

Notes from Parent Action Group meeting on June 10th 2014

Present: At least 19 parents (two new) plus Phillip Taylor (Deputy Headteacher) and Julie Prince (Business Manager), 26 pupils represented.

	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Boys (12)	8	1	2	1	0
Girls (14)	2	4	4	1	3
Total	10	5	6	2	3

1. SIMS Learning Gateway

Julie Prince gave an update on progress since the last parent Action Group meeting where she had explained how the Learning Gateway would allow parents to access much of the data that the school holds on their child. School is still working on how parents can view progress and attainment data; some initial problems are being ironed out by Capita. Julie explained that as SIMS is new to the school she is keen that the Parent Action Group members trial the system with a view to it being rolled out to all parents in September. Interested parents gave their details to Julie, passwords and instructions should be distributed soon. Julie would welcome any feedback and ideas for improvement.

2. Curriculum

Mr Taylor distributed an overview of the subjects being offered to each year group for the next academic year. Years 7 & 8 will follow essentially the same curriculum of Maths, English, Science, PE, languages, geography, History, RS, PSHE, IT, Art, Drama, Music and Technology. Year 9 will have a core of Maths, English, Science, PE, Humanity plus some optional subjects. Some of the options combine several themed subjects, eg Performing Arts (Music, Dance, Drama) or Creative Media (Film studies and Music), Art (textiles, photography, Fine Art) . This allows students to sample a wider range of subjects with specialisation occurring in Year 10. These year 9 choices are not fixed and hopefully any changes of mind can happen before formal GCSE course begins in Year 10. Years 10 and 11 follow GCSE courses, the main difference being that IT is a core subject in Year 11 but an option in Year 10.

The curriculum offer can vary each year depending on, for example uptake of a particular course, availability of specialist teachers or the academic profile of the cohort. Although there can be no guarantees the school makes every effort to accommodate pupils first choice of options but sometimes this is not possible.

There was also data on the academic profile of each year group, Key Stage 3 and 4 targets from the Fischer Family Trust (an education charity) and the percentage classified as having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Mr Taylor endeavoured to explain what the data was about.

Parents had a chance to discuss curriculum matters in groups and then raise issues of interest.

- The issue of quality over quantity was raised by parents, Mr Taylor explained that in future USH pupils would concentrate on doing fewer GCSE s(typically 10) in greater depth.
- IT, what is happening? Next year IT is part of the core offer for Years 7 and 8, in addition most of year 11 will be studying it. It will be an optional subject in Years 9 and 10 although there is a legally required element for IT which will be covered within the rest of the curriculum. It is a time of change for IT at USH, a new Head of Computing started after Easter and 2 new IT teachers have been appointed. We should expect new and exciting ways of addressing IT/computing requirements. It is becoming apparent that many pupils are already highly skilled in IT and traditional ICT lessons are not appropriate. It is essential though that every pupil develops key skills.
- The idea of allowing options in Year 8 options was popular with parents. Parents who had attended either of the option evenings felt that the process was well explained and plenty of help was available for pupils and parents.
- A question was asked about how much interaction is there between USH and 6th form colleges on whether some exam boards offer better preparation for A levels, in general and specifically with regard to languages?

USH does have good links with Richard Taunton College but conversations mostly involve Learning Habits, independence, resilience and skills rather than course content. There has always been a huge leap between GCSE and A level.

General discussion ensued regarding different methods of teaching languages. Whilst no one doubted the quality of teaching of MFL at USH which certainly yields good results, there were concerns from parents that some pupils find the change to A level particularly daunting. There is anecdotal evidence of students rapidly switching courses, feeling that they lacked vital skills compared with other students, despite obtaining a good grade at GCSE.

ACTION for Mr Taylor to find out whether colleges feel any language skills could be better developed at KS4.

3. Reports

Mr Taylor explained how the new SIMS system allows a different style of reporting which he hopes will better support learning progress. Copies of old and new style reports were handed out. In the new reports each department has identified three key areas of learning for which a level is given. The average of these three is used to give a current grade. There is also a ranking for Behaviour and Homework. In future more information will be provided about how pupil targets are set and who to contact if parents have any questions. Pupils will receive three reports per year, 2 short and one long. There will be 3 reporting cycles per year group each academic year at strategic times, which might be different for each year group. For example in the autumn term of 2014 Year 8 and 10 will receive short reports while Year 9 will get a long report.

Mr Taylor explained the new processes that are being implemented at USH regarding data collection and analysis. Hopefully in future there should be no nasty surprises regarding attainment in a report, any problems should have been previously noticed and action taken.

Feedback on new reports

- There was a feeling amongst parents who had received the new reports that the overall impression they were left with after reading the report was less positive than discussions at parents evening.
- Homework rankings could be more positive as the current ranking system means that most pupils would get a 2 or 3 even for outstanding pieces of work if they had a sensible target.
- The graph is a useful feature but can the scale be changed to make it easier to read? Despite his best efforts Mr Taylor cannot change the scale or labels on the graph, they are pre – set in SIMS.
- It would be good if it was explicit that sublevels of progress are since KS2.
- A parent commented that in the school where she works reports go out prior to parents evening and teachers have a place to indicate that they would like to see a pupil's parents. This means time can be prioritised where it is needed most. She also reported an improved uptake by parents.

[ACTION- Mr Taylor- consider putting in place for appropriately timed reports]

- School has taken note of parents comments regarding the timing of reports – ie people do not want to receive them at the start of a holiday. However because it is a new process it is taking longer than usual to produce the reports. They should all be distributed before the end of term.
- Parents asked for a more personalised report with more information about the individual for example what kind of learner, how they interact in class? Mr Taylor explained that in future reports will have a tutor comment about each pupil. Perhaps this could include a summary of how the pupil is doing, this might make the report more approachable/easier to access for some people.
- Will issues raised in a report be addressed and monitored?
- Some parents would like some way of judging their child's progress for example placement within class, cohort, against national expectations. Mr Taylor is trying to include a comparison against National Expectations in future. The National Benchmark is 3 levels of progress from KS2 to KS4 (GCSE) USH has an aspirational target for pupils to achieve 4 levels of progress from KS2.
- There was a suggestion that the last report of the year contain some kind of summary of the academic year.

Other comments

Homework – some parents still finding their child is not receiving feedback on homework.

4. Next meeting

Our next meeting is on 22nd July and is more of a social event and a chance to reflect on the impact of the Parent Action Group.

If anyone has any feedback on it is always welcome via the contact button on the Parent Action Group page on the school website.