



LAWRENCE SHERIFF SCHOOL
A National Teaching School Hub
RUGBY

School Culture – ‘The Way We Do Things Around Here’

One of the most important things for any parent/carer to consider when exploring their child's secondary school options is whether the school culture, or 'the way we do things around here', will suit their individual child. In order to give you a greater understanding of how LSS operates in practice, I thought it would be useful to share some extracts from our recent weekly newsletters home.

Continuity Amidst Change

One of the books charting the history of the school, written in 2003, is called 'Continuity Amidst Change'. Is it possible to have both continuity and change? Do we want or need continuity? Do we want or need change? My answer to all three questions is yes.

I hope you can sense that I have been reflecting heavily on what the next steps for the school are.

Continuity lies in ensuring that teaching and learning is prioritised as the DNA of the school. Another constant should be a supportive and well-structured pastoral system that allows students to overcome the difficulties that life inevitably throws at them. We must also hold onto the values and behaviours of doing things the right way and ensuring that people are at the centre of everything we do as a school.

However, society is changing. What matters to this generation of young people is different from what mattered in the past and therefore how we support and address our students' needs should also change. The education system is dynamic and as the skills and knowledge required develop this should be reflected in our teaching and learning. No matter how good something is we should never be happy to settle, instead we should always be looking to how we can be even better.

In other words what we strive to achieve should not be compromised and the values and ethos that are uniquely Sheriff should never be lost. But we should also look to how we can improve, we should be open to doing things differently and, just like our students, be open to learning new tricks!

The photo on the right shows three generations of headteachers at Lawrence Sheriff School. Both Rex Pogson and Peter Kent had the very clear ambition of maintaining the deep tradition of valuing people and striving to provide the very best education for Sheriff students. Both were equally confident in making the changes needed to move the school forward. Students, parents, staff and governors should have the same high expectation of me.



Happy Schools

'For students and staff to be happy during their time at Lawrence Sheriff School'

I wonder how many schools have this statement at the top of their Headteacher's job description and as the primary aim of the school. I think it is brave of our governors to make this their aim and the first point on my job description. However, I recently read a document where the first line read: *I have never heard of a happy school before and I am still not sure what it means*. Surely all schools should be happy! But maybe this signals that I need to clarify what we mean by a happy school.

Firstly, it is my experience that any person at any stage of their life and career performs better when they know they are valued and they enjoy what they do. A happy school creates an environment where all people can be heard, where all people have the space to develop themselves and all people are respected. It is important to note that when working in a school with over 1000 students and over 100 staff this does not mean that everyone does their own thing and everyone can do and say what they want, when they want – that would be anarchy. It is also unlikely to have a school where everyone agrees on what should be done and when. Instead, the happiness comes from **how** we do things: we listen to each other even if we disagree, we talk to each other nicely even if we have opposing opinions, and we act considerately even if we want to do things differently.

A quote from Maya Angelou comes to mind at this point 'people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel'.

Another aspect of happiness that builds on this is one of expectation. Despite what anyone says an easy life is not a fulfilled and happy life. Taking the easy option may at times give you time to breathe and short term gratification but deeper happiness comes from challenge. I cannot imagine a school where we settled for learning the easy stuff, or accepted superficial knowledge or skills. As teachers we don't work hard to achieve mediocre teaching and learning; we get the buzz from challenging ourselves and challenging each other. You only have to walk into a classroom where the teacher has created challenge but has also structured the learning to help students achieve and you can feel the energy!

When next asked what we mean by a happy school we can sum it up with: where everyone is valued and everyone is challenged to be the best version of themselves or perhaps as a familiar voice would often say 'it's the way we do things around here'.

Kindness

Kindness and positivity should never be taken for granted. It is the small gestures that can individually and collectively make a difference to how everyone experiences each day and if everyone made it their aim to be kind and spread positivity, I can only imagine what a wonderful world we would live in.

Throughout this half-term I have asked teachers and students to consider this message and work collectively to further develop our school culture. As teachers we have focused on sending postcards home to praise attitude and character as well as great work. One week, I challenged all teachers to use the phrase 'One of the reasons I enjoy teaching is you is' with all of their classes. Another week I asked teachers to write short thank you messages to colleagues who had gone out of their way to help. This week I have asked all teachers to recognise kindness by using our #choosekindness merit as many times as possible to recognise the lovely things our students do day-in-day-out.

We have involved students by asking them to also complete thank you messages to staff. We have been spreading this message in assemblies as well. We have talked about how school must be a safe place for every student to be themselves and how we all play a role in enabling this. We also spoke about marginal gains and how small acts such as smiling can not only make ourselves feel better but they also increase the likelihood of someone else smiling and spreading the positive vibe (cue a Biology lesson about endorphins and mimicry and how a smile is as close to magic as we can get!)

Student voice on this message of kindness and positivity is also growing. This year we have added the 'Diversity and Inclusion' group as well as 'Mental Health and Wellbeing' committee to our Enrichment programme and they have been working with Mr Chislett on our Anti-bullying week and Dress to Express day. The national Anti-bullying week takes place in November each year but as this is when we are focussing on health as part of the Movember campaign we celebrate Anti-bullying week elsewhere in the school calendar to give it the priority it needs. This year's message is 'One Kind Word: Let kindness fuel kindness'. Both enrichment groups joined Mr Chislett in presenting information in assembly and talking about the work they do. We have used tutor time to focus on this theme. Today we complete the week with Dress to Express day which is a totally student led initiative. All students were encouraged to wear odd socks (part of the national Anti-bullying week) to celebrate that we are all different. Students in Year 7-11 could also wear a different tie to express and celebrate their uniqueness. Sixth form students could choose to wear an additional or alternative item of clothing that expresses their individuality in some way.



As parents are an important part of the school community I would like to give you the opportunity to get involved. If you would like to pass on your thanks to a member of staff or student please reply to this email and we can pass on the messages on your behalf.

Play

When was the last time you had a really good play session? I mean, when you really just played at something – maybe it was game of cards, a board game, a Sudoku session or using an app on your phone. Perhaps you have a favourite family game you played together during the half-term holiday (or at least used to before your children decided ‘I’m too old for that now’, as my son has done?)

I was somewhat amused by a recent BBC news article (www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-59950823) on the importance of playing, not as something that was just for children or for keeping older brains active in retirement, but as an activity which could give teenagers and adults the opportunity to build friendships or purely and simply for the immediate fun of it. I wasn’t amused at the concepts, but rather at the level of research taking place on something that has been so firmly entrenched within the Sheriff curriculum for so many years in the form of Enrichment.

When I look at the wide ranging Enrichment activities that have been offered over recent years, I notice how many of them focus on playing: Crystal Maze, Dungeons and Dragons, Animation Club, Lego, adult colouring, chess, cards, board games, to name but a few. Yes, there is an educational element to all of Enrichment whether it is about developing strategy or skills, but it is also about the sheer enjoyment of doing something just for fun, whether alone or in company.

Over the coming years all our students will inevitably be spending time alone or seeking new friendships, whether they are at university, in employment or are developing a new social circle. My son may well not wish to join me in a game of Monopoly or invite me to join him for a session with his latest PlayStation game, but when he is at university I think that he will, like so many of our former students, build new friendships that are oriented around shared interests, whether they are academic, sporting or through playing games.

Undoubtedly, there will also be occasions when he is feeling quite alone, perhaps on a Sunday evening in halls of residence when there are fewer activities taking place, when he can play a game or engage in a hobby that he enjoys and which provides a distraction from the pressures and, at times, isolation of university life. I do know that when my daughter returns home for holidays, she often gravitates towards playing favourite games for that unique and shared family experience which provides a certain level of reassurance, confirming that things haven’t really changed at home whilst she has been away quite as much as she may have feared.

Looking forward just a few weeks to the next holiday, all our students will have some free time during the Easter fortnight – both time alone and time shared with family members. If I was to ask you and your child after that holiday ‘when was the last time you had a really good play session’ would you both tell me that you have taken some time to play, or do you regard play as a childhood activity that is merely a ‘Trivial Pursuit’?

OFSTED

Although our Ofsted visit took place almost 2 months ago, the report was finally made available on the Ofsted website earlier this week and I have not yet had the opportunity to share and celebrate the experience with the school community.

Whilst I would not describe the Ofsted experience as enjoyable I did feel that it was rigorous and fair. The team of four inspectors really took the time to get under the skin of the school and triangulated what they observed and what all stakeholders said



about the school. In the final team meeting the lead inspector said that he would struggle to capture the school in a written report but I feel he did a wonderful job with the opening two sentences: 'This school is a truly special place. Pupils flourish here.'

The deep dives took place in English, History, MFL and PE and findings were supported by meetings with a further four Subject Leads, subject teachers and students. If you have read the First Word over the past few years you will be aware that we are serious about our school curriculum. We interpret the curriculum to encompass all that students experience and we have long held the view that this needs to be planned and sequenced carefully. We have also spent several years interleaving our Sheriff Learner qualities throughout the curriculum and more recently developed our Science of Learning programme. It was therefore a delight to hear the inspectors describe our curriculum as 'ambitious...comprehensive and thought-provoking' and that we 'carefully considered the precise knowledge that students need to know in order to be successful'.

Our teachers are passionate about what they do and are determined in their desire to support our students. The inspectors recognised that their 'use of assessment is skilful' and that they 'methodically check learning and....expertly adapt their teaching to ensure that all pupils can access the work'. This is particularly important to us, although we are selective we have a large student body and they come with a broad range of needs and we work hard to support them all.

We know that we are incredibly fortunate to work with quite exceptional young people and this was recognised in the report. One of my favourite comments is 'The passion that students have for their learning is palpable'. Whilst teenagers make mistakes (and learn from them), for their behaviour to be recognised as 'exemplary' is a real credit to them.

I am delighted that all of the work since the last inspection in 2007 has been recognised in the report, however I am most proud of the conversations that we have had since the inspection. Rather than basking in the many lovely comments the inspectors made about the school, some of which made it into the report but many that did not, the next morning we were straight into lessons learned and what do we want to improve further.

I have to finish with two comments that highlight beautifully the work of Dr Kent and how this report reflects his 23 years as Headmaster: 'there is a clear culture of mutual respect' and 'there is a strong sense of pride in belonging to this school's community'.

As we are in the exam season (both external and internal) I wish our students a half term balanced between work and rest and that they all find time for fun and laughter.

Mrs Teresa Mpofo
Headteacher