

From the Headmaster
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Friday 28 January 2022

Dear Everyone,

The whirligig of school assessment, selection, offers and acceptances continues to spin and with it the annual crescendo of anxieties exacerbated by the uncertainty. Our professional lives are governed by a myth that we have a great deal of control, so the cognitive dissonance can become unbearable.

The spinning has a few weeks left, with I1+ schools declaring in February, and other entry points making their way through the calendar over this term and next.

As ever, a lot of heat and not much light. I am heartened that, overall, most schools are taking a more humane approach, and parents tell us that we get that about right, too.

In other news, one school sat its prospective children through multiple written exams of some length in serried rows in a hall, and some of them cried. Well, you would if you were only six. What's that about? As one former teacher told me who is now in the washing machine of school choice, some people she meets are making decisions on schools based on narrow criteria: convenience, brand and smooth access to the next stage. What about the experience of children in the meantime, I asked? Who cares, she said, it's about the end goal. And that is?

What do we think we know?

- In conversations with admissions directors and Heads, while competition appears to be high, schools are still keen to secure children on to their books for September. There is the capacity to meet demand in a general sense, and this needs to be looked at from the position that all schools in London do well by their children, including many of the maintained schools.
- How selection works in the independent sector is largely a matter for each school to settle against their own criteria, and most know that they are also competing head on with other schools.
- The Head's reference makes a difference in informing those decisions, but not always. And intervention from the Head on near misses or senior school decisions that just look wrong can be effective, but not always.
- I3+ is alive and kicking, and even those schools with no formal I3+ entry are always keen to stay in touch with us. In short, while sticking around has certain nail-biting features, the benefits can be very significant.
- Weekly boarding is gaining more interest as more boarding schools look at creating more flexible options to attract the London crowd, with its attraction of more green space and broader opportunities in sport and the arts in particular.
- Heavy tutoring tends to be found out, and doesn't help anyone in the end, even though it looks like it might. It is a serious mental health issue in the making, and we have to think: when does it stop?

- Increasing numbers of schools are beginning to distrust NVR and VR scores because of their mutability since the advent of adaptive learning and testing platforms, which were in any case designed to undermine tutoring.
- Some schools are beginning to create assessments that aim to ameliorate tutoring. One example is a paper we've seen that sets out a business problem, and assesses English, Maths, reasoning, creative thinking, ability to see patterns in data etc. Can we teach to that test? Yes, we carry on encouraging children to think for themselves.
- Senior schools are struggling to manage the numbers of applications to schools, a phenomenon of children being registered for multiple schools on a spread betting model.
- Sometimes it feels like this:
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRuS3dxKK9U>

'Twas ever thus, although that doesn't make it right, and those who have been here more than once, know that all things come right in the end. And we are also all part of the solution, too. The matter of schools, and what the landscape for education looks like, is the subject of a new book, *About Our Schools*. Researched and written by former Schools Commissioner Sir Tim Brighouse and former Director of Curriculum at Qualification and Curriculum Authority, Mick Waters, it sets out to describe how British schools have come to be what they are now. Its focus is on the maintained sector, with scant discussion about independent education, although the commentary about independence is pithy. Part of the work in compiling this book was a detailed analysis of numerous Ministers of State for Education over the last few decades, including remarkably candid interviews with them, and makes compelling reading.

Two things strike me about the findings. The first is the muddle that the education sector is now in, with no coherent sense of schooling in the round, made more acute by austerity measures, which is made even more complex since corporate interest and private equity entered the fray, and the second is the relentless pursuit of targets. Both have a serious bearing on the independent sector.

Forever the optimist, I am encouraged by a number of meetings I have had since the beginning of the Spring term, and all pointing in a similar direction: assuming education has a significant role to play in forming a better future for all, it also starts with the question, what is in the best interests of children?

Our school, and I should say, your school, plays a significant role in a much bigger community. As one former parent said to me this week, SPCS is a jewel, an extraordinary gift, a place where children can think about and test ideas of consequence. This isn't mere sophistry, what we do here makes a difference to the lives of so many other people through the actions of your children as the adults they are becoming. There is a huge burden of responsibility in that, and a reason also to be hopeful. This is a happy place where children thrive on their own terms.

A meeting with one of the great 12 livery companies shifted from a rather mundane discussion about funding small inconsequential projects, to a more expansive collegiate idea of partnerships. This discussion links to two other separate discussions I had with senior leaders in strategic roles educating children within the City of London, both along similar lines of how we can collaborate. How do we start to look at London as a community that can come together, rather than be in constant competition? A fourth meeting with parents who, tired of the race for exclusivity and facilities, want a different world for children, and not just their own.

And that means making what we do porous and connected and about creating access to opportunity, ideas and horizons. Because if we can be part of that, then everyone wins.

Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza, gave the annual education lecture to the Haberdashers' Livery Company last night. In it, she presented the findings of the largest ever survey of children's views. Among the findings are that children are much happier than perhaps we thought, yet many also find exams present a particular anxiety because they are now such high-stakes affairs. The survey can be found here:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-answer/>

At the lecture I met Carol Lynch, CEO of the Construction Youth Trust, and we talked about other routes into industry, and in particular via apprenticeships. University and the so-called knowledge economy is not the only way to make a living.

<https://www.constructionyouth.org.uk/about-us/about-trust/staff>

In my discussions with Heads of schools, there is a genuine interest in making a difference. One Head told me this week that the roles in their school that pupils most want to lead are such things as Eco Soc, LGBTQ+ Soc, Amnesty Soc: not much interest in being the big 'I am'. In Oxfordshire, Abingdon School is part of a state-independent partnership called OX 14 Learning Partnership where the students set the agenda of what their community needs. I will watch this with interest. Our children want to change the world. And we can help them.

Here's to the future.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0NVb25pIoU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKS1aj27I8Q>

Have a great weekend.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lina Lante-Evans". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined.