an institution needs to serve as a paradigm of those values which we'd like our pupils to absorb and be guided by, here in and beyond Highgate. Our school is a charity and as such has charitable ambitions: Access, Bursaries and Community, our ABC. Access, to enable our teachers to give some of their time (without disrupting your children's education) so that children not at Highgate, particularly less advantaged ones, have access to excellence in teaching in the subjects required by top universities – you will have heard about our Chrysalis summer schools, for example; Bursaries, so that children for whom Highgate would be the right school can join us even if financially their parents or carers could not consider us; Community, we want to develop links so that local schools and charities can benefit from our resources, be they human, intellectual or physical, and our pupils can participate in and live out our ideal of service.

If you are interested in our plans, or in ways of making a donation, please do feel free to speak to Robert, this evening or by contacting him at the school. Let me take this opportunity to say that no gift is too small, and that every gift makes a difference. Your involvement will transform the life of a child.

To return to my words to the pupils. It would be a hard-hearted head master who would not be proud of your pupils' achievements last year. The results were the best ever; we have a planned capital projects programme which is delivering a new classroom building and site for the library; admissions and registrations are stronger than ever before. But, great those these corporate achievements are, none of this matters a jot unless the pupils we send out into the world are thoughtful, open-minded, conscious of the advantages which they have enjoyed and of the opportunities and obligations such advantages bring; and intently focused on exploiting those opportunities, be they academic or relating to their personal development. The proof of this particular pudding will not be in the School's place in the league tables, good though that will be, but in the long-term and sustainable achievements and values of the individual, and the contribution they can make.

# H I G H G A T E

## Y12 PARENTS' EVENING Address by the Director of Studies (David Fotheringham)

SEPTEMBER 2011

You will know from innovations over the last few years such as the Knowledge Curriculum and the Academic Forums that we have been endeavouring step by step to broaden the academic and intellectual diet on offer to our pupils and to encourage them not only to think for themselves but to think beyond the limitations of GCSE and A Level syllabuses. This year several topics in each subject will be explored as departments add to the exam board externally imposed syllabuses topics we believe it would be wrong for a pupil to leave Highgate in ignorance of. There may well be some of you who are worried by that: after all, pupils need the grades to get to university and we and they should not be taking eyes off the ball.

Let me try to reassure you and to set out two paradoxes this evening. The first is: to give pupils the skills to work independently, we have to show them how to set about it. It's what I refer to as giving them the scaffolding. You will find that your sons and daughters will have to do more and more for themselves. To start with, we won't just say: go and find out about Oliver Cromwell before tomorrow's lesson – we will give clear pointers and suggestions as to where to look – and we shall try very hard to get them beyond Wikipedia, back to those things called books, even, though websites will surely feature on reading lists. But they certainly will be finding out things for themselves, so that they come to lessons prepared to explore and to discuss and not just to receive every single piece of information in a spoon-feeding way. So we shall be giving guidance, paradoxically, so that they can learn how to find things out and then to think for themselves. In addition to this, all pupils in y12 will have a weekly Critical Method lesson. This is expressly designed to help pupils to think, and to think logically. It is of course crucial that pupils form opinions about what they hear and read, but these opinions have to be based on the evidence and logically worked through. That course starts from simple beginnings – the pupils may tell you that to start with it seems self-evident – but that's the point, for we start with basic principles and build on them. They will soon be looking at complex arguments and having to get their heads round them. All this is the scaffolding, the support to give them the skills and the confidence to think and argue logically.

But does it matter? The results are pretty good – this year group gained our best GCSE results ever. But it is precisely because we have pupils of this calibre that we owe it to them to do this. I have to the staff used Cecil Day Lewis's poem *Walking Away* as a way into this. The parent in the poem talks of the difficulty of letting a pupil grow up, the

pain as the son walks away with his friends at the end of the football match and does not walk back to dad. This letting go of the teacher's dominance of learning can seem a bit like this – many of my colleagues haven't found it easy – confidently to stand back, relatively speaking, and structure lessons and courses in a way that hands learning back to the pupil. That boy walking away with his friends was at the beginning of adult life, I suppose. This process of which I am speaking is the beginning of intellectual maturity. And it has to happen now. We have evenings when recent leavers come back to see us (Beer and Burgers, would you believe). You may think we are flattered when many pupils say they were better taught at school than at university. But that should not be, and, when I probe, I soon see that they do know how to handle life as an undergraduate and, while they will have a great time, many I think get right through their degrees intellectually unfulfilled. That is plain wrong – and very sad. So we have to do this now. And don't get me wrong – the teachers are not doing less – we are restructuring lessons, hand-outs, presentations, the lot – to include greater scope for pupil involvement, in that paradoxically structured way of logical thought and careful research. I hope you see pupils who are far more sparky about their work, talking much more about it because they have far greater ownership of it, they are far more actively involved in their learning process. In practical terms, more of their homework time should be spent in the way suggested by the old name for it: prep. They should be spending more time in preparation for lessons – in addition to the obvious follow-ups in essays and so on. I was asked today about Oxbridge numbers. Over the last five years they have shot up from about 8 to a peak in the high twenties. We had a dip last year which was entirely predicted because of the year group ability profile. We envisage a return to far higher numbers this year. But how do even more pupils get into Oxford and Cambridge? By having from the start the idea that it is up to them to develop the methods of independent thought: they won't cope with the probing of the interview if they can't, for that probing is far, far more about whether a student can take a new idea and run with it than it is about regurgitating learnt fact.

I want to mention one other way in which we encourage this. We are aware that A Levels don't give pupils the opportunity to run with a topic of their own. We will give pupils after Christmas the chance to take the Extended Project Qualification, which enables the pupil to do his/her own piece of research; content, stuff, matters, but the process of research and the thinking skills are even more important in this exercise. The Head Master of Rugby school where this project was tried out and indeed pioneered, says that it is the best thing to happen to education in his life time. Now we shan't be offering this to pupils whose effort grades and attainment levels suggest that this will interfere with their A level work, but pupils will be hearing more from Mr Rory Fisher, who is my VI Form assistant in charge of the provision of these courses, later in the year. Again, this initiative has the blessing of the universities who really do want to see that a pupil can think as well as be taught well and know things. But remember this is a test of independence, Don't phone me up and tell me John hasn't done much on the EPQ over the holidays and can I give him more help. The marks come from the whole

process and that whole intervention will lose John marks for organisation and independence. John really is on his own here. If our whole philosophy of letting go works, then the learning curve on the EPQ should not be so steep as it has been for some pupils this year. It's another paradox of course – encouraging pupils through a qualification to be independent and giving them the carrot of a grade at the end, but..... We are absolutely committed to these initiatives and are confident that the Highgate Sixth Form will be an increasingly intellectually exciting place to be in the way that a spoon-feeding academic hot house is not and cannot be. The pupils will, rest assured, gain the same high results, but they will get there feeling intellectually fulfilled, guided rather than led, stimulated rather than cajoled, and with a real in-depth knowledge of topics which they have had to explore far more for themselves. For a few of them, this will be hard, and we won't let them slip through the net, but they must espouse the philosophy and do what they can if they are not to sink rapidly at the top universities, as I mentioned.

Your sons and daughters are an able and interesting group – we are proud to have them and we are absolutely convinced that they are going to have an experience in the Sixth Form that will demand great things of them but also give them enjoyment and intellectual fulfilment in a very new and exciting way.

## **Y12 PARENTS' EVENING** **Address by the Head of Sixth Form (Simon Brunskill)**

**SEPTEMBER 2011**

I would like to talk more about everyday expectations, as well as the practicalities of life in the 6<sup>th</sup> form. Firstly I would like to make a few introductions: at the start of each academic year the Headmaster invites all new teachers to stand in front of all the other teachers so that we can put a face to a name: it's a rather nerve-wracking initiation ceremony and people think that it's the last time they will have to do this.

So – we have– Simon Brunskill, Philip Harrison; Kathryn Kramer; and Julie Welch: our work focuses on preparation for Higher Education and for employment, and on promoting the academic attitudes and ethos which Mr Fotheringham outlined. We look at how the year groups and individuals perform (including tracking progress, both in terms of effort and achievement), and how they are integrating and behaving, the kind of example they are setting to those lower down the school.

When we make our way back to the Big School or the Undercroft, you will meet your son or daughter's housemaster and tutor. These are your first port of call should you have any questions / issues to raise, and they are responsible for the academic monitoring and pastoral care for the next two years, as well as delivery of PSHE, preparation for university application, as well as the usual pastoral issues.

We are only in the 4<sup>th</sup> day of term but already the reports back from teachers are very favourable about this year group and certainly this is my impression from walking about the school and talking to the pupils in the common rooms. The new initiative of a team-building day on Friday has helped to integrate new members, as well as making the pupils reflect on the two years ahead: the impending House Music competition has also allowed pupils of different years to mix with a common purpose.

As always, though, it is the individual's feelings of security and happiness that matter most, so if there are any social or academic teething problems, do let us know as soon as possible.

This cohort of pupils has raised the bar for future year 11s to follow. The GCSE results from the transferring cohort of 89% A\* - A broke last year's record and there are some equally exceptional results from the pupils new to Highgate. The current year 12 went

on to achieve 61% A grades at AS, which gives us great hope for a large number of A\* next summer. (the A\* is only awarded at the end of Year 13)

The A\* at A level is now firmly established and we see it is a very good thing. My assembly this morning to the whole Sixth Form talked about the need to aim high, target the highest grades, and go beyond the syllabus. Pupils who achieve the top grades are more likely to go on and excel at university because of the way that they have learned to work.

With the average Russell Group university offer being AAB (my course of French and German at Manchester stands at AAB – 20 years ago it was BCD) and with one of our pupils from last year being asked for A\*A\*A, it is imperative that they strive for the very best .

What is certain is that first-attempt modular scores are key : while the school may occasionally suggest strategic re-sits in some subjects, the approach we want our pupils to adopt is to aim high in Year 12 so that time is left free to concentrate in Year 13 on the harder synoptic papers; some leading universities are making offers based on module results achieved at the first attempt (eg a maths course at Imperial demanded As in every module and no resits). This, too, is a motivational message we have shared with your child.

There are two events later in the academic year where we will go into finer detail about the UCAS application process and Oxbridge entry – we also invite representatives from many universities for the pupils to grill about life in Higher Education. However, if you do have any specific questions please do seek one of us out after this presentation has finished.

There is an understanding that we have built the pupils up over the last two years into thinking that their GCSEs are **the** most important thing. And they may think that they deserve a break. They may even be supported in their belief by those of us, like me, who reminisce about the pleasures of an exam-free (work-free?) lower sixth. But, following their three-month post-GCSE vacation, pupils are ready to cut their teeth on really challenging work and they enjoy the adrenalin-rush of the swift but deep progress Year 12 allows them. There should be no problem in finding the excitement and motivation to tackle Year 12, and still find it stimulating for all the freedoms and opportunities which sixth-form life brings.

The school should be **an exemplar for the healthy life**. Academic challenge is part of that, but we firmly believe that pupils need a balanced life, and part of that balance, as well as the richness of friendships and experience which accompanies balance, are found in the many other opportunities that are open to them at Highgate. It always amazes me how much is on offer here and at 6<sup>th</sup> form level we enjoy seeing how the

year 12 start to take a lead in things such as clubs and societies. There is Music, Drama, Sport, a new Entrepreneurship venture, volunteering in the community, lunchtime activities, Tuesday Afternoon activities which started yesterday: there is something for everyone and if there is something missing, then the pupils are free to set it up.

We would like our sixth form pupils to come to school and enjoy themselves. We would like to see them challenged and be challenging academically; We would like to see them broadening their friendships and committing to things outside of the classroom that will make them more rounded individuals both intellectually and socially. I hope that in August 2013 we will be able to send this group of talented pupils off to university confident that they have the skills to make the most of their time there.