

Spring Term 2019

This term in school...

Welcome to my Headteacher's Letter. Sent home termly it will let you know what's happening in school: at a leadership level, for the whole school and in the classroom.

As I reflected and planned this term's letter, I realised what an incredible period of achievement it has been since my last letter in November.

The first, and quite a significant achievement, was our positive Ofsted inspection on Thursday 17th January. As a headteacher, there is always a surge of adrenaline when a member of the office informs you that it is Ofsted on the phone! I received the notification of the inspection at 12.30pm the day before. The process then involves a long and detailed phone conversation with the lead inspector who informs you of their lines of enquiry. This is based on a remote assessment of your school and primarily driven by the school's academic data (Year 6 SATs results and progress from Year 2 SATs results). I am always acutely aware that first impressions count, so it is an interesting discussion to manage and participate in.

We were fortunate to be inspected by Sir Robin Boshier who very quickly put me at ease, as it was clear he had the same values and expectations of what a good school should be. His relaxed approach enabled him to find out far more about Amherst rather than being officious and detached. I had to remind myself during the inspection that he was an Ofsted inspector and we were under scrutiny! As you know, the inspection went well and he recognised and validated our strengths. I was particularly pleased that middle leadership within our school was recognised. I am very fortunate to be working with, and leading, an excellent team.

Thank you to all parents who contributed to the Parent View survey. The outcomes were very positive. Good relationships are what enable a school to function successfully. As a large school, it can be hard for each parent to feel listened to and part of the community. This is an area we work hard on and much of the work falls on classteachers and teaching assistants developing and nurturing their relationship with you and your child. Therefore, I was extremely proud that early in the report it stated:

You, your leaders and governors provide clear direction, which creates a strong sense of community and purpose, which motivates staff and pupils to achieve very well. Parents, carers, pupils and staff alike recognise the very high quality and dedication of the leadership you provide. All pupils responding to Ofsted's survey said that they enjoy coming to school and find lessons interesting.

Staff are fully committed to delivering the school's values of trust, kindness, determination, politeness, fairness and cooperation; they all said they are proud to work at the school. Parents responded very positively and in large numbers to Ofsted's online questionnaire. Two parents, speaking for many, said: 'The children are very well motivated and inspired to learn as well as to participate in the many extra-curricular activities' and then, 'The teaching staff go above and beyond for their pupils.' Leaders are fulfilling the school's aim to 'Inspire every pupil'.

Thank you for your continued support. To lead a successful school is a team effort, with each person playing their part.

Continuing with our theme of high achievement at Amherst, one day this term particularly stands out. It is Saturday 9th March. I was in Bolton with Amherst Choir for the filming of Songs of Praise Junior Choir of the Year. I already felt incredibly proud and privileged to be accompanying Amherst Choir at such an amazing event (to be broadcast on BBC1 May 19th). I had my phone on silent but during the day, I started to receive several text messages. First Mrs Wheeler, to let me know that Amherst had just won the Sevenoaks Partnership netball tournament. Then Mr Barratt, a few minutes later, to inform me that

Amherst had just won the Sevenoaks Football tournament. This is the first time we have won both the football and netball at the same time. A little later my phone buzzed again and it was a member of my own hockey team to inform me that we had just beaten Marden Russets 2-1 (a game we were not expecting to win!). Finally, I checked the Premier League football scores and saw that Southampton had come from behind to beat Spurs 2-1! A memorable day.

This term's achievements continued after 9th March. Our Under 11 Boys hockey team won the Kent Cup, progressing to the Southern finals where they finished second. The school table tennis team came second at the national finals in Hinckley on Saturday 23rd March. This was a phenomenal achievement and the first time Amherst had reached the national finals. Our chess teams continue to perform at such a high standard and qualified for the regional finals. The school football team have also won the league this year.

As I reflect on the range of success we have recently had I identify two common elements. High quality coaching/teaching and hard work. The combination of multiple years of high quality input by a skilled coach or teacher, and the dedication of a child to attend weekly rehearsals or practices is why we have been successful. I am aware it is not all about winning, but you cannot beat a few wins to validate what we are trying to achieve and to promote excellence!

As mentioned in this letter last year, the lack of funding is having a direct impact on schools being able to function effectively. Unfortunately, Amherst continues to be one of the lowest funded schools per pupil in Kent (£3200 per pupil). This is due to high attainment at the end of Year 2, low amount of Pupil Premium pupils and not having KS1, which quite rightly, you are funded more for per pupil. The government had pledged to increase funding to £3500 per pupil from September 2019. With very short notice, this has now been delayed/withdrawn to £3400. The impact for us is we now have £38,400 less in our budget than predicted. We were relying on that funding to continue providing the high quality academic, social and emotional experience that we offer to all pupils.

When looking at the difficult financial situation we are currently in (annual shortfall of close to £50,000) I have two reflections. Firstly, how reliant we are on PTA funding and School Fund donations to run the school effectively. Without this additional income, we would not be able to operate. Secondly, when comparing our funding to the private sector, what amazing value for money we provide! The music and hockey competitions entered this year (which we have won) were against private schools. If you equate our fees to £3200 per year then it again highlights how well we are using the resources we have and the outcomes we are achieving.

I have always felt uncomfortable asking parents for continued donations to School Fund but if you were able to support us in anyway, in addition to what you have already donated, it would be most welcome. You can do this via School Gateway www.schoolgateway.com or if you would like to set up a regular smaller payment (currently about ten parents), please contact the school office.

What is actually required is the DfE to fund schools at a higher rate rather than you as parents picking up the shortfall. I have met previously with Michael Fallon to share my frustration and disappointment at the current low levels of school funding. If you feel motivated to do so please contact him as well to express your concerns.

I hope you all have a fantastic Easter holiday and enjoy the chance to spend time together as a family.

Best Wishes

Andrew Reid