

Eversholt Lower School

Notes of Parent/Community Information Evening

Date	8 th July 2021
Time	19:30
Venue	Eversholt Lower School

1. Welcome

Welcome from Tim Peacock (TP) as Chair of Governors, before handing over to Mrs Miller as Headteacher.

Mrs Miller reflected on the school's response to COVID-19, noting that laptops had been upgraded in September 2019. In anticipation of a further lockdown, staff spent time preparing lessons so they were quickly able to switch to online learning, with full lessons being taught. This meant that when children returned to school they were able to quickly pick up from where they had left off.

The response to the parent survey revealed that - 84% were very positive about the schools' provision during this difficult time. GM then further shared the pupils results – noting that there was no requirement at this time given the challenges of COVID to do so. Strong results were noted in reading, where expectations are set early on in reception. There is a small dip in writing ability due to learning having been online, however this was still in a good position and booster groups had also been set up.

Further work needs to be done in maths, as some topics were not easy to provide teacher modelling whilst remote learning so this was being picked up. All children were however ready to progress.

It was noted that year 4s had had 22 weeks out of school and had worked hard since their return with only 10 children in this cohort

ELS are proactively looking at trends with other schools. The comparator data against 2019 is not a reflection of true national average due to the circumstances of the year.

GM was pleased to share the improvements which had been made, which included photographs:

- All weather adventure trail – funded by PE funds
- Moon class year 1 – taking focused, child led learning to support transition from reception. Space had been created for focused/independent learning
- All classes had virtual father Christmas visit, with each class having a separate zoom call, followed by a joint story.
- On Fridays whole school assemblies have taken place via video links with the other classes
- A virtual pantomime had taken place through the living nativity to keep those traditions going
- Children had participated in a Christmas play which was recorded by a parent and shared with all parents
- Eversholt crib service and carols, a community based tradition which was recorded with Mrs Miller and Reverend Nuth and and shared with the village.

- Sleepovers replaced usual residentials. Y4 had a sleepover in school and had private use of the swimming pool which was thoroughly enjoyed. Y2 had their usual sleepover.
- Successful first Eversholt amble – using local environment raised £3,000. Thanks to fundraisers and local businesses for sponsorship. Ex-parent donated ice-creams at the end. Villagers reported that they enjoyed seeing the children out and about
- The school helped the church advertise their village fayre by contributing scarecrows which were distributed around the various “Ends”
- The school continued to welcome rising 4’s with a thriving group of 9 nursery children.
- New resources : cosmic yoga, building blocks for reception, 20 puddle suits so children can be outside in all weather, interactive board for the hall, wireless speaker, walkie talkies, new reading books.
- Welcome to specialist teachers – KS2 J-Sax, swimming coach, forest school,
- Delighted to grasp every opportunity!

GM handed over to TP to talk about education & the local context.

2. Education & Local Context – Tim Peacock

TP set out the background for the benefit of new parents in particular, in the context of planning for the future

3 Broad themes impacting our school :

- (1) Policy movement away from small schools (which are classified as c.150 pupils) – challenge is our school is much smaller and doesn’t feature in the Government’s planning. There are however lots of schools like ours in central beds.
- (2) Shift towards 2 tier system : Eversholt is part of a 3 tier system where pupils go from lower to middle and then to upper school. Over the years that model has shifted. The challenge for us as a lower school is where we fit in the overall education landscape. Central Beds have stated no new 3 tier schools, however no one is forcing us to change, given that we are tiny, less relevant/useful to central government.
- (3) Emergence of MATS – this is not a new concept, some large commercial entities already run 100s of schools. This is attractive to Government because it devolves responsibility away from local government to trust responsibility.

TP explained that this isn’t intended to paint a gloomy picture, but to accept the situation we are in and determine to do something about it.

Strategy

Our approach is to thrive not survive, to ensure that we continue to have a school in Eversholt for the foreseeable future. We challenge ourselves as to how we stay relevant, viable and desirable as the school of choice for local children.

How this translates into our strategy:

- (1) **Continuously improve**; broaden school offer through provision of breakfast club, after school clubs; challenge how we can do things better.

What next?

Greater wrap around care, more activities at lunchtime. Making investment in short and medium term.

Assess Primary conversion – part of strategy is to lean into primary education. We are already an Academy so we can't be forced to convert. A separate sub-committee are looking at how the school can broaden its catchment/offer etc – by considering potential space to accommodate years 5/6, as well as logistics and facilities. Essentially what would our school look like longer term if we were to move to primary.

Build fit for purpose facilities – through prudent financial management we have money we can spend which we are looking to use for meaningful projects. The school has acquired additional land to use which increases the land available by 30%

We are looking to convert the old kitchen into a music room to extend our current curriculum. Longer term we would like to consider all weather pitch/astro turf so the children are able to be outside more. Our differentiation is that children can be outside.

Longer term joining a MAT is still an option – we chose last minute not to join the Pyramid MAT but this might change over time – TP remains a trustee of the Pyramid MAT, when the time is right we will re-open conversations.

- (2) Maintain outstanding – last inspected by Ofsted in 2009. Outstanding usually means exempt from re-inspections apart from trigger events like headteacher changes. We are aware that only the top 2-3% of schools get outstanding and therefore are realistic, however our standards have only continued to increase and we are incredibly proud of what Mrs Miller and her staff have accomplished here.
- (3) Thrive not survive – we regularly consider all options from staying exactly as we are, considering our readiness to become a primary school in keeping with the Governments desire, federating with other schools, to joining a MAT or even forming our own MAT.

When considering federating with other similar local schools and observing the landscape around us, it was noted that Ridgemont, Woburn and Husborne Crawley are all maintained schools. Woburn and Husborne Crawley intend to form a Primary over 2 sites, with Fulbrook Academy as the secondary school.

Our current focus is on assessing our own readiness for primary, we would consider federating with other schools to form our own MAT, however this would generally need to be with schools with 2k+ pupils to benefit from the economies of scale. We are therefore looking to invest in facilities which will support us in a possible conversion to primary, whilst already benefitting our current children.

TP advised that the comfort he wished to convey tonight is that the national plan is on our radar and we will be ready if and when the time comes. This strategic plan will be translated into the school development plan which encompasses the breadth of thinking which is needed to go into running a school. It's then down to Mrs Miller, senior leaders and the team of Governors to make those strategic decisions.

3. Finance Report

TP then invited Mike Preen, as Chair of Finance to update parents on the school's current financial position.

MP recalled delivering a session a few years ago when as a school we were genuinely worried about running out of money. MP was therefore pleased to report that we are now in a position to start spending some money and investing in new facilities as TP set out in the strategic vision.

MP noted that he continued to explore external sources of funding, in addition to the efforts of the fundraising team as quite simply the funding we receive from Government funding is not sufficient on its own.

MP explained that ELS converted to an Academy 10 years ago when there was a strategic push from Government to do so. However Academy status is now unfortunately not such a positive thing for a small standalone school : whilst we have much more autonomy and control about where money goes, there is certainly less funding available. It is now no longer possible for schools to become a stand-alone academy but those choosing to do so must join a MAT in order to benefit from the economies of scale.

A key influencer for our funding is the number of students we have on roll – funding is provided at c£3k per pupil so if we have less pupils, we receive less funding. In addition there are specific funds available which have specific uses, for example PE funding, and MP ensures that we are able obtain and use as much as possible.

Fundraising and donations are therefore critical – and the school is hugely grateful for donations received from the Eversholt parochial charity which has donated a third of their income for educational purposes in the last 2 years.

How do we spend the funding we receive?

Funds are split between staff (teaching/non-teaching) (about 85% of core GAG funding), then learning resources, premises including bills, admin, school activities, school development, bought in professional services (e.g. HR, health and safety, auditors as well as music, PE provision) etc. Without fundraising we would reduce school activities/development.

MP reported that the financial outlook for the next 3 to 4 years is in-year deficits, i.e. spending more than our income in any given year, but with signs of an improving trend back towards in-year balanced budgets. Reserves are currently healthy but could quite quickly dwindle therefore fundraising is critical to provide additional resource and activities.

The maximum number on the roll is 75 (years R, and 1-4 all offer 15 places per year, excluding nursery places). This reached the lowest number for quite some time recently of 60. Income fluctuates accordingly because c£3k is provided per pupil, however the schools fixed costs don't change.

In the last couple of years we have returned to generally being oversubscribed in reception (3 of past 4 years). When those fuller years have 5 years of growth through the school, it is hoped that we will return towards 75 on roll. Our planned expenditure assumes an improving roll and we will continue to look at marketing/demand for places.

4. What can parents/the community do to help?

MP handed over to TP to advise what parents and the wider Eversholt community can do to support:

- Spread the word about what we do – don't be shy/coy – tell people about what we do! As a school we rely on children attending from outside the village to fill the number of available spaces.
- Continue to support the school with volunteering and fundraising – it's a huge part of how this school works. Also parents/grandparents - coming into read, going on trips etc.
- Stay engaged, this is a journey and we need your support!

5. Questions

TP invited questions, and the following was noted:

- One parent wanted to say *Thank you! The work you all do is amazing, and the stats are just incredible.*
- *After school provision – 4.30 is a barrier for some parents. Woburn have afterschool care until 5pm. Demographics are changing.* This is acknowledged and is being looked into. It was not possible to run breakfast club with bubbles in place as it would require year groups to mix, but this would all be reviewed in light of new guidance in September
- *It was agreed that looking at primary is relevant.*
- *If we were to convert to primary – what would be the timescale? We are not actively looking to do this now but in a minimum of 5 years if it's our active choice. There has been a lot of pressure with what has been happening in the other pyramid, and from a finance and LA perspective we could be pushed sooner. We also need to consider what is happening with our feeder schools – e.g. Parkfields, Harlington as we need to be clear where children who leave Eversholt would go so we wouldn't do this in isolation, but in the context of what is happening around us and in preparation for what comes. If we were to become primary we would look at single site to year 6, in contrast to Woburn who are looking at 3 sites and may have children at different sites.*

TP closed the meeting with a final thank you for coming and an invitation to all to email/call get involved.

ENDS: 8.50pm