

GIRLS' SCHOOL MERGER

Questions & Answers

Issue 2 – November 2009

How will you communicate with us and how can we communicate with you?

1. How will you be communicating with us?

When we have the answers to questions, and a clear direction of where the new school will be located, we will be sharing the news with parents through a variety of sources including emails and letters via the school, updating the school and Charity websites, issuing new sets of FAQs and holding another information session on 7th January and then again on 21st April.

In addition we are keen to hear parents' views and are happy to receive questions and ideas. Please email them to the Charity's Communication Manager, who will forward them onto the Project Steering Group (PSG) on your behalf. Early next term we also plan to send questionnaires to parents, pupils and staff to gain their views on various aspects of the merger. In addition we have set up a Stakeholder Reference Group, consisting of members of staff, parents, pupils, ex-pupils and Charity staff, and this group's objective is to review and advise on decisions made by the PSG, to advise how best we can communicate to key stakeholder groups and to advise on and participate in the stakeholder consultation process.

2. How can parents communicate with Trustees and the Project Steering Group?

Parents are welcome to email their comments and questions to Suzanne Sharp, the Charity's Communication Manager, at ssharp@harpur-trust.org.uk and all communication will be collated and shared with members of the Project Steering Group (PSG). Additionally queries about your daughter's individual circumstances can be raised with the Heads of both schools.

Parents will receive an acknowledgement/response to their emails within four working days of receipt although in some cases a detailed response to questions may not be possible if the particular subject area has not yet been agreed by the PSG.

Questions will be included (anonymously) in future editions of the Question and Answer booklets that will be published on both the Charity and School's websites.

3. What if I want to comment anonymously?

Either send an email, hiding your email address, to ssharp@harpur-trust.co.uk or write to Suzanne Sharp, Communication Manager at The Bedford Charity, Princeton Court, Pilgrim Centre, Brickhill Drive, Bedford MK41 7PZ. Alternatively send a fax to 01234 369505

How can parents and pupils get involved?

4. At the Information Evenings it was mentioned that there is going to be a student forum established of 12 girls from each school. How you will determine who will be on the forum?

Twelve girls from each school, ranging from Years 3 to 13, were selected from the school councils and/or recommended by teaching staff. During the first student forum girls discussed ideas for the new school name, uniform and a host of potential activities the two schools could engage in jointly over the coming months. The output from this session will be discussed and developed through the school councils and tutors groups and has also been shared with staff, the PSG and the Stakeholder Reference Group.

5. How much influence will parents have in the design of the new uniform and the school name?

Parents, pupils and staff will have an opportunity to vote for their preferred school name in early November and the voting results will be presented to the Trustees. Voting details will be sent out week commencing 2nd November.

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Once we have refined the options for the new school uniform we will share the ideas with those parents that sit on the Stakeholder Reference Group – who will then be requested to gain feedback from the stakeholder groups they represent.

When will the schools merge?

6. Is there a “no move before” date?

At present we do not have a confirmed ‘moving’ date. However, Trustees appreciate that parents, pupils and staff need to know when and where the new school will be located as soon as possible. They therefore envisage being in a position to announce the location for the merged school by the end of the autumn term and the transition plan in detail by the end of the spring term 2010.

What will the curriculum be at the new school?

7. We want a school that is not diminishing. Therefore will the merged school broaden its curriculum and offer the same as the boys’ school?

The Education and HR Working Group are currently discussing the curriculum offer for the new school. As part of the process we are taking advice from independent educational experts, reviewing the current curriculum offered at both of our girls’ schools and also what is offered at other independent schools. Trustees envisage being in a position to announce the new curriculum plans early in the spring term.

Who is paying for the merger and how will it affect bursaries?

8. Who pays for the costs of the merger and all the consultants’ costs?

The Bedford Charity is paying for the cost of the merger out of its own funds and, eventually, through the sale of the redundant site. Therefore the cost of the merger should not have an adverse effect on future school fees.

9. It was said at the Information Evening that all the costs of the merger will be met by the Trust and that parents would not be expected to pay any aspect of the merger. Can you therefore please advise whether parents will be expected to pay for a completely new set of uniform when the new school starts?

Trustees are very mindful of the cost of school uniform and will take a pragmatic approach to its introduction. Trustees intend to explore various options of how and when to introduce the new uniform and will carefully review its cost and who will be expected to pay for it and will consult with parents before making a final decision. Nevertheless, the new uniform will be a potent symbol of the new school and all pupils will be expected to wear it once the schools have merged.

10. Is the Charity’s sponsorship of the Bedford Academy project draining funds from the schools or Charity?

No. The Charity’s decision to co-sponsor the Bedford Academy has no impact on the schools’ funds and the money we have committed to this venture will be taken from the Charity’s Community Grants Major Projects fund. This is funded from endowment income and has no bearing on school fees.

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- 11. Will there be a cap on operational spending on the site that is being run down (i.e. the one not chosen)?**

No. We are committed to maintaining the quality of education for the existing girls and so capping operational spending at the site that will eventually close is not part of our plan. The Charity will plan to pick up all short term merger costs either via its reserves fund or sale proceeds.

- 12. Will the merger be able to make up for loss of bursaries?**

We have not reduced the number of bursaries over recent years. It is simply that the schools themselves now fund the bursary provision rather than them being funded from the Charity's endowment income. In the future we hope to be able to increase the bursary provision. We currently fund at least 3.5% (in relation to gross fee income) and Trustees' medium term plan is to increase this to 5.5% of gross fee income p.a.

How large will the new school be and will the site have sufficient capacity?

- 13. What is the optimum size for the new school and is this the final figure?**

It is our intention to provide 1,100 places +/- 100. This decision is based on several factors, including our assessment of the available research, and our own experience of running similar schools, which indicates that this is an optimum size. It will allow us to deliver a diverse and first class curriculum as well as the personal touch that BHSG and DAHS currently offers. It is also the optimum number of girls we can educate on either one of the current sites (we have educated over 1,000 girls on both sites in the past) and will enable the Charity to balance its overall provision for girls and boys.

- 14. If Trustees are confident that the new school could be on either of the current sites why are they considering a third site?**

Trustees want to ensure that they locate the new school on a site that provides it with the right mix of facilities that will help its staff deliver a first class education. It is therefore essential to explore all possible options for the school's new location, including the option of building a new school on a new site. However building a new school would cost £25 - £30million and it is unlikely that the sale of our current sites would realize that amount of money.

- 15. What happens if the property investigations conclude that the sites cannot take 1,100 girls?**

The site analysis has confirmed that either site would require some element of refurbishment and new build to accommodate all the girls in the merged school. The choice of site will be determined by a number of factors such as most suitable existing buildings, accessibility, planning constraints, running costs, etc.

- 16. What happens if the merged school finds itself with demand in excess of 1,200?**

Should we find ourselves in this fortunate position, we will introduce a waiting list rather than building additional capacity, as it is the Trustees' firm opinion that a school of more than 1,200 pupils may be considered too large and might not enable us to offer the quality of education expected from a Harpur Trust school.

- 17. Have Trustees consider the possibility that the number of applications to the school may reduce dramatically if parents decide to remove their girls from the school because of the uncertainty?**

The Trustees have recognised that risk and are taking action to mitigate it by making announcements and reducing uncertainty as quickly as possible.

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18. **What will be the position if we do not lose a further 100 girls per year leading up to the merger? Will the decision change and would it not have been worthwhile to recruit harder for the two schools?**

We know from the size of the upper school year groups that will leave and the current recruiting figures that, particularly in the current economic conditions, there is likely to be a reduction in pupil numbers. The schools are already making significant efforts to recruit more pupils and have been doing so for several years; more effective recruitment will help but it is not a complete answer to the problem.

19. **Why will numbers not continue to decrease following the merger?**

It is impossible to accurately predict what will happen to numbers following the merger. However Trustees and the Heads believe that if parents and pupils can see that the school is offering a first class education for girls, with an even wider curriculum and extra-curricular offer, and if fee increases can be kept reasonably low, then they believe that the demand will still be there.

20. **It has been said that the children present at both schools were 'guaranteed' a place as expected numbers of the combined schools are anticipated to go down to the 1,100 mark. However, if the numbers are not as low as predicted there is a risk that when a girl in Year 4, for example, sits her exams to get into the senior school and if they need to limit senior school numbers, the senior school may have to start being more selective, and if she is in the lower end of the class academically she may not be able to progress to the senior school.**

The girls do not sit exams to move into the senior school of either school, and we do not envisage that changing. We can currently accommodate all the projected year group sizes, and will adjust the number of forms accordingly, if required.

21. **What is the optimum GSA size for 7-18 size school?**

From a GSA point of view the new school would be above average size. However there are GSA schools that are bigger than 1,100 and they are very successful schools.

22. **We are saying that there is a decline in pupil numbers but the Independent Schools Council (ISC) says otherwise. Can you please clarify the situation and qualify the numbers?**

The numbers stated at the Information Evening are not projections – they are facts. There has been a 25% decrease in the numbers of girls at the two schools from 1990 to 2009. The ISC headlines are that pupil numbers continue to rise, but the detail of the 2009 report states that “pupil numbers were broadly similar to 2008 on a like for like basis, totalling 508,678 in 2009 compared with 508,781 the year before.” The Howarth Clark Whitehill Survey (the Charity's auditors) also reported static numbers, but that there were regional variations. However these are overall numbers across the independent sector and the number of girls educated in single sex schools has declined significantly in the last 20 years as more boys' schools have chosen to admit girls.

23. **What impact did Bedford Modern School's decision to go co-ed have on the girls' schools numbers?**

It is true that some of the girls attending BMS would probably have attended BHSG or DAHS if BMS had not been an option, but this would not have significantly affected the rate of decline in the two girls' schools over the 20 year period before BMS became a co-ed school.

24. **How many girls are at Bedford Modern School at the moment and how many of those have come from DAHS and BHSG this year?**

There are 250 girls enrolled at BMS for the 2009/10 academic year. Of the 78 new girls who have joined BMS this year, 12 came from BHSG and six from DAHS.

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Will boarding be provided at the new school?

25. What proportion of the 1,100 school size is expected to be boarders?

Trustees are still reviewing the future of boarding and have not yet reached a decision.

26. Why not increase the level of boarding as it's so profitable?

Trustees are still reviewing the future of boarding and have not yet reached a decision.

27. The 6th form boarders who join BHSG mainly take Maths as an A Level subject and should the boarding facility be ceased, it would have a fairly catastrophic effect on the Maths Department. How would this issue be addressed?

The numbers taking Maths and Further Maths across both schools is very healthy, and is not dependent on the boarding community.

How will my daughter's education be protected during the merger process?

28. Will the education of my daughter in Years 10, 11 or 12 be affected?

We are determined to minimise the impact on the girls' education and hope to be in a position to outline the transition plan with parents, early in the Spring Term of 2010.

29. Is it envisaged that current pupils will be merged into the same classes, or will existing pupils run parallel until the 6th form?

Once year groups are merged, classes and sets will be decided on an educational and social basis as they are now – there will not be sets/classes that preserve the "old school identities" except possibly in certain exceptional cases where examination groups are involved.

30. What proof do you have that you can stop or minimise the disruption of my daughter's education and that standards will not fall?

We shall do all in our power to ensure the quality of the girls' education is not disrupted and that the provision current girls receive is as positive in the next few years as it is now. This is an absolute priority for us.

31. What plans do you have to help the girls get to know each other before the schools merge?

Pupils and staff have already sent us lots of ideas about how we can help the girls, and staff, get to know each other before the schools merge. The Student Forum and Stakeholder Reference Group have also discussed various ideas and these will be explored in more detail over the coming months. Ideas to date include joint school trips, drama and music productions, visiting the other school, holding joint charity and debating events, sports tours and team practice, coffee mornings, talent shows etc.

32. I am very concerned about the fact that the new school will be an unknown, not recognised by the institutions that their daughters may apply for in the future. The existing schools are both recognised which paves the way for their daughters, so the new school won't have this advantage. How will you address this?

It is important to remember that we are merging two incredibly successful, well established girls' schools that have a superb reputation with universities and colleges and we are not creating a new school from scratch that is completely unknown. Therefore all of the heritage, success and

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reputation from the existing schools will form the history of the newly merged school and all new literature, marketing and communication materials, press releases and pupil/staff references that are produced in the future will reflect this.

How will the merger affect school staff?

33. How will you minimise the impact on staff during the merger process?

We will ensure that staff are kept regularly informed of the changes that will affect them and the senior leadership teams and Trustees will work hard to provide the support, guidance and time to guide staff through the process. We have a team of internal and external staff who are working together to ensure the merger creates as little disruption as possible on staff and pupils.

34. How will the best staff be retained?

Trustees and Heads will work together to ensure that all staff currently employed in the two schools are motivated, valued and supported throughout the merger process and that we regularly communicate with them. The process for filling positions in the new school will be fair, transparent, and legal and follow the correct HR procedures. Staff will also be involved in developing the new school through a variety of working groups and will have opportunities to learn new skills by attending training courses especially if they will be required to teach new elements of the revised curriculum.

How will the new school be structured?

35. When will you announce the new headmistress?

We hope to be able to announce the new headmistress by the end of the autumn term. It is likely that the new headmistress will either be Julie Eldridge or Jo MacKenzie.

36. What will be the process regarding the appointment of staff to the merged school? Will parents have any say or influence?

Decisions about the new, overall staffing structure will be made by the Headmistress and her Senior Leadership Team in consultation with Project Steering Group.

How will you bring the two schools together?

37. How will the two schools come together? Will it be closed on a Friday and re-opened on Monday or will there be increased working together before then?

It is proposed that where possible the merger should be a phased process but no firm arrangements have yet been decided. The Charity wishes to ensure the transition from the existing two schools to one merged school is as smooth as possible and therefore will be seeking opportunities to bring activities together at as early a stage as possible with a view to avoiding a "big bang" scenario where nothing happens until day one.

38. Will your staff be expected to teach/work at the other school before the two schools are merged?

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As part of the merger process increased joint-working between the two schools is encouraged and expected. It is therefore possible that staff may in due course be asked to teach at the other school but at present there are no plans to set any formal arrangements of this nature in place.

39. How will you get staff from both schools to build working relationships and to share knowledge given they may well be in competition for jobs?

We are encouraging staff to work together wherever possible and some groups are already working across the schools to share ideas e.g. marketing and admissions teams. This will be widened as the merger process moves forward and is an opportunity to develop working relationships and knowledge not just between the two schools who are merging but across all the schools in the Charity. One suggestion being considered is joint staff training days between DAHS and BHSG. We want staff to look for and develop any appropriate opportunities they can to work with their counterparts.