

Autumn Term 2016

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.

Now in my fourth year as Headteacher of Amherst it is a chance to reflect on the achievements of last year and also focus on the development priorities for this year.

Firstly, welcome to all new children and families in Year 3 and other year groups. I hope your first months at Amherst have been a positive experience. The Buddy system in Year 3 continues to be a success and helped aid transition into Year 3, especially on the first morning. This year we are trying to ensure that the Buddy system continues beyond just the first day. Each Year 3 and Year 6 class are paired to hopefully facilitate the classes working together when appropriate. A good example of this in action recently was 3W and 6C enjoying a shared Indoor Athletics lesson with the Year 6 children guiding and teaching their Year 3 Buddies. There was a wonderful atmosphere in the hall of excitement, mutual admiration, pride and enthusiasm. We will continue to find shared learning opportunities throughout the year.

Each year part of the school's performance is judged by the Year 6 SATs results. Last year's Year 6 pupils were the first cohort of children to be assessed on the new curriculum. The new curriculum is far more challenging and demanding than the previous one so it is really pleasing to see that Amherst children have performed significantly above the national average in all areas. Well done and thank you to all the children and teaching team for their hard work and commitment to high standards. This year the children received a scaled score as the outcome of the SATs test in Reading, GPS and Maths. Writing continues to be assessed by teachers in each individual school rather than a written exam. For a child to be at the Expected Standard they needed to score 100 + with the maximum score being 120. For a child to be assessed as achieving a High Score they needed to score 110+. It is particularly pleasing that close to 50% of our children have been assessed as achieving a High Score in Reading, Maths and GPS which is an excellent outcome. There is no national average score for progress but we should expect to have a positive progress score which we have achieved in Reading and Maths.

Attainment and Progress 2016

Subject		School	Kent	National
Reading, Writing and Maths Combined %	Expected Standard	75	58	53
	Higher Standard	19	6	1.5
Reading %	Expected Standard +	87	69	66
	High Score (110+)	49	21	19
Writing (Teacher Assessed) %	Expected Standard +	81	80	67.5
	Greater Depth	23	15	6.1
Grammar Punctuation Spelling %	Expected Standard	93	72	72
	High Score (110+)	40	22	23
Maths %	Expected Standard +	84	71	70
	High Score (110+)	44	17	17
Reading Average Scaled Score		108	103	103
GPS Average Scaled Score		108	104	104
Maths Average Scaled Score		108	103	103
Reading Progress Score		1.1		
Writing Progress Score		-2.6		
Maths Progress Score		0.8		

Kent Test

Eighty-nine Year 6 children sat the Kent Test (11+) on Thursday 8th September 2016. Seventy-four (77%) passed the test. Fifty-eight (60%) passed in 2015 and fifty-one (53%) passed in 2014. The percentage is of the whole year group not just the children who entered the test. 19% of children in Kent passed the test. This increases to 32% when looking at just West Kent. 77% is an incredibly high pass rate for Amherst and congratulations must be awarded to the children, teachers and parents. It is a team effort. As in previous years, I was a member of the Headteachers' Kent Test Appeal Panel. I find this is such a valuable experience as it gives me insight to the standards needed for an appeal to be successful. It also helps maintain good relationships with the secondary school headteachers.

As part of our commitment to develop well rounded children we want every child to develop a passion and expertise for something beyond English and maths. It is so important that every child is recognised for their talents. High self-esteem is the key to all learning and ensuring children have positive emotional well-being.

At the beginning of every year schools write a School Improvement Plan. I would like to share with you the three key priorities on our school improvement plan for this year:

- To embed the 21 Steps Assessment procedures to ensure consistency across all year groups.
- To ensure more able pupils are engaged, motivated and make good progress through Challenge by Choice classroom ethos.
- To ensure middle attaining pupils make expected progress in reading, writing and maths.

A key development at Amherst in the last two years has been a shift to a Challenge by Choice classroom ethos. This approach enables children of all abilities to self-select the most appropriate level of challenge for them. This enables the child to have ownership of their learning and we find the children invariably choose the task the teacher would have selected for them. The three levels of challenge on offer in a lesson have all been created and selected by the teacher, so they still lead the children's learning, but this approach creates a greater partnership with the child and their learning journey.

What this ultimately leads to is a values driven educational approach with all staff believing in every child and enabling them to achieve their full potential. This is at the heart of what we are trying to achieve at Amherst and as I mentioned in my Summer Term Headteachers' Letter, a key part of this strategy is recruiting and retaining the best teaching staff that understand and utilise this ethos to its full potential. I am always thrilled to hear at lunchtime teachers and TAs discussing individual children with enthusiasm and taking pride in facilitating them to learn. This tells me those adults care deeply about the child they are discussing and understand that a key element of developing a child's self-esteem is enabling them to achieve academically. A child's academic status means so much to them even if it is in their sub conscious. If a child knows they are learning and improving on a daily basis, this is what has a positive impact on their self-esteem alongside the academic outcome. We will continue to reward effort over outcome as this is a fairer system for all and a better life skill to learn. If you are interested in learning more and about the research behind this strategy you may wish to read 'Creating Learning without Limits' (2012) by Mandy Swann. It details the journey Wroxham School went on under the leadership of Alison Peacock.

"Creating Learning without Limits' takes on one of the most important issues in education today. In the last decade schools in England have taken a path towards putting all children into boxes, attaching a level to their heads and deciding what they are capable of achieving. This book shows the possibility of a different educational path, one in which all students are encouraged to achieve the greatest they can. Importantly the book also documents ways in which courageous teachers can do this - promoting fair and engaging learning environments for all students. This is a must-read for educators, policy makers and parents alike."
Jo Boaler, Professor of Mathematics Education, Stanford University, California. Formerly a teacher and researcher at the Universities of London and Sussex.

I continue to teach a different class each Friday morning. It enables me to get to know the children better (at least learn their names!) and also get a feel for how their class is progressing. The children get to know me as a teacher and a person, which helps develop positive relationships. It also ensures that any whole school strategies and initiatives are firmly rooted in improving teaching and learning.

If you ever feel the need to come and speak to me, please don't hesitate to contact the office. If I am available I am always happy to chat immediately and if not, to make an appointment.

I look forward to seeing many of you at the Christmas Bazaar and Carol Service.

Best Wishes

Andrew Reid