



Claire's Court Schools

NEWSLETTER - 31 MARCH 2010



Mrs Karen Rogg B.Ed

*Joined Ridgeway, 1978;
Mistress-in-charge,
1988; Head of Ridgeway,
1989 to 2010*

The retirement this April of Karen Rogg after 32 years of service as teacher and Head is both a matter of celebration of her distinguished and inspirational service to Claire's Court Schools, and a sadness to the pupils, teachers and parents she leaves behind at Ridgeway. At the two recent leaving ceremonies, tributes from past and present have reminded us of the great respect Mrs Rogg has won over the years. Whilst we are delighted that her successor, Jeff Watkins, has worked directly with her since 1989, a respected school leader now in his own right, it must come as no surprise to any that I report we will miss Karen's contribution to the life of our School hugely! Our loss is her husband's gain, and long and happy may their retirement together be.

Election promise

Never has the independent sector been so certain in what it needs to ensure the future stability of UK education. You can see the Independent Schools Council's all-party manifesto http://www.isc.co.uk/Publications_ISCManifesto.htm. (16 March 2010)

Suffice it to say that education will remain at the forefront of political debate when the next Parliament convenes in June. Every party is planning further reform and change, from early years to national testing, with Nursery and University funding the most obvious big rows to break soon. The Claire's Court Schools Group is not affected by the on-going public benefit squabble between schools which are set up as trusts and the Charity Commission, but we are badly affected by the current 'velocity' of regulatory change. ISC undertakes much needed research on our behalf, and the manifesto is worth a read.

School website and digital developments

Our virtual school presence continues to grow apace, with www.clairescourt.com featuring news each day of the life and times of our pupils. The website also serves our marketing and regulatory needs, and I do hope that you are able to visit us frequently enough to keep up with life within our many walls. The next generation website is soon to be launched, adding further features such as our Twitterline, and aggregating our various 'blogging' sites for pupils and staff using WordPress. Our new dedicated broadband link offers us connection speeds of 10MB/s, which brings nearer the capability to provide full gateway services for pupils and staff for the next academic year. Currently we are working on separate projects with Nokia and O2 and contributing to the development of new ways for digital learning, so ...keep watching this digital space!

School Tuition Fees 2010-11

At this time of year, the Principals consider the various plans, projects and needs the Group has for the forthcoming academic year, taking into account the broader economic and political realities.

The national pay award for teachers provides for an increase of 2.3% this September, and various price indexes show costs increasing in education at more than 3%. We will write to you later with details of next year's fees scale but please be assured that any change to our fees will be as small as possible, but commensurate with the need to resource teaching and learning well, and to ensure that the day-to-day environment is appropriate to a school of high quality and aspiration.

Annual Parental Questionnaire 2010

Our annual survey of parental attitudes to our school provision is modelled upon the Independent Schools Inspectorate questionnaire, and this is the 8th year of compilation.

There were 337 respondents, representing approximately 1/3rd of the pupil cohort and a similar proportion to previous years. However, the number of replies was very uneven from year group to year group, highlighting perhaps a variation in e4preception and emphasis that parents from different

age groups feel we give to this survey. There does seem to be some link between cohort (year group) size and privacy issues. To précis one parent 'I would not wish to jeopardise my relationship with my child's teacher by appearing critical about their work, when that is simply not the point of my concern'. Next year, I hope to provide an on-line version to assist those parents who feel a web-based approach would provide better privacy.

So please read my detailed report of your feedback on the pages that follow, and if you wish, feel free to contribute to our development by e-mailing me on jtw@clairescourt.com. In the meantime, enjoy the Easter break with your sons and daughters, and let us hope that when we return, the warmth of spring will be truly with us, whatever the heat being generated by the politics of the day!

James Wilding

Academic Principal

Questionnaire findings

All questionnaires were fully completed, though with a number recording no views where their child and they have no experience (for example Holiday club). A good number chose to write additional responses on the questionnaire, and in addition several chose to attach detailed sheets of advice and observation.

Whilst the vast majority of the feedback is very positive, replicating our findings from previous years, there are consistent themes emerging amongst parental views in some areas of provision and these are highlighted below.

Summary judgements.

Many parents and families have found 2009 and 2010 to be difficult years, with problems and pressures arising from the recession, from work and from other family matters. Some of the latter have been really ghastly and with tragic circumstances. Nevertheless, it is pleasing that the questionnaire responses have stayed focussed on what 'the School' provides. In instances where concern or criticism has been given, we have the opportunity to provide explanation, advice or adjust what we do to improve as you would hope. Many respondents hope that our staff are contactable by e-mail (they are), and recognise that because teachers are in the classroom, it is unlikely that e-mails will be replied to during a working day (a teacher's primary activity is to teach pupils in lessons). The School is not able to resource its teaching staff with the time and space so that all can be on-line more rapidly, a very different scene to the office world where, for many employees, the only contact with others is through e-mail.

General issues for School to address

Academic matters

The Academic focus of the School remains a great strength of the School, as seen by the vast majority of parents.

Teaching helps my child to make progress

Parents recognise that we have tried to reduce general levels of homework, and there are few complaints about excessive volume, other than when the year group concerned seems to have an unbalanced week. Even greater clarity on homework policy would be welcomed, with, it is suggested, an extra emphasis on high quality digital resources. Getting the balance right on what we should test also has a following; at junior level, such commentary suggesting we might better address the needs of pupils by testing less (outside of English and Maths) and extend and develop those of varied abilities with better differentiated work, stretching the able more effectively where setting does not exist. At top primary level there are requests for extended homework to be more regularly set at the weekend. Some suggest our homework activities should promote in-depth learning rather than lots of different subjects; others (more at secondary level) find the 'weekend' supply a 'burden'. In commenting on their child's experience of teaching, respondents suggest that least progress is made where the range of teaching styles and work method is narrow. The move to triple award science at secondary school for the more able is coming a little too late for a few (on stream for current year 8). A mix of opinions about the variety of subject choices – for Latin, modern languages and creative subjects prior to GCSE – indicates that we need to give better guidance and information to parents before choices are required of their children.

On Staff

School should provide clearer information about staff changes, either through career moves, retirements, maternity leave or redeployment. New staff should be introduced to parents as soon as possible, so that they can engage with parents more rapidly and be seen to be less 'distant'.

Feedback meetings, such as parent teacher evenings.

Where year groups have only one parent teacher evening a year, parents occasionally find the limited time available to talk to teachers insufficient to provide the depth of dialogue they seek. Appointments for evening meetings split opinion equally, with the mix of drop-in and scheduled appointment meeting the broad needs of the year group well. Parents comment that they do find it easy to make specific appointments to meet staff when needed.

Feedback through reports

Parents recognise that the School is adjusting to electronic reporting, and in addition at secondary level to the increasing scheduling of modular examinations throughout the school year. Nevertheless, where concern is expressed, it is about the reduction in report information coming home because of a change in frequency. Some concern exists about the quality of writing within these reports; we are asked to clearer direction on what teachers are doing to raise a child's achievement, as well as greater clarity for measurable targets where they are set.

Feedback using phone and e-mail

The rapid extension of the use of both phone and e-mail within our schools to provide early intervention and timely feedback is welcomed.

Our individual staff e-mail addresses are not always visible to parents, and the School's website contact form does not provide the kind of swift response some respondents would like. A few concerns are expressed that our contact to parents about injuries sustained at School are not sufficiently timely.

The handling of concerns

Office staff handle parents' contact with concern well, often extraordinarily so, and the best handling of complaints arises when staff involved give a time indication of when a reply can be given, and follow-up occurs to ensure parents have their concern has been dealt with satisfactorily. Initial school reaction can be defensive, such as when theft occurs. Parents can be left for some time awaiting a response, and on occasion only get reply by coming in to School to find out what actions have been taken.

The provision of support for SEN, G&T etc.

Many parents respond with a zero here, feeling that as their child does not receive support they have no view. Resourcing can be an issue where the cost of providing support for Dyslexia falls on the parent's pocket, as can the scheduling of support classes (why can't they be after school?). Enthusiasm for extra lessons within the school day for music and Lamda for example is matched by the obvious tension that arises when a child has to miss one lesson to benefit from another (why can't they be after school?).

The work my child has to do at home

This section attracts the greatest breadth of view, indicating that for many we get this precisely right, and for others not really right enough. Parents of younger pupils would like to see their more able child stretched through the earlier arrival of subject-based homework, an opportunity to review exercise

books at home (there is no embargo on this!), with extended holiday reading available from the School's reading scheme. Higher up the School, as less able children have difficulty coping with such an academic programme, more carefully structured study support at School is suggested, as is the provision of early buses on occasion to allow pupils to get home and take some of the academic pressure off.

Pastoral matters

Excellence remains the majority experience here, with staff named for the outstanding contribution they have made to pupil development.

Not all are totally satisfied with our care, particularly when it comes to matters of dress, uniform, tidiness and overall appearance. Some of the comments below seem 'secondary school' related, but the issues are voiced by parents of younger children too.

Satisfaction with behaviour, help/guidance, values, extra-curricular activity and holiday care

Parental views on the look and behaviour of our pupils are strong. Above all, parents want our pupils to be smart, dress appropriately, use less bad language (particularly on the buses), have better organisational skills, lose less property (and on occasion have less stolen), bully less, get rewarded for good behaviour more often and be popular with their teachers and pupils, without undue favouritism appearing to be directed at those who achieve highly, be that in the classroom, on stage, in concert or on the playing fields. Some parents would like us to be more systematic about the disciplining of poor dress and behaviour, others feel that many of these problems arise because parents themselves cannot address these issues and are as mixed in their messages as School is. The overarching message is that parents feel we achieve good standards of behaviour but that the School should always strive to do better. We are asked to avoid rewarding badly behaved children in the classroom who shine outside, perceptions exist that the same old pupils cause the same old problems throughout school life.

The help and guidance offered remains strongly valued, whether it is tied into the provision for SEN or not. But it is not plain sailing here; as one parent writes 'When a child like mine is receiving much SEN help, I like to think s/he is making progress but I know it is massively hindered by their learning difficulties'. There is no magic potion for the child that lacks ambition, or the ability to spell or the social skills to integrate with their peers, and parenting can be a long old haul for those supporting children with such difficulties. A few parents of top junior children would like to see events at breaktime that

encourage conversation and mutual support rather than the playground banter. The counselling service provided by 'The Living Room' remains very highly valued indeed.

Parental views of extra-curricular activity developments over the last year were of particular interest as the deputy heads on each site revamped this programme over the last 12 months.

Parents have noted the addition of extra activities such as Karate, others are concerned at the arrival of charges for such provision! Parents of our youngest would like to see all-year round football activity, and as pupils rise up the School, an even greater focus on the development of ICT and associated skills in the use of digital technologies. Those who are gifted or talented should have more opportunities to practice and perform, School should look to develop further its incentives programmes, and provide more opportunities for children to take responsibility and become more industrious.

Wrap-around and holiday care remains very highly thought of, with positives about our provision in this area from those families where both parents work. The days immediately either side of term start and end on which we cannot provide care cause those affected much grief, and for those whose children have the longest stay with us, the introduction of cooked breakfast and tea would improve provision further. The cost of these extras can be a barrier to participation, as can be the lack of appropriate activities for those over the age of 12.

Finally, we have not found an easy way of increasing parental satisfaction with the way we encourage you to be involved in our life and work. Despite the very best efforts of the PTA committees to provide stimulating and entertaining social events for adults and for families, attendance at the annual PTA general meetings remains very low. In an age when parental help within schools requires us to go through the entire vetting and CRB process, it is through the vigorous work of the Claires Court and Ridgeway Society and The College PTA that such engagement is best placed. The tremendous support given to our annual 3for3 Charity week and for our own fundraising events does indicate strong parental support for such worthwhile activities.

Principals' response to concerns raised that are site specific

The Ridgeway Swimming Pool

The construction of the Sports Hall in 2005 was funded by a 10 year capital loan to cover the £1million pound plus development, and the unforeseen closure of the swimming pool the following year due to the failure of its underground

pipe work has left us with an extensive building project waiting to happen.

A fast-track plan was developed by the Society in partnership with the Principals, which would provide a new indoor facility; £100,000 was jointly provided, requiring a further £36,000 to be raised from appeal to existing Ridgeway Parents. Unfortunately, the appeal was only supported by £7,000 in pledges, and the rapid arrival of the recession in late 2008 led to the abandonment of this project. The Society's funds have been refocused on other areas of provision for 2009 and 2010. The recession has reduced pupil numbers at Ridgeway such that revenue is reduced by about £200,000, yet we have maintained the teaching and support staffing levels so that the 14 classes at Ridgeway remain fully provided. The return of our missing 20 pupils will bring this project back to the fore, so the quicker we recover to 250 pupils on roll, the more rapidly we can develop these and other facilities at Ridgeway.

Claires Court Seniors

Planning permission for our new playing fields (Berry Hill) was granted in December, and we will be able to take occupancy in April 2012. In the meantime, we have rebuilt and extended the major pavilion at Phoenix, and remain in negotiation with the Licensed Trade Charity over the Station ground facility. The LTC are happy to have us rebuild their pavilion but will not provide a lease for longer than 2 years, so we will continue to make and mend until we can develop on the adjacent Berry Hill site.

At Ray Mill Road East, we have planning consent for the construction of new locker and changing rooms. The footings for these go in this April and the superstructure follows during the summer holidays. The Music and Drama School project is next in line for 2011, planners, Environment Agency, financiers and neighbours willing.

At College

The extensive building works providing covered pool, music department and Sixth Form centre were funded by long-term loan in 2005, and whilst renovations of laboratories and main teaching spaces have continued apace, big capital projects are not on the horizon until after the constructions at Claires Court are complete. As at Ridgeway, the recruitment of younger pupils remains a key part of our development strategy, with our commitment to parents being the maintenance of high quality teaching and support services, both in the classroom and in the diverse range of activities provided.