

Spring Term 2023

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 referenced in my autumn term headteacher's letter this is my tenth year leading Amherst. It is my fifteen year as a Headteacher, having led Goudhurst and Kilndown Primary School for five years prior to Amherst. Despite all those years of experience I still find I regularly learn something new and have to keep developing my leadership skills and knowledge to be successful. When I joined in September 2013 I was reminded by my predecessor Derry Wiltshire that I am only the fourth Headteacher of Amherst since 1966! I inherited a long legacy of stable and consistent leadership. There are so many positive aspects to Amherst that make it an excellent school to lead resulting in high levels of retention. I am proud and fortunate to have the opportunity to be the current custodian.

There are many challenges leading a school successfully. Those different challenges have come and gone over the last fifteen years. Some are ever present and some are unique to an individual situation. Schools nationally are currently facing a context of a deterioration of pupils' behaviour and a lowering of children's emotional and mental resilience to cope with life's challenges, perhaps related to the pandemic. We are only marginally affected by a lowering in standards at Amherst but we are determined that it does not creep in, in a structural way. Below is a list of key areas that all schools, including Amherst, are currently wanting to improve (they are all common sense and not too radical).

Attendance fell below 95% in the autumn term, for the first time, outside Covid, during my time at the school. Research shows that pupils with the highest attendance achieve the best outcomes in all areas of school life. Regular daily attendance is vital to maintain positive relationships with teachers and friends. If you don't invest in school by coming in every day, it becomes increasingly hard for your child to take full advantage of the learning and social opportunities offered. I was shocked to read an article in the paper on Saturday detailing the rise of children working from home on Fridays to keep their parents company!

Punctuality: this matters, at school and in the outside world. Regularly arriving at school late is disruptive for the child involved but also for the teacher and classmates. Teachers have to stop the beginning of their lesson to welcome and accommodate the child who is late. Regular lateness (we will all have the odd occasion when something happens out of our control) models to the child that school is not important and a lowering of respect for their teacher and peers.

Presentation matters. How children present themselves does make a difference to how we learn. We have a uniform so everybody should be respectful of that. Presentation includes bringing the right equipment to school each day, including PE kit and being generally well organised. All good lessons and habits to be learnt for secondary school and later life.

Attitudes to learning. At Amherst I have always encouraged staff to reward and praise effort over outcomes. It is a far fairer reward system as everybody is capable of trying hard. Positive attitudes to learning includes behaviour at school and attitudes to adults at school. To successfully manage thirty-two children in a class every day the teacher is in charge. We accommodate a range of needs but there will be times when everybody must take direction and then get on with it! I am not saying that the teacher always knows best but for a classroom to be a positive and successful space for all, that mutual respect must be present.

As experienced teachers at Amherst, who have taught this age range of children for many years, we know what they are capable of. Many schools have lowered the pitch of their curriculum in response to the pandemic. This is something we have not done. The vast majority of our pupils are still capable of achieving the same outcomes of pre-pandemic pupils. Good teachers have always differentiated lessons to meet the needs of their pupils. My fear of a fundamental shift of the curriculum would be that we never return to the pre-pandemic expectations. Yes, teachers tell me that some curriculum content from previous years currently needs to be taught slightly slower or over learned, but ultimately we are still reaching the same end goals in each subject.

As always, a positive partnership between home and school, prioritising the points listed above, is vital and will give every child the best chance of achieving their full potential.

An increasing number of children in Years 5 and 6 now bring a mobile phone because they are walking to school. Those phones are collected in each morning and taken to office in a class box. At home time the phones are given back to the children. I understand the caution about a child walking to school but some of the distances are very short and I wonder if it is really necessary? I know in my house, as a parent, we are under immense pressure from our own children if they feel they are the only one who don't have something. Over the years you begin to realise your child is not *the only one* but wants you to feel that way so they can get what they want!

My greater fear regarding mobile phones is that a child will get run over walking to and from school because they are looking at their phone rather than concentrating on road safety. A cruel irony is that well intentioned parents are giving them a phone to keep them safe.

Don't be afraid to be different and hold your ground as a parent. You are modelling strength and principles to your child which ultimately they will learn from, respect and come to appreciate. Yes, there will be some days when you pick your battles but just be mindful that this doesn't become every day. It is not easy being a parent!

At the beginning of the year, I discussed with children setting goals and what is involved in trying to achieve them. One of my personal goals this year is to run 1000 miles. This will be the fourth year that I have attempted this having not managed it yet. I start the year well, often on track by April, but then the cricket season starts and I struggle to fit in runs at the weekend! I am determined to try and do better this year, which involves running early in the morning during the week. My run this morning was the first one this year that I did not need a headtorch all the way round. It was a cold but uplifting start to the day and gave me the opportunity to consider what I would write in my headteacher's letter.

One of my favourite times of the week is playing in the school orchestra on Friday after school. The children (and Mr Clarke) have worked so hard and are beginning to really play together as a group, demonstrating strong musicianship. We look forward to playing to an audience at the Amherst Music Festival on Tuesday 28th March.

I look forward to seeing many of you at Open Afternoon on Friday 17th March and then parents' evening the following week. Please take a chance to look at the fantastic *Flotsam* displays for each year group. If I don't see you before the end of term I hope you all have a wonderful break over Easter.

Finally, I must credit Mr Wesson (headmaster of The Skinners' School) who influenced elements of this newsletter by me reading his weekly bulletin!

Best Wishes

Andrew Reid