

Dear Parents and Carers

I am writing to you in the first of a series of letters to cover areas of the running of the school which may be of interest to you. As Headteacher I receive many communications from parents about a wide range of topics relating to school life. After conversations with colleagues and other stakeholders, and in the interests of good communication, the school is launching a 'Letter from the Head', planned initially as half-termly, which will look at a variety of these matters.

It has come to my attention that there are some concerns about the level of staffing at Forest Hill School. The leadership team take all parental issues very seriously and I felt it was important to address two common areas of concern:

- Current staff absence and the measures which the school has implemented to address this
- Staffing for next academic year and how we are working to attract high calibre professionals to work at Forest Hill School

At Forest Hill we take tremendous pride in our teaching staff, who work together as one fully supportive team committed to providing a first-class education for your child. In our team we have colleagues with many years of experience who have shown a long term commitment to the school, as well as teachers early in their careers and also newly qualified teachers. We believe this balance of experience and fresh ideas is essential for your sons to thrive academically.

Current staff issues

At the moment we have a number of colleagues who are, unfortunately, absent with long term sickness due to serious medical conditions. I cannot, of course, go into details of the precise nature of these, but I would like to reassure you that in almost all cases they are due to physical conditions and are not the result of work related stress. Some of our absent colleagues are specialists in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science which has affected certain students within these three curriculum areas. I understand that this will cause concern to parents.

Our strategies to tackle this situation are directed towards ensuring that the learning experience of affected students is maximised as far as our capacity allows.

Practical actions we have taken include:

- School senior leaders and curriculum leaders monitoring the situation closely
- Recruitment of the highest possible quality of supply colleagues to cover absence. Where possible we have sought to recruit long term supply colleagues who are specialists in the relevant subjects
- Rapid induction and support for supply teachers coming to work in the school (e.g. in managing behaviour and being brought up to speed with the school curriculum)
- Reconfiguring the teaching timetables of experienced permanent staff so that classes affected by long term absence have access to high quality specialist teaching for as much time as possible
- Ensuring that classes sitting examinations this year (Years 11 and 13) are prioritised for the allocation of specialist teaching. I have myself taken on GCSE Physics teaching to this end.

- Requiring that staffing is a regular item on senior leadership team and governors' meeting agendas
- A commitment to, where possible, prioritise classes which have been disproportionately affected by absence this year, for the allocation of experienced subject specialists in 2018-19

The welfare of our teachers is as important as it is for our students and we have a firm commitment as a school to minimise staff absence as far as possible. We have already implemented strategies to address teacher workload issues. These include a weekly early closure to give teachers extra planning time, and dedicated meeting time to allow marking and assessment of student work. We continue to work to support staff wellbeing.

Staffing for the new academic year

As stated earlier in this letter, we have an absolute commitment to recruit the highest quality teachers to work at Forest Hill School. We had a higher than normal number of staff joining the school in September 2017. This followed a very difficult year but was also due to staff moving for reasons such as promotion, retirement and relocation. I must state that the overwhelming majority of these colleagues have made an excellent start to their career at the school and have shown an unstinting commitment to supporting our improvement journey. Visitors to the school regularly comment on the positivity and professionalism of our staff.

We currently have seven vacancies to fill for the new academic year. This is less than 10% of our total staff and is reflective of what would be expected for a school of our size. In the weeks approaching half term we have interviews for all of these posts and I am confident we will recruit highly qualified and motivated colleagues. I am sure we will be fully staffed for the new academic year.

I am pleased to report that we are seeing a much stronger interest in our advertised vacancies than at this time last year. For example, our recent advertisement for an Assistant Headteacher attracted 70 applications.

As you will be aware, we are recruiting in the context of an acute teacher shortage both nationally and locally. This is estimated to be in the region of 50,000 on a national level. This situation is exacerbated in London because of the high cost of living and property prices. There are also particularly worrying national shortages in the numbers of mathematics, science and modern foreign languages teachers. Colleague Headteachers in other local secondary schools report that they are experiencing difficulties in teacher recruitment. This means that we have to compete very robustly to recruit to our vacancies.

We have implemented a range of strategies to ensure that Forest Hill is a school at which high quality colleagues wish to work:

- More national advertising and new information pack developed in conjunction with communications professionals. We've negotiated a competitive ad rate with the Times Educational Supplement – the best route to advertise teaching jobs – which has brought excellent short-lists for recent vacancies, including the Assistant Head Teacher posts described above
- Use of recruitment agencies – with closer targeting on specialist roles

- Ensuring that the core values and ethos of the school are communicated to candidates. We are proud to remain an all-ability community school with a broad and balanced curriculum, and this is a selling point in a landscape which is becoming increasingly academy driven
- Showcasing our new faculty structure. This provides a system which allows ambitious and driven professionals better career progression, and also facilitates a culture of accountability to drive improved outcomes
- Use of well-regarded initial teacher training routes, such as Teach First, to recruit highly qualified graduates into the profession and the school
- And I interview all candidates for teaching posts myself - to ensure that I am satisfied with the quality of the appointments

Strong interest in working at Forest Hill is indicative of a change in the perception of the school within the teaching profession. As we move forward after last year's difficulties, the often inaccurate and misleading picture of the school has receded and Forest Hill is once again seen as a dynamic community school with an exciting future.

You have my reassurance that we are doing all within our power to ensure that we have the best possible teachers to support our students to excel in all areas of school life.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like to discuss anything related to the contents of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Mike Sullivan
Headteacher