

SCHOOL REPORT

SPRING
TERM
2021

2020 IN REVIEW

*How Covid-19
changed education
forever*

Interview
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MERCURIO

PUPIL POWER

*How schools are encouraging
students to speak up on world issues*





Sixth formers at Felsted School

Life changer

School Report speaks to Felsted headmaster Chris Townsend about an award-winning end to a very different year

Words: MARK KEBBLE

Congratulations on being shortlisted for Boarding School of the Year at the TES Awards. What does such recognition mean to you?

We were delighted to be shortlisted for the second time. I feel that it is recognition for the hard work that the boarding teams put in, but it also recognises the innovative approach to boarding that we have at Felsted. Boarding is changing rapidly at the moment, and it is important to keep looking for ways to improve the experience for pupils and communication with parents.

What boarding provisions at Felsted School are you particularly proud of?

In the last year, I have been really proud with how we have been able to respond to the Covid pandemic. Back in March and April, we took care of students who could not get home, then in June and July, we trialled a return to boarding for some students. This term, we have operated at full capacity throughout, including supporting overseas students who have (in some cases) been staying with us since mid August.

If we happened upon one of the

boarding houses, what kind of atmosphere would we encounter?

Boarding is about creating a family atmosphere and ethos within the house, and trying to ensure that each person in the house has a positive impact on those around them. The houses can be quite noisy at times, but hopefully full of the sound of laughter!

How did you prepare for the first lockdown?

We had been anticipating that there would be some form of lockdown since the end of half

TOM SOFER

term, when the virus first really hit Europe, and had thought through various scenarios, including helping teachers with remote teaching skills. What I had not anticipated was the length of the lockdown, and the immediate cancellation of exams.

How did you look after pupils who remained at the school during lockdown?

We ran one boarding house during the lockdown, and made sure that the pupils were given plenty of exercise, help with wellbeing and mindfulness, and that they were encouraged to do something purposeful – for some this was continuing with school work, for others it was doing some online courses to help them prepare for life post school.

As the year has progressed what kind of things have been taking place at the school?

The end of the summer term saw the gradual return of some students on site, which was helpful for our planning for September, and also helped to grow confidence in the community that we could do this. From mid-August we had pupils back in boarding, so that they could undergo their isolation, and then since September, we have been open for all year groups, boarding and day, with as close to a full programme as possible.

Have you also been involved with the local community during these difficult times?

Very much so. At the start of the lockdown, we opened our boarding for trainee paramedics who were preparing to enter the



The schools offers an all through education

Ambulance Service, and needed somewhere to stay. We have also provided food parcels locally, and at half term offered our services to support Marcus Rashford's 'Free School Meals' drive. The school has links with a Church in Newham, and we have been supporting their work during this time, as well as looking after the residents of the Alms Houses in the village. It has also been great to see many of the pupils take the initiative themselves, and take on projects to raise funds for charities that mean a great deal to them personally.

How has the start of the current school year gone so far?

I think that it is fair to say that it has gone much better than I thought it might so far, but I also recognise that we are expending huge amounts of energy, for pupils, staff and parents, in order to make this happen, and we have to constantly think about ways to reduce pressure. Having said that, it is definitely the right thing for schools to be open.

At the time of writing, we are back in lockdown nationally so what's happening at the school?

It is a very different lockdown from that back in the spring, when the school (and village) were practically deserted! School is carrying on, so we have over 1,000 pupils in every day. We are also fortunate that we can continue with sports, drama, music, and other activities, to support their learning. It must

be slightly strange looking from the outside to see so much happening, but of course, this is within constraints of hand washing, temperature checks, one way systems, health declarations, seating plans, social distancing, and much more besides!

Once we have put this year behind us, what things will stick out for you when you look back?

The big thing for me from the lockdown was that we constantly undervalue the importance of social education in schools. The academic and co-curricular aspects of learning are recognised widely, but the importance of being together, developing friendships, falling out and getting back together, learning how to interact positively; all of these should be central to the experience of every child going through school. A second thing is that there was a joy at being back in September, and we have to build on that.

Third, the ability to respond to change is remarkable. We closed on Friday, and were running a fully online school by Monday, which is a remarkable achievement by all of our teachers. Finally, never think that a school is all just about teachers and pupils, because the teams that support the operation of the school have all had to dig really deep over the last few months, and yet there has not been a single complaint about doing that bit extra to make the school as safe as possible, to feed the students, and to keep us up and running. ■



TOM SOFER

A biology class at the senior school