

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headmaster

Since 2013, Mr Michael Taylor (40s). Prior to Fairley House spent a year as deputy head, joining the school originally in 2008 as head of the senior school. After university took a job as a transport engineer but it was never going to stick and, with employer's full backing, moved into teaching in 1998. Started off as a year 9 tutor at Malory Comprehensive in Lewisham, moving into independent sector in 2000 when he spent two years at St Martin's Prep in Northwood as a geography and history teacher (and basketball and rugby coach). More importantly, success in identifying and helping dyslexic and dyspraxic pupils made him realise that this was where his future lay.

Moved to The Elms in Colwall in 2002 (teacher and sports coach) before rejoining the maintained sector in 2003 as a geography, leisure and tourism teacher at The Malling School in Kent. His move to specialist teaching came about when he joined More House School, Frensham, in 2004, as deputy head of boarding and English, history, geography and PE teacher to a range of ages.

Still finds time to teach - good for credibility with staff, he feels, 'Nice to be able to sit and sympathise.' Attends as many school matches as possible. 'Even if we didn't win he's still happy,' says pupil. In his spare time he's pretty outdoorsy. Cites interests as keeping fit, travelling and white-water rafting, plus conversation and animal behaviour (clue provided by presence of live chameleons Misty and Fog in his office).

'Fantastic', 'Approachable', 'Kids love him,' say parents, who speak of delighted juniors being given piggy backs at end of year picnic. 'He's always coming around and cheering people on,' confirms pupil. 'I have never seen him have a frowny face.' Travel round the school with him and it's like accompanying a fantastically approachable celeb, he's instantly mobbed by senior school pupils. 'Sir, is it mufti day on Friday?'; 'Sir, I love assembly.'

Children appear in his office, most of which is now taken up with sundry items including desks, white board, two chameleons and cctv monitors (head says children particularly enjoy a spot of ad hoc spying), to chat and let off steam if they have a problem with other staff and pupils. 'In here they can shout and swear at me but it stays in here,' he says. He's a big personality with the happy knack of achieving right balance between fun and gravitas – deliberately so. 'Here it's a special place - we can't just be teachers, we must be a little bit more,' he remarks. Watching a celebration assembly where each award was greeted with a drum roll (performed by series of pupils), jokes (by the head) and a real sense of shared joy, it was hard to disagree.

Pupils always know just who's in charge. 'It's respectful but the gap is different from regular school in a good way - you learn the most from the teacher you love best,' says parent. Dyslexic himself, he vividly remembers how it felt: singled out but never in a good way; 'classed as being this awful thing' and compelled to walk to a 'dusty room' for extra lessons. 'Would walk very slowly there and sprint back.' Determination to ensure that no pupil here ever feels like that shines through everything he does.

Academic matters

For many it can feel like school of last resort. 'Some of the parents are in a bit of a desperate situation,' says parent. 'Feel their child cannot be taught anywhere else.' 'If they can't learn the way we teach, we have to teach the way they learn,' says the school. Simple, yet devastatingly effective, particularly for children who've previously learned in an often hostile environment, with teachers who make no concessions for anyone who doesn't fit the mould.

School starts with an assessment to find out 'how children tick' followed by IEP, collaboratively produced by OT, SALT, Ed Psych and teachers and used as the yardstick to monitor progress of pupils. Most children are at least of average ability, some way ahead. While inspectors felt tracking could be improved (a tiny detail in a very positive report), numbers of pupils joining or

leaving mid-year makes it logistically tricky. School has all the top-notch benchmarking systems in place, while parents get a termly update of the child's progress eg their reading age.

Small size and range of needs makes progress highly individual to each child. For some, it's about arriving unable to count and mastering times tables or learning to write in full sentences; for others, acquiring the strategies that will secure a place in selective senior school. One parent cited all the things school had done for her child, 'structuring what has to be retained and not retained, helping 200 per cent.'

Achieved by seamless, integrated support. 'Impossible to divide the two.' Plenty of experienced members of staff undoubtedly help. Average age of staff is 40, 18 have been at the school for ten years or longer, many either with, or working towards, an SpLD qualification. Can take teachers a while to adjust to this very different way of working, 'Normally takes them two years to settle completely,' confirms head. All are praised to the eyeballs by parents. 'They have a quiriness children can relate to,' says one. 'It's not "I'm a teacher and am going to tell you what to do." I wish I'd had a school like that.' We watched an endlessly calm and brilliantly effective teacher getting junior pupils on side. 'I'd like everyone sitting on the carpet in five...four...three...two...[long pause for the stragglers] one.' It works.

Classes, average just over eight children, maximum 12, aren't necessarily based on chronological age but ability. Teaching covers all national curriculum subjects but with own schemes of work, therapists are involved in teaching and learning process (get own training). Inspiring, sometimes off the wall, approaches are the norm.

English naturally takes up considerable share on the timetable and is approached with much inventiveness and confidence boosting, essential given just how fragile children here can be. 'I don't know what an adjective is,' says junior pupil, sounding panicked, but they are quickly reassured.

Multisensory word study sessions hone every useful technique going, way beyond phonics and spelling rules. Here, children will also study word meanings, structure, origins – it's all about making connections that will help with unfamiliar words.

Learning to write fluently, at length, with interesting and well punctuated sentences can be extremely hard, so work with SALT and OTs cover useful strategies. Results can be impressive; a year 11's review of a recent theatre trip urged readers to 'forget your work. Forget your existence and travel into a world of insanity, melancholy and pure chaos...'

Maths is similarly thorough. Multisensory approach includes motor maths in the gym and uses OT and PE equipment to give maths concepts a physicality. Children use bodies while learning a maths concept which helps with understanding and recall. Parents describe lessons that involve children whizzing through the hall on a skateboard to collect the answer to a times table question, or making a human clock as a way of learning to tell the time. Developed by OT and teachers working together to commit key words and concepts to memory. 'Must be something behind it to ensure that it works,' says head.

Similar care and attention elsewhere. Computing uses dyslexia friendly drag and drop apps (rather than programming languages). In science, masses of hands-on stuff, from experiments to interactive online games that make lessons memorable and fun. History and geography work with SALT on memory strategies to help learn new vocabulary or dates. One former pupil, reported inspectors, learned about ancient Egyptians through the medium of brightly coloured pottery.

A blend of reassurance and motivation was evident in every class we saw. 'How are we feeling?' asks teacher before a year 5 maths test. One pupil is worried because 'I went to bed at 7 for the last two nights.' 'Good self-reflection,' is the encouraging response. Even the furniture is well thought through, featuring untippable wobble seats – ideal for pupils who need to keep on the

move during lessons.

Decisions on options occur in year 8 (some courses are taken over three years). Goal is for everyone to aspire to GCSE English, maths and science, though can all be switched for a functional qualification if works better. Students also study two additional subjects, including child development, citizenship and iMedia as well as humanities and DT.

School celebrates all GCSE grades achieved, though that 'magic 4...is what parents and individuals look for' and head lets pupils who haven't quite made it come back for retakes. Pupils, especially seniors, are understandably enthusiastic about the approach. 'At my old school they would just expect you to know,' said one. 'Here, if you don't understand, they won't just continue.'

Parents shouldn't ever be in any doubt as to what children have been doing. Newsletters are a lesson recap all on their own, complete with illustrations - recent example included word of the week ('character', 'mature'); revision on quadrilaterals (photographs of teams creating shapes) and emotional Zones of Regulation with strategies for achieving 'green' (calm state of alertness), avoiding 'blue' ('down feelings...sad, tired, sick, bored') or 'red' ('elation, anger, explosive behaviour.') Frequent trips all over London from The Globe to the Lyric Theatre to Tate Britain as well as residential trips (e.g. to Cumbria). Underlying all is school's ability to turn miserable children with sense of failure into happy ones. 'Confidence and support is what drives the learning.'

Games, options, the arts

School does its best with sport though its focus on literacy and numeracy eats away at remaining time. More PE lessons on several wish lists (two for seniors, would love three). Range offered includes football, netball, rugby, cricket, athletics, swimming and dance. Some fixtures against other schools with varying results, and though unlikely to nab any awards for a win-at-all-costs culture, the school does better than you might think; squash team recently recorded victories and a near miss from netball team. While not the place to dream of high-profile team glory, school is remarkably effective in arranging matches against some serious opposition and ensuring that chances to represent the school are evenly distributed. 'Lots of children with dyspraxia can't catch a ball but still play. I wish other schools could see the way they treat children here,' says parent. For the head, it doesn't matter if team loses 30 nil, it's all about the experience. 'The kids come back and love the fact they've done it. It feels normal having a fixture.'

Clubs run on Tuesdays and Thursdays, current range from Taekwondo to sewing (juniors), DT and singing for seniors, and vary through the year. Yoga, Lego and photography also on offer and bouldering (indoor rock climbing) for everyone.

Highly creative arts; individual music lessons – piano, guitar and drumming on offer, with wonderful performances (slightly hit and miss in the juniors but breathtakingly good in the senior school, say parents). Staff write both music and the script. Everyone has weekly timetabled music and drama with several productions each year, latest including 'Spelbownd' (year 7) and Julius Caesar (year 8).

Some very able pupils could be encouraged to do even more, thought one parent, to harness the creative 'superpower' that can come hand in hand with specific learning difficulties. 'Could be phenomenal; children should be down getting greasy and making go karts and building stuff and cooking to realise that creativity.' Head is listening, however, with resources being bumped up and more pupils building portfolios, some working towards formal exams (13 timetabled hours for English and maths has inevitable impact on other subjects) so it's a question of watch this space!

At the senior school, bright classrooms (art, food tech, DT) have recently been added, complete (say our tour guides) with a 'secret fire exit'. DT, a particular favourite, has staff who appear to live for their subject with a devoted following, so we heard. The big attraction was the prototype skateboards, each constructed from a different mix of veneers to achieve ideal union of strength and flexibility. For the DT teacher, who is also dyslexic, pride of place went to the manuals he

had put together, ('show Miss - they're really cool'). Each colossal tome, loosely bound, was a labour of love with instructions for every project broken down into the tiniest of tiny steps, one to a laminated page, words at a minimum, illustrations copious.

Background and atmosphere

School was founded in 1982 by Daphne Hamilton-Fairley, a speech and language therapist whose own children were also dyslexic, in memory of her husband, Professor Gordon Hamilton-Fairley, the UK's first oncology professor. She is still very involved with the school. After several moves, school finally settled on current sites, Lambeth for the juniors (years 2-5) and SW1 (just a mile away) for senior pupils (years 6-11). Juniors have two historic buildings close to Lambeth Palace (even the stairs are listed) where not an inch of space is wasted. High-end decor largely provided by the artwork, from motivating posters to attractive butterflies with googly eyes, taking flight from watercolour backgrounds, on the walls. Seniors have a compact-looking site: smallish classrooms off narrow corridors (lesson changeovers can be a bit of a squeeze) though, like juniors, miraculously packed in a good-sized, and well used, hall.

Both sites are mainly landlocked with limited outside space, inevitable given the location, but hard for energetic pupils who need to run round wildly at breaktime to let off steam. Juniors have delightful courtyard garden, brick paving, palms and espalier trees, shortly to be astro-turfed over, a practical and sensible decision if a lot less scenic. Also have Archbishop and Battersea Parks, both close by. Seniors have their own densely planted garden and 'The Cage' public games area just across the road.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

Pupils' previous experiences can cast a long shadow. One junior pupil described school as 'really fun because the teachers aren't angry ...they joke and understand how it is to be dyslexic.'

Understandably mega emphasis on confidence building – school aims to get them to the point where they can cope when things don't work out, now and later in life. Prize giving every term, honour rolls with awards for range of attributes, including kindness. Regular focus on perseverance and growth mindset – children's understanding impressive. 'Is it when you work harder, your mind gets stronger?' asks junior pupils. 'You don't know all the answers straight way, and you're not meant to,' explains teacher.

Pupils are in small tutor groups with additional support and mentoring if they struggle either in lessons or during unstructured time e.g. in break. Regular PSHE – to government-decreed specs but tailored, wherever possible, so tutors can use to address particular issues.

Occasional issues linked to such small class sizes if big personality starts to dominate. 'In a class of seven or eight students, can be hard if you're not getting on with one particular child,' says parent. 'Have to learn how to deal with each other.' Inevitably some behaviour issues but felt by parents to be well managed. 'Effective and clear – and that's what children need,' says parent. School uses yellow behaviour cards, employs behaviour management expert and problems are often temporary and resolvable. 'Primary goal is that we prevent and support, and guide them back,' says the head.

Home/school diary, signed daily, is the bread and butter of parent communication but emails and phone calls also welcome. School felt to do a good job in keeping parents up to date and personal data is sensitively handled.

Pupils and parents

As only 60 or so pupils have EHCPs, majority self-fund, some struggling to pay the fees. Parents' Association organises regular events, including Christmas Fair, cake sale, a second

hand uniform sale and wine and cheese evening as well as raffle where to win great prizes including chance to be head for a day or dole out yellow behaviour cards to a teacher (surely a

highlight). Similarly jolly sports day. 'Of all those I've been to, theirs wins hands down,' says parent. 'If someone's sister or brother wants to join in they don't tell them to get off the track but invite them to join in. There's a real inclusive vibe to it.' Head's cunning plan is to ensure that fastest runners 'only come across each other in the 100 metres or they're going to win everything - so everyone walks away with a first or second.'

Boys in the majority all the way through with girls making up between a third and a half of pupils in most classes (though in year 11 when we visited there was only one girl out of eight pupils). Year groups start low (12 in year 3) and peak in years 6-9.

Pupils come mainly from London – all points of the compass but from beyond the M25 too - (Gerrards Cross, Walton on Thames and Bromley all feature). Can make for a really early start – some pupils are up at 5.30am. No wonder 'a later start to the school day' was on one junior child's wishlist.

Most parents are positive about the education they're getting though inevitably some can find it hard to adjust to the more specialist approach that can seem worlds away from more traditional environment. Children, too, can find move initially challenging though one child who was 'devastated' to leave friends told parents after the first few weeks that they'd done the right thing, to all-round relief.

Tiny numbers of girls less problematic than it might be. Perhaps surprisingly, junior and senior girls felt that friendships had in fact been strengthened because of the necessity of getting on with each other. 'It can be a bit lonely but we know that we've all got each other's back... maybe we all are very different but we all get on,' said one

For some families, school is seen as a quick fix – in, job done, and out again into mainstream. For others, it's a school for life or at least to 16. High turnover means inevitably transient friendships – 'lose friends every couple of years – that's the sad thing,' says one parent, though there is a trade-off, thought another – 'the opportunity to make lots of friends – which is a positive as well as a slight negative.'

Means parents can feel like two tribes, with quite different aspirations. Generally co-exist peacefully, though not always – one family overheard describing 'permanent' pupils in very disparaging terms. Wide range of nationalities currently includes American, Dutch and Russian pupils.

Entrance

Start with tour of the school and meeting with the head. Most children have primary diagnosis of either dyslexia or dyspraxia and at least average cognitive ability. Stick closely to this – won't admit children with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties (includes ADHD) and not registered to accept children with ASD. Anyone with EAL needs to be sufficiently proficient to access the curriculum. About a third of junior and 45 per cent of senior pupils have EHCPs.

If paperwork adds up, child will have three day multi-disciplinary assessment at the school, including time in class and in the playground, followed by feedback session where school outlines support. Can ask for written reports from OT, EP and SALT (there's a charge for this).

Exit

Goal is that as many pupils as possible return to a mainstream school so most stay for two to three years – though with growing pressure on independent school places, no longer as easy as it used to be. 'Harder to get schools to take into account pupils' personalities outside the written [entrance] paper,' says head. Very occasional departure because of behavioural issues – though only happens when all other measures have failed. 'We try not to get to that point,' says head. Otherwise, good links with local sixth form and tutorial colleges, state and independent, where can work towards additional qualifications with appropriate support.

Money matters

Many parents self-fund – costs are ‘eye-watering’ is one on-line comment - when LAs won’t cough up. School is fundraising so other children who are ‘only’ in the bottom ten per cent and a mere two to three years adrift from peers can be helped through outreach programme.

Therapy and staffing

Collaboration between teaching and therapists colours many of lessons and helps staff to share skills. Also offer individual and small group therapy. Overall staff to pupil ratio of 1:3.5.

While OT does have own areas (well-lit top floor space in junior school), the focus is on integration. ‘They do maths while doing OT and are taught literacy by qualified speech therapists,’ says parent. Nobody needs to be pulled out or made to feel different and everything happens in small, well-matched groups. Pupils will have other needs on top of SpLD. School felt to be brilliant at making everything work, ‘Have all sorts of difficulties so they spend a lot of time thinking how can they fit and how can we help them,’ says a parent. Support extends to families, eg for those caught up in the EHCP process or needing a bit of expert clout at annual reviews, they will attend meetings and back up parents. If they can help, they will.

Expertise recognised by others, and there’s a growing outreach programme. Have recently worked with GOSH to give advice on teaching dyslexic children and are just about to launch own accredited teacher training programme run by one of school’s former heads.

Our view

Inclusive, fun, intertwining therapy with lessons (‘lerapy?’), all delivered by fabulous staff and a universally popular head...we could go on. If any school can erase the damage caused by previous school experiences, this one can.