

10th November 2015

Dear Parents & Carers,

Time has been flying by...

I realised the other day that I hadn't written to families since the end of September – the term really has flown by faster than any other I can recall. Today's newsletter will be quite lengthy as there is quite a lot to update people on – but please do persevere with it as it contains lots of information and requests.

We're filling up – this year AND next...

I cannot recall ever having to do so many tours for prospective students and their families! **Over thirty students have joined us since the start of term**, with more due in the next few weeks. From the feedback I am receiving, it seems that it is a combination of solid GCSE results and good word-of-mouth that is encouraging families to consider us for their children.

We now only have a few spaces left across Years 7 to 10, so if you have any friends that have been sitting on the fence, please encourage them to visit us sooner rather than later.

In a similar vein, **it is apparent that we have received more applications than ever before for Year 7 next September**. Whilst the official deadline has passed, I am still doing tours for prospective students – so if you have friends with children in Year 6 who were thinking of leaving it until the summer to apply to us, they may need to bring those plans forward.

Ofsted Parent View survey

It's that time of year again when I ask families to complete the Ofsted "Parent View" online survey. Whilst we always do our own surveys on Progress Evenings, this online one is a really good, quick, way of sharing your views on the school. It is anonymous, takes only a few minutes to register and complete and can be found here: <https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/login?destination=give-your-views>

As ever – **if there is any other feedback families wish to share with us, please don't hold back**. I have said many times before, the quality and quantity of feedback we get from people is better than anywhere else I am aware of – and it is one of the things that has helped us to make such good progress since we opened. If there is anything personal to your child – please approach their form tutor or Head of Year. And if it is something you feel needs to come direct to me, you all know where I am...

Planning update

As lots of you will have spotted, there was a certain element of "here we go again" a few weeks back when our planning application for the rooftop extension was effectively turned down by certain councillors on the Planning Committee. It is fair to say that we were somewhat flabbergasted by this – as were our colleagues at the Department for Education!

However, we have been here before with planning, and we have been working hard to ensure that councillors make the right choice in the end. **Our application will be back with the Planning Committee next Monday (16th) – should anyone wish to come along and watch a riveting discussion, it will take place at 6.30pm at Borough Hall.**

A few grumbles & reminders...

It wouldn't be a newsletter if I didn't have to pass on a few reminders and grumbles, would it?! However, I do need to flag up a few things as unfortunately a small number of parents and carers are causing us problems with their actions and attitude:

- **I have been disappointed at the number of holiday absence requests** I have received from families this term. Aside from it not being allowed by the Government, all parents & carers sign the Home-School agreement when sending their child to us, and so undertake to never take their child out of school during term-time. We monitor absence incredibly closely as it is **the** best indicator of how a child is going to do at school. There are

14 weeks of holiday a year for BFS students – we all need to do our best for our children by making sure that they are in school the other 38 week.

- We have had **a few incidents of people pulling up and dropping their children off outside school** – this is simply not allowed, and incredibly dangerous due to the traffic at the starts and ends of days; please do not do this (or we will need to put your child in after school detention.)
- I'd like to remind people that **where we do tell students to stay back after school for extended preps or detentions, this is non-negotiable.** We try to always set them for the same day that they are issued, in order to resolve things quickly – they will not be moved to other dates in order to be more convenient for students or families. I appreciate that this is quite a draconian approach – but it is how we have decided to do things at BFS as we believe it is in the child's best interest.

I do genuinely appreciate the ongoing support that we receive from our families, so **please take the above in the spirit in which it is intended.** We know that we are not a perfect organisation, and where we make mistakes we will apologise (sorry for the recent problems some experienced with our phone system!) However, we do believe that we are on the right track, and that a major part of our success to date is down to the incredibly high expectations we have regarding attendance and behaviour. Grumbles over!

Darker mornings and evenings...

Now that the clocks have changed, we are into the time of year where it feels like we both arrive and depart in semi-darkness. With this in mind, **please talk to your child about the extra precautions needed when making their way to-and-from school.** At this end, we will be checking that our students who bike to school are properly equipped with lights – and that they are making proper use of cycle lanes and crossings.

Sport & Performing Arts update

I am delighted to be able to report that sport and the performing arts are going from strength-to-strength here at BFS. **Mr Cox and his team** are doing a sterling job in giving as many students as possible the chance to represent the school: in the first half term alone we complete 28 fixtures in only 35 school days!

On top of this, we have been nominated for "Sporting School of the Year" at the Bedford Sports Awards, and last week we were awarded the Gold Standard by the Youth Sports Trust, in recognition of the PE and sports we do as a school. And I know that Mr Cox has plans for even more things as time goes on...

In terms of the arts-y side of things, rehearsals are well under way for the **Winter Showcase – this will be on Tuesday 15th December at The Place Theatre.** There will be two performances of this on the night, at 6pm and 7.30pm, and it should be another fantastic occasion for all concerned. Tickets will be available soon.

On the music front, **Miss Goodship & Mr Keech** are doing amazing work with both extra-curricular activities and our "Music for All" scheme. As well as teaching all Year 7, 8 and 9 students violin or guitar, **we are linking up with the local Salvation Army to teach a large group of students brass instruments as well!** I cannot emphasise enough how excited I am at all of this – and once we have our hall up on the roof, we'll have an amazing space to perform in as well.

And finally – how are we doing as a school overall?

We have recently spent some significant time as a team of Governors & senior staff considering how we are doing as a school, and what we should focus on in the short-, medium- and long-term.

As well as doing well versus schools in the town this summer, **we believe we were the best performing free school in England** (albeit there were very few who had GCSEs this year.) **There has even been a report written about our success for ministers in London,** who are keen to understand what we did to achieve this!

Our current Year 11s are a smashing bunch of students, and we know they are looking forward to next week's mock exams. We are being very cautious on our predictions for next summer's GCSEs – but even these suggest that there should be clear blue water between us and other schools.

However, **we know only too well that we can and must do even better in future.** I know we have a very long list of things we'd like to improve – I'm sure many of you have things you'd like to add to this. (See my comment above about sharing such feedback!) One of the nicest and most reassuring pieces of feedback I have had in recent times from an ex-senior Ofsted inspector, that

we are the most self-critical leadership team of any school they had ever seen, and this was one of the main reasons for our rapid improvement since opening.

This relentless desire to improve is going to be important in helping us sustain things as **the situation for schools is going to get extremely tough over the next few years** – as funding cuts nationally, and the two-tier transition locally, kick in.

(If you haven't already seen it, I would encourage people to read the council's consultation document about schools' plans to go two-tier – it makes for interesting reading and, even though we won't be changing, it will affect us as more schools become primary and feed into us, or become secondary and provide parents with more choices. Their document is here:

http://www.bedford.gov.uk/council_and_democracy/consultations/idoc.ashx?docid=640bd4f3-3056-471a-8b57-db755448fdd4&version=-1)

We know first-hand how tough it is to grow into a secondary school. **We are currently considering ways that we can expand the number of families we support** - but I'd be interested in your views on this.

We love the small secondary school model, and don't want to move away from that – but should we consider opening our own primary school? Another secondary school elsewhere in town? A sixth form? Or do we link up with existing schools in a "multi-academy trust"? What do you think? If we do anything at all, you can be sure that we will not do anything that puts the day-to-day quality of BFS at risk. I've seen too many people in the past go-for-growth and take their eye off the ball in terms of the bread-and-butter business of keeping their great school great.

All the best,

Mark Lehain.

Key dates for this term

w/c 16 th November	Year 11 GCSE Mock Exams Week
1 st December	GCSE Awards Evening – invitations going out to ex-students this week
3 rd December	Year 8 Progress Evening – 5.30pm – 8.30pm School finishes at 3.30pm
10 th December	Year 11 Progress Evening and 'Next steps event' – 5.30pm – 8.30pm School finishes at 3.30pm
15 th December	Christmas Dinner at school – NOTE CHANGE OF DATE
15 th December	Winter Showcase – The Place Theatre, 6pm & 7.30pm
16 th December	Year 7 Harry Potter trip
17 th December	Christmas Assembly at St. Paul's Church – details to follow
18 th December	End of term – school finished 3.15pm
5 th January	Start of Spring Term – 8.25am as usual
14 th January	Year 10 Progress Evening – 5.30pm – 8.30pm School finishes at 3.30pm