To: Parents at St Nicholas School

Wednesday 24th July 2019

It is July, and the end of another very busy school year. I hope you have enjoyed some of the many end-of-year events, particularly Celebration Evening and the Year 2 and Year 6 performances. It has been a while since my own children left St Nicholas, but I spent time at Celebration Evening this year, looking at work the children had done in each year group, from Reception all the way to Year 6. I cannot help but be amazed by the extraordinary progress children make in their journey through the school. Writing goes from basic letter formation all the way to rich prose; Mathematics from sorting objects to the beginnings of algebra. Perhaps most importantly at St Nicholas, children grow as individuals, leaving as broadly educated, independent and self-confident children ready for secondary school. It’s all really impressive, and a tribute to all the work that staff, children and parents all put in to their journey.

Turning to Governor business, at this term’s closing Governing Body Meeting we caught up with the work in our sub committees, looking at the latest information on our SATs results, reports on behaviour monitoring, our financial situation, and some important IT infrastructure investments. We discussed the results from a recent independent review of teaching and learning and considered a review of our school trips and visits. We also spent particular time looking through the results of the Parent Survey earlier in the term, which I will come back to below.

Our Standards Committee looks at the school curriculum, to make sure that our assessment and tracking is robust and effective, and to make sure that the school does everything it can to help children progress well. This term, the committee looked particularly at Geography and provision for Physical Education as well as keeping tabs on the core subjects. A recent review of Geography showed, as we expected, a clear progression from basic understanding of location to a broad global perspective, supported by a good range of resources and some important off-site visits. We were pleased to hear that staff are planning to include even more creative activities within the subject. In Physical Education, there has been a great improvement in the availability of competitive sport for children interested, and the school has done very well in a number of recent events.

Our SATs results this year are, as ever, comfortably above provisional national levels, with a particularly good improvement in Year 6 Maths; we believe that reflects the steady focus on
Maths Mastery through the school over the last three years. Detailed attainment and progress figures will be available on the school website early next term, as the confirmed national figures are not yet available.

Our Resources and Staffing Committees monitor the school budget, buildings and staff – the assets the school depends on for a good education. The school has again managed to keep the books very close to a balanced budget even though budgets remain tight. This has helped to make room for some important IT infrastructure improvements in the near future; the school’s internal network will be upgraded and our ageing file and administration servers will shortly be replaced, which will allow the school to keep up to date with some of our most important administration software.

Staffing is also looking strong for next year. Mrs Felsing and her Senior Staff always spend many hours each year finding ways to provide full cover with good teachers. The school is also very good at moving staff up to leadership roles, and we were pleased to hear that our support for Special Educational Needs will have greater cover over the next year, so that we can identify learning needs more quickly and adjust teaching to match individual needs more closely.

I have already mentioned the recent Parent Survey. We had a very good response across all year groups, and we were very grateful to all of the parents who took the time to give us their views. If you have not already looked at the summary, you will find a short but complete overview on the school website. At our meeting, we were able to spend time looking carefully at the general results, and we also discussed recurring themes among your free-text comments.

As you may know, the first few questions we asked were the same as those asked in OFSTED Parent View surveys, so we are able to compare those with national averages. Compared to national figures, St Nicholas does well across all topics; the proportion of positive responses is above or well above national averages, and for many questions over 90% of you were kind enough to respond positively. It was also great to see how many parents added positive free-text comments about the school’s welcoming and supportive atmosphere, our teachers, the fun your children have at school, and our focus on ‘whole child’ development. But of course, that does not mean we are satisfied on all points.

For this survey, the themes that stood out for further work are largely around communication and partnership with parents, where some of the responses are somewhat lower, concerns about whether homework was appropriate. We also saw that, while we had reassuringly few responses (compared to national averages) indicating that poor behaviour and other concerns were poorly handled, we had a larger proportion of “don’t know” responses to those questions. Among the free-text comments too, we saw a desire for improvements in sport and fitness, and some indications that our special needs (SEND) provision needs improving. We also paid close attention to your comments on the value for money for some of the school trips.

On behaviour, the school already takes behaviour management very seriously, and visitors to the school always comment on the outstanding behaviour of our children. Nonetheless, there are occasional instances of poor behaviour and Governors have asked for regular reports on the number of incidents that merit contact with parents. We have been pleased, this year, to see that these incidents have reduced substantially over recent years, in part due to improvements in playground provision and supervision, and in part to improvements in the behaviour policy. However, we know that even rare instances of poor behaviour can
have a disproportionate impact on other children. The school always acts on those, firmly and as quickly as possible, however, parents may not hear about specific sanctions, as this is not appropriate. But we do need your continued help, so if you have, or hear about an incident that you do not think has been addressed, please bring it to your Class Teacher or Mrs Felsing as soon as possible so that we can act on it and minimise the chance of any recurrence.

Turning to the other key issues from the survey, the school is already putting more resource into SEND support, both in response to this survey and the school’s own evaluation of SEND support. Mrs Felsing has looked again at homework, and you should see a shift towards more exploratory and inspiring homework topics. The school has already spent some time on improving competitive sport and exercise, especially for after-school activities, but in response to your views the school will also be looking again at regular PE lessons to improve attention to fitness and health, as well as the general coordination skills that are particularly crucial to develop in the 5 to 11 year age range. In relation to the value for money of school trips, we were pleased to hear that the school has already prepared a revised schedule to address some of those concerns, and you will find out more about that over the next year. You will also have seen that Mrs Felsing is looking for further views on how we can improve communications with parents, and we are hoping that some of you will be able to help us find out what you most need to know and how we can keep you well informed.

No end-of-school-year update would be complete without some much deserved thanks. The staff have again worked hard and consistently through the year, both in class and out, supporting all the out-of-school trips and events the children have presented. Our parents – you – have been a great support, attending school events, acting as parent helpers, supporting the PTA, helping your children learn at home, and contributing to the building maintenance fund that allows helps us keep the building in good shape. And all of the children at St Nicholas have worked really hard all year – as you’ll have seen at Celebration Evening – and their behaviour is a credit to the school. Thank you all for your support and hard work during the year.

Finally, I’d like to add a word of thanks to two of our Governors who will be moving on at the end of the year. Stewart Crook, a Parent Governor, our Vice Chair, and former Chair of our Resources Committee, has reached the end of his current four-year term and will be stepping down. Kelly Judd, currently a Foundation Governor and our Staffing and Pay Committee Chair, is also moving to take on a new role elsewhere. My thanks go to both for their contribution to the Governing Body. I should also thank all of our other Governors for the time they give to the school; Governors are volunteers, and their time and skills are invaluable and greatly appreciated.

I wish all of you a good summer break, and look forward to seeing you again next year.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Ellison

Dr S Ellison
Chair of Governor