

Spring Term 2018

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.

I would like to start this term's letter by sharing how immensely proud I am of the children's writing and artwork linked to the recent whole school writing project. This is now our fifth project, completing two a year. 'The Mysteries of Harris Burdick' by Chis Van Allsburg, has generated such an enthusiastic response from all year groups. The dynamics of the whole school working on the same book at the same time is unique. It has the impact of creating a cohesive feel, amongst children and staff, which generates a positive energy of its own. The projects were introduced originally to raise standards in writing, which has been achieved, but they have grown into something far greater than that now. One of my most enjoyable tasks is to consider which book we will work on next!

As mentioned in previous Headteacher's letters the lack of funding is having a direct impact on schools being able to function effectively. You may have read the recent (Feb 22nd) Sevenoaks Chronicle front page article 'The huge funding gap at our schools'. The article highlighted the differences in funding between local schools and compared to other schools across Kent. The tool used for comparing schools was the amount each school is funded per pupil. Amherst School was not featured in the article, as it is an Academy. I feel it is necessary to share our funding amount per pupil, as I was concerned parents and the local community might interpret our omission is due to Amherst being funded so highly! Unfortunately, this is not the case and we are actually the lowest funded school in Sevenoaks and potentially in Kent. Our current funding rate per pupil is £3069. The article quote Roseacre Junior School in Bearsted being the worst funded at £3300 per pupil.

When you compare our funding rate of £3069 to Riverhead Infants School (£4300) and Sevenoaks Primary School (£3960) for example, the range of funding is alarming. There is a funding formula that calculates the amount but junior schools struggle to attract a higher rate of funding. I understand this is due to two main reasons. KS1 (5-7) children are funded at a higher rate than KS2 (7-11) due to higher staffing ratios needed in the classroom. The second reason is prior Key Stage 1 attainment. The better the children achieve at KS1 the less you are funded at KS2. As you will be aware, our children achieve extremely highly at KS1 and having no KS1 children, results in such a low level of funding. I am sure there may be other factors I am not aware of or do not fully understand but the outcome is a low amount per pupil for Amherst.

The government have put in place a new fairer funding formula, which takes effect from 2018/19, progressing to a minimum funding of £3500 per pupil by 2019/20. Amherst will be funded at £3500 but still far less than other local schools.

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 other local schools, what amazing value for money we provide! The high level of teaching and learning and the extra-curricular/enhanced curriculum that is on offer at Amherst is superb. All funded at a lower level than any other local school. On this reduced funding, based on current KS2 academic results (34%) for children achieving a Higher Score

at the end of Year 6, in Reading, Writing and Maths we were ranked highest school in Kent and ranked 99th out of 20,956 primary schools nationally!

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 and much needed. What is actually needed is the DfE to fund schools at a higher rate rather than you as parents picking up the shortfall. I met with Michael Fallon before Christmas to raise my concerns. If you feel motivated to do so please contact him as well to express your concerns.

On a more positive note I attended a course recently entitled 'Stopping bad things happening to good schools and good school leaders'. A strange title for a course but sadly needed in today's society.

Example scenarios included:

- social media hate campaign against a headteacher or member of staff
- allegations and complaints (valid, vexatious and false) distorted by the media and social media
- any critical incident seriously mishandled and reputation damaging
- serious physical attacks on staff or pupils.

A sobering day of discussion! A key part of prevention and then managing a serious incident came down to relationships. It was very clear that school leaders need to rapidly generate trust and goodwill amongst their parents. That trust and goodwill will enable the school to have some breathing space to respond effectively. Historically the profession generated a default trust and respect but sadly that seems to be no more. Social media can very rapidly generate a community view about a school or school leader that is not factually correct and heavily biased by one individual's personal views.

At the end of the course, I felt privileged and incredibly fortunate to be working at Amherst and with you as a community of parents. We have managed many challenging situations and I have felt that I did have that breathing space to internally reflect and make good decisions. Your trust and respect for the school, and myself as a school leader is vital. I am acutely aware that that level of trust is earned over time. Amherst is a wonderful school to be part of and I hope that we continue to work together so successfully.

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

Best Wishes

Andrew Reid