

Governors Report to Parents Jan 2016

Although regular termly letters to parents have been our main way of reporting back the work of the governing body in the past, we welcome the opportunity to use the new website to share our view of our roles and responsibilities and how we've enacted these over the last three years.

Our Governing Body

We are lucky to have a highly skilled and committed governing body to work alongside our talented staff team. The last three years has been an unusually demanding and challenging time in the school's history. We succeeded in reaching our aim of Ofsted Good rating in 2016 and to ensure that we achieve our aim of going beyond expectations, our Full Governing Body meets twice a term, as does our Curriculum Committee. These meetings, along with the additional committee meetings, governor visits and one to one meetings and telephone contact between the Chair and the Head Teacher provide the focus and drive for the excellence that we together seek to achieve.

Skills Audit and Governor Self-evaluation

We regularly carry out a skills audit of the governing body. We have found this to be a very valuable tool for identifying governors' skills, knowledge and experience and comparing these against those required by the school now and in the future. It assists with the recruitment, training and development of governors, helps us develop effective committees and helps guide the delegation of specific tasks to individuals. In addition to this we carry out an annual self evaluation of our performance and effectiveness using an evaluation framework based on the All-Party Parliamentary Group's "Twenty Questions for School Governing Bodies to ask themselves". These questions enable us to challenge our own practice and decide when and how improvements can be made to continually improve the governance of the school.

Our School Development Plan

Our School Development Plan, which we actively co-create with the Headteacher, has provided the focus for much of our work. It identifies the priorities for improvement and development over the course of academic year, and is closely informed by the Self-Evaluation Framework that uses data about children's progress (amongst other sources of information) to assess how we're performing as a school over time and in relation to national norms.

As governors we have needed to remain alert to any new issues arising or any recurrence of previous impediments to good or outstanding progress.

This year's plan prioritises the following areas:

- **Phonics teaching**
- **Progress in reading**
- **Progress in Maths**
- **Monitoring progress of flexi-school children**
- **Facilitating the shift from National Curriculum assessment by levels to end of year expectations model**
- **Developing and updating our approach to Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural education, British Values and the Prevent strategy, and Online Safety**
- **Behaviour for Learning**

Our previous School Development Plan included a focus on both Maths and IT which had been areas of concern in our previous Ofsted and we continue to carefully monitor that the progress in both of these areas last year is maintained and built upon.

One of our key priority areas is Phonics where our Year 1 scores were disappointing last year. All schools are periodically moderated to ensure that National Tests are delivered consistently and fairly across the country and last year our delivery of the Phonics Screening Check was moderated by a representative from the Local Authority. This representative was impressed with the positive and supportive manner in which the Check was delivered and found all testing requirements to have been fulfilled appropriately. Although we are pleased to be able to deliver National expectations appropriately without compromising our ethos, some children were distracted by the presence of the moderator, leading us to wonder whether the unexpectedly low scores were in part related to the children underperforming due to being observed by an unfamiliar and unexpected adult. However, we were sufficiently concerned to review our approach to phonics teaching and implement some changes. Our careful monitoring of the data in curriculum committee would suggest that these changes are delivering the improvements we had hoped for.

Behaviour for Learning remains a key priority for us as a governing body and we regularly make this a key part of our lesson observations when we visit the school. The rapid growth in our school has meant that we have had a very high percentage of children new to the school at the same time as working with a new staff team. We have devoted considerable time and thought to how our staff socialise all of our children into the high expectations we have for their learning whilst ensuring their enjoyment of school is enhanced. We discussed the impact of a Behaviour Management system implemented last year and weighed up its pros and cons. We noticed a significant improvement in Behaviour for Learning and this year we are exploring other techniques based on the latest evidence in education to ensure that we consolidate the progress made thus far. We are also considering the use of a Mindfulness programme which we anticipate will have benefits for Behaviour for Learning, areas such as resilience, emotional intelligence and overall well-being of our children. We believe that resilience is especially important to instil to help prepare children for the real world beyond education. This is often a challenge for small schools, so we want to ensure our children have the tools they will need after they leave Michaelchurch.

Our Use of Data

Data has become an invaluable source of information for us as a governing body and plays a key role in the triangulation of what we observe in the classroom (and what the Head and other external visitors tell us), what we see in children's books and what the data tells us about children's progress over time.

We use RaiseOnline to support us with understanding data, though always view data in the context of the very small numbers of children in each year group (cohort). This means that in a cohort of 4 children for example, 1 child represents 25% and this can sometimes skew the overall presentation. However we always look beneath the data to find out more, and where we identify issues will take action alongside the Head and staff team to implement changes.

We view it as an advantage of the breadth of view and relative independence the governing body has that we can sometimes notice issues that might not be immediately apparent to the teaching team, and are confident in our ability to challenge where needed.

Our Self-Evaluation Framework

We are conscious that our two preceding Ofsted visits have come at times of turmoil and transition for our school. In 2012 we had just come to the end of a year in which as a governing body we had spent a year planning for the retirement of our Head Teacher and reviewing up all the options for the future of the school. The process of entering into a federation had taken considerable time and work and our Ofsted visit came within the first month of our new federation being in operation with a Head teacher and Chair of Governors who had had very little time to familiarize themselves with the school. In 2014, as described in the "Recent History" section below, we had been faced with the threat of closure, the loss of most of our staff team and our Head teacher.

As a governing body, perhaps for understandable reasons, I do not believe we had our eye where it needed to be to adequately prepare for our two previous Ofsted inspection and ensuring that this does not happen again has been a key focus of our work as a governing body since our last Ofsted.

Our current Self-Evaluation framework rates our school as Good in every area and provides considerable evidence to support this judgment.

Attendance

Our attendance is currently 96.8, which is well within the acceptable range. We are aware that our location in a very rural area means that seasonal factors can play a role in school attendance. Snow, ice and flooding can be a significant impediment on occasions, and because of our mountainous location (and the fact that some of our children live up unsurfaced tracks or ungritted minor roads) it can be difficult for all of our children to attend school in extreme weather conditions. However, we continue to

emphasise the importance of good attendance to support children's learning and support the Head with this message wherever possible.

Our Flexi-schooling Offer

One area we have been particularly actively involved in monitoring is our flexi-schooling contracts. You can see a copy of our flexi-schooling policy elsewhere on this website, but in summary, this approach allows those children with a contract in place (subject to the agreement of the Headteacher) to be schooled off site on a Monday and/or Friday. This approach has been trialed successfully in other rural schools in England and can be particularly advantageous for children

- 1. who are just starting school and building up their tolerance of a school environment;**
- 2. who have a long way to travel to attend school;**
- 3. who have previously been home schooled and are looking to re-integrate into mainstream education;**
- 4. whose parents want to be more actively involved in their children's education.**

The majority of flexi-schooling children are in the Infants (Early Years and Key Stage 1) and contracts are reviewed regularly. As governors we carefully monitor the progress of flexi-schooled children to ensure that they make good or outstanding progress. We have been delighted that this has been the case for all of our flexi-schooled children, and that we already have evidence that this has been an effective way of helping home educated children back into full time education.

Safeguarding

We have also kept our safeguarding under careful review and ensure that all our staff and our safeguarding governor are appropriately trained and regularly reminded about the correct procedures to follow in the event of concerns about any of our children's safety. Our staff team take concerns about children's well-being very seriously and work closely with parents to address any issues that arise.

Although previous Ofsted inspections have not raised any concerns about our safeguarding, as a governing body we have taken steps to secure the entrance at the back of the school to ensure our children are as safe as possible when they are with us, and to enable us to appropriately direct visitors when they arrive.

Governor Training

Governors have taken advantage of a number of trainings over the last year, including new governor training and school finance updates.

We also make full use of the internet and our membership of the National Association of Small Schools to ensure our knowledge is as up to date as possible.

Working with other schools

We remain enormously grateful to the Wyche School who provided us with invaluable support during our transition to a new staff team two years ago. We drew greatly on their Ofsted rated outstanding school for inspiration in thinking about how to enact our use of the outdoors in our children's learning in the most effective way possible.

The staff have also developed links with many other local schools, for a variety of purposes, ranging from sporting activities to moderation. Recently Riverside, Garway and the Golden Valley Schools have all formed elements of this partnership.

Our head teacher attends the Golden Valley Heads meeting which brings together the four primary heads within our cluster locally with the Head at the feeder secondary school in Peterchurch.

As a governing body we continue to review and appraise options for working more closely with other schools as we are aware of the many benefits this brings.

Regular Feedback for Governors

We invite parents at least annually to feedback to the governing body about how they think we're doing, along with having an active presence at parent meetings and school events. We invite informal contact by email or phone and try to make ourselves as accessible as possible. We are embarking on a 360 degree feedback exercise for our Chair of Governors and the Chair will be undertaking individual reviews with governors about their contribution to the governing body.

Regular Governor Visits

Governors have always been actively involved with the school, as parents and as members of the community, providing us with many opportunities to observe what happens in school informally. However, over the last two years we have started to use governor visits more strategically, ensuring that we direct visits so that they relate to key priorities for us, often derived from the School Development Plan. Visits may involve a lesson observation (see above), or take the form of a book look, or involve a general appraisal of the school and how it functions (and sometimes many of these functions may be combined in one visit). We often try to include pupil conferences as part of visits to ensure that we have a clear sense of the pupils' experience of their learning and school environment. The information gained from visits is feedback to the Head teacher immediately afterwards, where appropriate discussed with the Chair, discussed in governing body meetings and recorded on a visit form. This information

helps us to triangulate both the classroom experience and the progress in books with the progress data that we review regularly.

Special Needs

At Michaelchurch we take the support of Children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities very seriously. Following the retirement of a SENCo whom we shared with a number of other schools, we decided to invest in training one of our own staff (our Infant class teacher Jennifer Brockwell) so that we could have an in house SENCo. Although she has dedicated time to fulfil her SENCo role, the opportunity to access her expertise, and the support she has been able to provide to the whole staff team and governing body to facilitate all our children thriving has been excellent.

Support, Challenge and Development for the Headteacher

Governors have striven to ensure that our new Headteacher Louise Crocker's Performance Management, Support and Continuing Professional Development fully match her needs. We have bought in the support of a school improvement partner who works with her regularly, and also benefits from the input of an adviser from the Local Authority, who has provided additional support. In addition to one to one meetings outside of formal governing body meetings, there is also considerable informal telephone and email contact between our Head and Chair of Governors, enabling the Chair to be in regular touch with progress and developments within the school.

A bit of recent history ...

We are immensely proud of the transformation that has taken place in our school since our last Ofsted inspection in 2014. At that time we had just come out of a federation with a neighbouring school following a disagreement about plans for the future of the school. Only four months earlier there had been a threatened closure of the school and we had lost two of our three full-time staff, one of our two Teaching Assistants and our Headteacher.

As governors we were faced with multiple challenges, and ensuring that we rose to these to enable the school to thrive involved unprecedented time and effort on the part of the newly formed governing body. We held the safety, well-being and progress of the children as paramount throughout and developed a clear strategic vision which we presented to the Director for Children's Wellbeing at the Herefordshire Local Authority to demonstrate our viability. This plan set out key aims in relation to the quality of our educational provision, a financial model sustainable over time and a plan to increase our numbers to ensure viability over the long-term.

Our first step was to ensure we recruited high quality staff to enable us to deliver on this vision and to take full advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to recruit an

almost completely new staff team, according to our vision, ethos and careful auditing of required skills. We were delighted to appoint our Headteacher, Louise Crocker who moved to our school from an outstanding school in Hampshire. She had an excellent grasp of how to ensure all our children realise their full potential and overcome any obstacles to their learning, and we loved her ambition to work towards making our school Outstanding. Three months later when we were recruiting a Deputy Head, we appointed her husband, Gary Crocker from a very strong pool of applicants. Gary brought some key skills we wanted to develop on our staff team (such as Maths and IT), was an inspirational story teller and had a passion for our ethos of using the outdoors as a core part of learning. Although we were a little wary at first about how a husband and wife leadership team could work for the school, we have been impressed by the commitment and excellent working relationship that makes their leadership of the school so effective. As a governing body we have put in place a range of measures to ensure that any possible issues arising from a husband and wife leadership team are appropriately addressed. We follow the Local Authority's Close and Personal Relationships Policy; we ensure that the head teacher is not involved in any decisions relating to the Deputy Head's pay awards; and as the Chair of Governors, I make regular contact with the staff to give them the opportunity to raise any issues they wish to.

In the same year the requirement for all Infant (Key Stage One) children to be provided with hot meals was introduced and we worked alongside a parent to secure high quality and affordable hot lunches for our children. We are very proud of our relationship with Local Restaurateur, Sarah Hardman, who runs Food for Thought in Peterchurch and very kindly provides delicious, nutritious and locally-sourced meals for our children to eat.

We remodeled our staffing establishment to ensure we could remain sustainable in the long-term, and together with a highly effective marketing campaign (led by a governor and enacted jointly by governors, staff and parents) we saw our numbers double in a year, meaning that our finances are on a secure footing. Governors played a key role in the development of a three class structure and along with the Head Teacher, engaged in a careful consultation exercise with parents about the best way of enacting this.

Moving forward with thanks ...

We are extremely fortunate to have a highly supportive parent body who help in myriad ways with after school clubs, events, volunteering during the school day and helping with work on the school site. Our recent work on the school vegetable garden which has formed the basis for the grow, cook and eat club is testament to the resourcefulness of everyone involved in the school and as a governing body we feel fortunate that the children benefit from such high levels of support.

Above all we are enormously grateful to our staff team who go above and beyond on a daily basis to ensure the best for our children. They are a joy to work with and we appreciate their commitment very much.

We are constantly mindful that the provision of high quality education in a setting in which children love their learning and feel happy and secure are our greatest strength, and the determination to make our school a success for the children who attend both now and in the future and for our wider community is part of what drives all our hard work as governors.

I am happy to discuss any aspect of this report and welcome any enquiries through the school secretary, Cheryl Hall on 01981 510208 or admin@michaelchurch-esley.hereford.sch.uk.

Benna Waites - Chair of Governors

Posted January 2016