

Leicester Grammar School Trust

Head

Since April 2019, John Watson, previously head of Bablake School in Coventry. He was hugely respected by Bablake parents and pupils, not least because of an abseil down the school tower. Has been head of department at Sevenoaks and Millfield and deputy head at Trinity School, Croydon. Degree from Oxford in classics and modern languages, PGCE from Exeter and advanced certificate in educational management from Leicester. Quite a gentle character but don't be fooled as his softly softly approach gets results. 'He has changed the nature of the school,' reckoned one parent – 'any toxic behaviour is disappearing.'

Moved to Leicester Grammar to be principal of whole trust which incorporates three schools: LGS, Leicester Grammar Junior and LGS Stoneygate, a non-selective school (for 4-16) just up the road. 'It's refreshing to have this strategic role whilst also getting to know the children in my own school.' Quickly changed his title from CEO to principal and is taking the school back to its education roots rather than being a business ie making it more personal. Parents like this – 'He's brilliant, he's more engaging and takes a personal interest in the children, something we did not always feel his predecessor did.' Parents remarked that pupils have noticed this too – 'They feel they have a voice now.'

LGS has always been an unashamedly academic school. But this head is placing greater emphasis on wellbeing, empathy and the more rounded individual. Don't worry, academic results are not being disregarded. 'But we are warming the place up a bit. More focus is being given to how we learn. Good grades are not the only important thing in education. Being successful is about being empathetic, creative, happy and self-aware. Interpersonal skills are vital.' Parents completely on board with this, as are we. 'Results aren't everything' said more than one parent. 'The children are better prepared for life now.' 'I like his approach, he's good for the school.' 'There has been a fundamental shift in culture,' said one delighted parent. An enlightened head.

Entrance

Unashamedly selective. Entry at year 7 based on an entrance exam covering maths, English and reasoning. Some candidates interviewed. Almost half come from Leicester Grammar Junior School, on same site. All sit a transfer or entrance exam. Another 20 or so come from the 'prep' class – a year 6 group taught within the senior school. These children come from local primaries (an old Leicestershire tradition) and gain automatic entry to the senior school as they have already sat an entrance exam. The remaining children mainly come from surrounding state primaries, mostly from the south of the city and county. Some travel from out of county such as Northamptonshire and Rutland.

Some 20 or so join the sixth form each year, mainly from state comprehensives within the city. Very occasionally one will come from nearby boarding schools. Entry requires minimum three 7s at GCSE in chosen A level subject and three 6s. All external candidates are interviewed.

Exit

Up to 20 per cent leave after GCSEs, mostly to local sixth form colleges. Vast majority of sixth formers to Russell Group. Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham, Bristol, Leicester, Newcastle, Exeter and UCL currently popular. Eight to Oxbridge in 2021. Around 20 per cent each year study medicine or biomedical courses (16 medics in 2021). Economics and finance/accountancy also popular. Gap years becoming more common. Lots of praise for support with university choices and application. 'The lunchtime sessions were a big, big plus in my eyes and an enormous help for my child and for me as a parent.'

Latest Results

In 2021, 83 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 74 per cent A*/A at A level (91 per cent A*-B s). In 2019 (the last year when exams took place), 76 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 51 per cent A*/A at A level (82 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and Learning

This lot are high achievers. Most take 10 or more GCSEs. At least two separate sciences are compulsory - most do all three - as is one language. French, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin or Greek are the choices, with 17 per cent of year 10 and 11 opting to do two modern languages. DT well supported, with two Greenpower cars built and raced every year at Goodwood. Our guides made sure we took note of the one on display - clearly a great source of pride and rightly so. Twenty six subjects offered in sixth form, mainly traditional and academic although head has introduced business and psychology which helps retain numbers and broadens spectrum - both well received, particularly psychology. Maths, further maths and the sciences are popular but MFL and humanities hold their own, albeit at much lower numbers.

'The children are stretched but not to breaking point,' said one parent, although another wasn't quite so sure: 'At times I would like to see the foot slightly less on the accelerator.' Teaching is praised, as is the support, though one parent said she worried 'slightly that the child in the middle, neither flying or struggling, might get overlooked.' But not all agreed: 'My second child is in the bottom third of the year and is treated no differently than my first who is in the top third. Both equally encouraged and supported.' Some staff are old pupils.

In the lessons we observed bright, engaged pupils were very keen to join in. Year 9 enjoying food tech. Small A level group of art students quietly immersed and science classes conducting experiments. Lots of arm raising and enthusiasm in the lower years. Harmony and enthusiasm all round. Lovely to see piles of musical instruments outside classroom doors, ditto sports equipment. The detritus of school life in all its messy splendour. Sixth form classes varied from one-on-one in German to three studying politics; more in economics and labs. We were pleased to see that the greenhouse just outside one of the labs used for seedlings and cuttings during biology experiments is still standing following the pandemic. For such an academic school there's a very relaxed, happy feel to the place.

Parents happy with lockdown teaching, particularly the second one where school really got into gear. Full timetable adhered to and pupils slotted straight back in academically upon return to school. 'It was like they'd never been away,' said one parent.

Learning Support and SEN

SEND status for 118 children ranging from low demand with extra help offered where needed. 'My child is dyslexic and was given extra English lessons rather than studying for a second language', said a parent. 'It was very well managed with no fuss and he achieved an A and A* in his GCSEs, which shocked and delighted us.' Ten pupils have an EAL requirement.

The Arts and Extracurricular

Excellent music and art, particularly in the lower years. 'I specifically chose the school because of their strong music department,' said one mother. It's compulsory to be in some sort of band or group if you play a musical instrument. No wonder there are 28 bands, orchestras, choirs and groups in total. All rehearse weekly. Different age groups play together with similar musical ability, hence friendships forged across year groups. 'Delighted to see boys in the choirs,' said another mother. We enjoyed hearing some of the practice sessions on our tour. Lots of opportunities to perform with monthly, termly and annual events. Also a music tour. House singing and karaoke hotly contested, as is house drama. Drama productions for whole school and lower years. Oliver was the latest production.

Lots of artwork on display, particularly in the art wing, and it's good. Some of the teachers successfully sell their own work, other work by local artists brought in and displayed. A pity interest drops off in the sixth form, but on the upside those that carry on get very small tutor groups.

Sport

Sport becoming more of a focus and gaining momentum particularly with the appointment of a new director of sport. Ex-internationals now on the staff and superb facilities on offer. Rugby pitches, Astro turfs and netball hoops galore. Plus lovely airy swimming pool, huge gym and a dance studio with mirrored walls. Oh, the joys of being on a purpose-built site with lots of space - over 75 acres. For boys, has been a rugby school but hockey gaining momentum, now the main sport in the second term. Many pupils representing the county, with others playing in local academies locally and nationally. Lots of tours with over 50 teams taking part across the board. Mixed views from parents. Probably quite typically, those with sporty kids think there is 'opportunity for all,' while the parents with the keen but not so able reporting that 'sport just isn't there and is unstructured.' School says it's addressing any imbalance. Pupils showing us around said, 'there were lots of teams and practices.'

Ethos and Heritage

Founded in 1981 and originally located on the old grammar school site in the city centre. It opened with 97 pupils but no sixth form. Ten years later it had 500 and a sixth form. A junior school opened in the early 90s on a separate site. Now both are together at Great Glen. Stoneygate School (now LGS Stoneygate), just up the road, has also been incorporated into the Trust offering nonselective education from 4-16. Long driveway conceals the school from the road. Large signs and flying flags announce its presence. All buildings are new but can't be described as architecturally appealing in our view. Functional rather than aesthetic but since our last visit it has become more 'bedded in' with trees reaching maturity and more colour in the gardens. It feels like a mixture of a hospital and an airport when you drive in. All slightly soulless although inside the wide spacious corridors have come into their own in the last few years with more colour and seating for pupils (provided at their request). The first thing you see when you walk through the sliding front doors is the large library. The rest of the school is organised simply and effectively with colour coding so pupils know which department they are in (this helps as it all does look similar). All very high tech.

Pastoral Care, Inclusivity and Discipline

'It's a kind school,' said a parent. 'The staff keep a close eye on the pupils and seem to know if something is wrong,' voiced another. Pastoral care and inclusivity high on the head's radar and becoming even more so. Sixth form pupils can take a counselling course over eight weeks - over 40 of them did so last year. They then use these skills for mentoring the younger years. Counsellor, nurses and wellbeing manager also available, and there is an anonymous portal that's well used by pupils.

Children not expected to conform. 'I chose the school because of its reputation academically obviously, but they accept the individual - one size doesn't fit all,' said one parent. School very

accepting of the quirky, geeky and nerdy. Eccentrics more than tolerated. These pupils have a voice and will not tolerate 'bad behaviour.' Toxic masculinity nipped in the bud pretty smartly, as is any religious bias. 'Sexual harassment, or perception of it taken very seriously,' said one parent. 'The pupils now feel they have a voice and feel able to call out bad behaviour and know that they will be listened to and that action will be taken.'

Some parents said they felt rather isolated from the school, physically rather than emotionally. The location, as well as the vast site with its one-way system and well planned traffic control, doesn't encourage stopping for a chat. 'There is no school gate culture,' said one. But a thriving PTA exists so parents can get involved if they choose to. Pupils seem to go home straight from school rather than socialise but strong friendships and bonds exist - attested to by all parents and obvious to see on our visit. There is a coffee shop on site apparently built at the request of the year 11s who, at the time, were very miffed to be moving out of the town centre – but only staff, visitors and sixth formers are permitted to use it during school hours.

Pupils and Parents

Pupils come from a wide area but mainly the city and environs. They reflect the demographic of Leicestershire, with over 40 per cent from Asian backgrounds. A 56:44 split of boys to girls. Parents forward-thinking, not bothered by tradition and mainly from professional backgrounds. High connection to the hospitals and university in the city. 'We chose it because of its reputation, it's nearby and all three of our children could go there,' said one. 'We did not want Saturday schooling,' reported another. Many are first time buyers of education and, according to school, most have 'high aspirations for themselves and their children.' The children we met were a friendly welcoming bunch - engaging, open and more than happy to chat. 'Easy to get in touch with the school and emails answered promptly,' said a parent.

Money Matters

Discount offered for more than one child, five per cent for two, 7.5 per cent for three and 10 per cent for four. Means-tested bursaries available as well as academic, sporting, music and art scholarships.

The Last Word

The new kid on the block is now well established and made its mark. Has more of a feel of a state city grammar than a private school. But forward-thinking parents who aren't interested in tradition, status and history are flocking to it.