

## **STAYING AT ST MARY ABBOTS SCHOOL – THE DETAIL**

*Gillean Craig, Chair of Governors – October 2016*

### **HOW LONG SHOULD YOUR CHILD STAY AT OUR SCHOOL?**

Our aim – as teachers, staff, governors – is to work together with our families to ensure that every child receives the best possible education and develops her or his potential in every direction, within a Christian environment that is caring, supportive and community-based, emphasising the special qualities of being a church school.

Children gain the most out of the school when they are able to stay for the **full seven years possible**, from Reception Year to Class Six. They work through the full academic syllabus and take their turn in the various special focuses offered throughout the different years – we can't do everything all the time. They build up a powerful sense of belonging to their cohort (especially significant in a one-form entry school), gaining a great deal from supporting and being supported by each other along the way. They develop a sense of belonging and make friendships that last throughout secondary school and beyond.

### **There are, alas, a number of perfectly legitimate situations in which this ideal is impossible to fulfil:**

- a) 21<sup>st</sup> century working patterns - especially in central London – mean that people are forced to move away from our city, often abroad. Family circumstances, and the multi-national backgrounds that so greatly enrich our community, all make it impossible to guarantee that a child will stay with us for the full seven years.
- b) Occasionally as a child develops it becomes clear that a more specialised education than a general school like ours can offer is needed to help her grow into her full potential – an exceptional ability in a particular area of skill or ability, or the need for specialised educational support. In such cases we will seek to offer our full assistance to your finding the right school to move to before reaching year six.
- c) Very rarely, to our distress, a child finds herself seriously unhappy at our school. We have many strategies to try to change this – which is in most cases of short duration, anyway - and we ask parents to work with us to try to turn this round as quickly as possible.

**BUT WHAT WE STRONGLY OBJECT TO IS SOMETHING QUITE DIFFERENT: Parents who set off with the deliberate intent of gaining a place for a child – or sometimes successively a whole family of siblings – at our school for the first few years and then removing them to private fee-paying schools: the so-called 'state 'til eight' syndrome. This we believe to be a cynical process that damages not only the children that remain and the school but also the child herself.**

To focus on the latter point first:

all the evidence proves that staying on at St Mary Abbots by no means inhibits future educational success – exactly the opposite. We can give many examples of children who in recent years have enjoyed the full seven years at St Mary Abbots and then gone on to achieve the kind of education that many would consider to be **the highest kind of success** – e.g.: scholarship to Eton, places at the 'best' London secondary schools

(state and private), most exclusive public schools, good degrees at Oxford and Cambridge. (Please see the Alumni page). We also believe that the wide range of backgrounds, abilities and cultures experienced at a school like ours is a far better and more rounded start in life than something more exclusive and privileged. We ask our parents to consider very seriously indeed what they really think is the 'best' education for their child/ren, what values they want them to carry with them through life? Above all, as a school based on Christian principles, we remind parents that *we share responsibility for not only for the wellbeing of ourselves and those closest to us – but also (perhaps even more importantly) our neighbours' wellbeing.*

Perhaps those who plan to take their children out of school and place them elsewhere do not realise the multiple consequences. Here is a brief list:

Firstly, **to their child him/herself** - who we have seen over and over again deeply distressed at being separated from the friendships that she has built up at St Mary Abbots, the environment where she feels at home, and unable to understand why her current school is no longer good enough for her. Because most children are flexible and resilient, they will grow out of this – but we wonder why they have to suffer in the first place?

Then, as importantly, there are many ways in which this practise **damages others:**

a) The most obvious is that it **denies an education here to a child who would dearly love to be at St Mary Abbots** but has been beaten to one of the precious places by another who fits the Admissions Criteria slightly better. It is particularly upsetting for families with long and devoted commitment to Mary Abbot's church and to our community to find that someone who took the place they longed for in fact leaves the school after a few years. Of course the casual vacancy that opens up may then be offered to them – but many parents consider that once a child has settled at another school for a few years, even if it is not at all the school that they really wanted for their child, it is better for them to remain stable. So, St Mary Abbots loses a family that would have given long and sustained commitment and the place (if it is filled at all – see below) is taken by a child without that previous link.

*We want to make it very clear that **we are delighted to welcome children and their families who join our school further up the years** – they often add to the diversity and richness of our community and can be among the most popular, and well-achieving, children in the school.*

b) It is damaging to the children left behind in the class. They miss their friend and wonder why the school is no longer good enough for them. Perhaps their friendship wasn't good enough, either. Perhaps they are just second best. In a single-form entry school the cohorts are close and intimate, and it can take a long time for a newcomer to fit in and form part of the group. Staff and parents alike notice that in a form year when a significant number of children have been transferred to other schools then sometimes the educational standard, behaviour and social cohesion never quite build up to the former level.

c) There is even frequently a **financial cost to the school:** like all state schools, ours is funded according to number of children on the roll on a specific day of the year. Despite the popularity of St Mary Abbots it is often surprisingly difficult to fill casual

vacancies, and this becomes harder the higher up the school you go. By law, we can only offer a vacant place when it actually becomes vacant, and then only to one child at a time - so have to wait until that family has visited, considered, and turned down the place before offering it to the next in line. All this means that quite often the place is vacant on the relevant day, and the budget for the whole school suffers for the year ahead - in 2017 the sum is £4,500 per child. We have no appeal against this until a whole year later. Because of the proper reluctance of many parents to transfer their children between schools when secondary transfer is in prospect, our year 5 and 6 are often below the full numbers, so the whole school has to make do with a reduced budget to pay teachers and staff salaries etc, material, equipment - everything.

d) Removing children to another school is **extremely demoralising for our staff**. It sends a clear message: 'your teaching is not good enough for my child' and 'your school (to which you devote your skill and energy) is not good enough for my child'. It is difficult for dedicated teachers not to feel that they have been judged and found wanting.

### **IN CONCLUSION**

**By Law, parents have the right to choose the education that they believe will be best for their child/ren. We respect this absolutely, and have no wish whatsoever to stigmatise parents who make decisions that we might regret. We wish to encourage the whole parent body to be cohesive and mutually respecting. But taking children out of St Mary Abbots to place them in fee-paying schools before year 7 does cause serious upset, and leads us to the unavoidable challenge to parents: if St Mary Abbots cannot, ultimately, give your child the kind of education you think appropriate, then perhaps the right thing to do is to place your child in a fee-paying school from the start, and let a child who will remain committed for the whole seven years at St Mary Abbots have the place?**