

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headteacher

Since 2013, Colin Parker BSc PGCE DipEd CMath (early 60s). Degree in maths and physics, plus PGCE, from Exeter; DipEd from Oxford. Swapped a life on the seven seas (as a cruise director on the Cunard Line, including on the QE2) for a crowd of kids in Berkhamsted. He'd started out in education, cutting his teeth teaching maths and computing at Bishop's Fox School Taunton (alongside, unusually, freelance sports journalism for the BBC), but decided to something completely different before teaching lured him back when he and his wife Chisa, a translator, settled in Hemel Hempstead in the early noughties. 'I started here in 2003 and never left,' he smiles.

The school was very different back then, he explains, starting as a prep, adding a secondary section and then developing the SEN side. 'When it changed, we all had to learn quickly.' He is rightfully proud of the school's homely, friendly and calm vibe, along with the attention on the individual, all of which come in for high praise from parents. 'My dad was a bank manager and treated every customer as a VIP, whether they invested one pound or over a million pounds, and that's what we do here - valuing every child as a whole person so we know when their pet isn't well or when they've achieved something out of school, as well as exactly where they're at in school.' Works both ways, it seems, with students asking him, 'How's Barnaby?' (his cat) and 'Is your daughter enjoying university?' His easy, relaxed manner - and the fact that, as one pupil put it, 'he's always out and about and really cares about us' - makes it all feel very natural, and sets the tone.

Parents call him 'a real gentleman,' 'absolutely lovely - he has a way of connecting with the kids,' and 'very human - he interacts with parents and pupils in a really open way.' One told us, 'I travel a long way to get to school and sometimes he'll invite me in for a coffee when I get there'; another that 'his communications are fantastic especially his weekly newsletter which always reflects how well he knows what's going on in every part of the school.' Aspirational too, we heard - 'he gets students to look beyond any barriers; if they want to have a go at a qualification, he's all for it.'

Supports Watford FC and enjoys walking, DIY, gardening his allotment and anything to do with radio broadcasting.

Entrance

All children have additional needs - roughly two-thirds with speech and language difficulties, half with autism, a quarter with ADHD and a third with specific learning difficulties (especially dyspraxia and dyslexia, but less dyscalculia). Social and emotional issues are prevalent, mainly anxiety, but not suitable for behavioural problems that could disrupt learning. The application process takes around half a term, kicking off with the admissions team reading through paperwork (around half of applications are turned down at this point), after which parents are invited in for a meeting and a three-day assessment, in which the child joins a group and meets necessary support staff, before a place is offered (a few are also turned away at this point and not just because of behaviour - 'it may also be that, for example, the child is very, very bright and there's nobody else at that same level, so we might suggest they try again in year 7'). The registrar offers weekly tours of the school and there are termly open days, when the children volunteer as guides - 'we don't cherry pick because it's good for all of them to get the chance to take a bit of responsibility and talk about their school.' Most popular entry points are years 5, 6, 7 and 9, with mid-year applications considered.

Exit

Widely fluctuating numbers stay on for sixth form, with those that leave taking up courses at local FE colleges, notably West Herts, Amersham, Wycombe and Oaklands. A few also to independent schools eg Aldenham, Pipers Corner and into performing arts at eg Chikenshed. 'There is no pressure to stay - if they are ready to go and can manage socially, we celebrate that,' says head, although he adds that, 'a lot come here for the structure so find FE hard.' School offers visits to colleges and helps with application forms, as well as offering interview practice. Some go on to university degrees in

maths/physics, forensics, vocational training in travel/leisure, animal care, hair and beauty, sports. Others join the army or take ICT training. One student who thought he would never be able to do an exam when he arrived wound up doing a PhD at Cambridge; another became a lecturer at King's College London.

Teaching and learning

Not a special school, not even a specialist school. Instead it offers a mainstream curriculum, albeit highly flexible and backed up with therapy sessions and individual support from specialist teachers which are interwoven throughout the day according to each child's need. And this, say families, is the major pull, whether they have a child with an EHCP (85 per cent of the cohort) or not. 'There's nothing else quite like it,' said more than one parent. 'The very personalised strategies, support and learning programmes ensures each child fulfils their potential but it's more than that – you see these often very anxious children flourish socially and in terms of confidence too,' said one. Small class sizes – maximum 10 but more usually seven or eight – are supported by a teacher and at least one TA, with some additional TAs in constant attendance on one child as required. The whole class enjoys snack and movement breaks.

Year groups are divided into learning bases named after trees – Poplar (years 3-6), Oak (years 7-9), Beech (years 10-11) and Rowan (years 7-11 with more complex needs, though some children might only do some of their subjects here). In Poplar – which has its own timber-clad building - students are set in four classes according to need rather than age, supported by a class teacher who follows the national curriculum in a topic-based approach. Children were learning about China when we visited, having located it on a map and made fortune cookies, Chinese fans and clay terracotta figures. The youngest children chat at group tables, while others choose to sit apart, some on therapeutic bouncy chairs. Over in Rowan, children were learning an adapted geography course called My World – 'learning about the Ruhr coalfields and the Boer War is too much for them and simply not relevant,' explains the head.

The senior school has a more formal feel with specialist subject teachers, and students moving between classrooms, claspng files. Transition is well thought-through, with year 6s having at least two lessons a week in this format to get them ready – and they are already familiar with the buildings and teachers for drama, art and PE. Years 7, 8 and 9 may take a range of core subjects, including a foreign language (Spanish), with different teaching methods to suit the child. In a maths class, children were learning maths via interactive games and bar modelling.

From year 10, the child chooses exam subjects: GCSE, BTEc, NCFE, Cambridge National, Number and Measure, foundation or entry level, whatever is appropriate and achievable. 'Everyone who comes here can access nearly all the subjects from a comprehensive school,' asserts the head. GCSEs in drama, sport, business, geography, history and ICT are popular and although we heard of many 8s and 9s, getting a 3 is a massive achievement for some and equally celebrated. We heard of one lad whose ADHD meant 'he could hardly sit still for two minutes and got seven 5s.' Another student had 'horrendous outbursts of anxiety' and got six GCSEs. If a student can't cope with an exam in a hall setting, they go straight to their own private room. Double (not triple, to some parents' disappointment) science on offer, as well as vocational qualifications ranging from horticulture to volunteering. There is a conscious emphasis on confidence-boosting and social skills before further education. As the head points out, re-entering a mainstream college at 16 'is a massive change for our pupils'.

The small sixth form allows students to retake or increase number of subjects, and offers independent workers the opportunity to take advanced courses, such as art. The sports leader course includes the opportunity to teach at a local primary – 'great for confidence,' we heard, with other courses in sports coaching, employability and social and personal development. No plans to offer A levels – too resource-intensive, claims school – but EPQ is popular, with one student having recently done one on the effect of the slave trade in the cotton industry in the north of England.

Teachers are described by parents as 'highly empathetic' and 'always pushing them to go the extra

mile but never with pressure.' But 'a bit slow off the mark with online face-to-face learning,' said parents about the school during Covid.

Learning support and SEN

Support is embedded into lessons and most have additional one-to-ones or group sessions, with the result that nobody feels different. We saw illustrated books of Treasure Island so as not to frighten readers off with dense text, and English books with highlighted sections for visual learners and photocopies in buff for dyslexic learners. Listening book activities and video support are also on tap. One teacher moves the desks for group discussion but shifts them back for the next so as not to discompose the children with autism. 'I like routine and it doesn't change here, that's why I like it,' one student told us. Not a school that issues laptops on arrival or uses iPads in every lesson, but they have 75 Chromebooks that are shared out and many students – especially those who with dyslexia - use their own laptops. Slower writers have a scribe, while others get extra time, prompts or their own room for exams. Sensory needs are catered for, including via the new sensory room, and we saw a mixed age group learning touch typing.

The arts and extracurricular

Friday afternoons (Tuesdays in juniors) are timetabled with a choice of activities, as after-school clubs clash with the long bus journeys. These change each term and include climbing, skiing or snowboarding at Hemel Hempstead, golf, fencing motocross, martial arts, ice skating (all payable extra). Other examples are yoga, cookery, chess, dance and computing.

In juniors, there's a Christmas play; in seniors, drama is on curriculum from years 7-9 and the more extrovert audition for plays such as Oliver, and up next, The Wiz. A separate drama studio is used for GCSE drama and there's a drama tech activity for non-performing children. LAMDA is popular. 'My son arrived absolutely terrified by the idea of performance but they've found a way of making the experience enjoyable,' said a parent. Everyone does music up to year 9 and music GCSE is available when there's the demand. Around a quarter learn an instrument, and music tech is on offer. Lovely, welcoming art studio is packed to the brim with pottery (they have their own potter's wheel), drawings and paintings with some imaginative results created on five big tables. In the small DT room, which includes 3D printer, we saw children beavering away designing desk-tidies – 'we've also made photo frames and clocks,' one told us. Sewing machines for textiles projects, while students in the cookery room were choosing countries' national cuisines.

Sport

Juniors get outside for PE nearly every day. 'Still features in seniors, just less of it,' commented a parent. Rugby, football, cricket, netball, tennis and rounders are the main sports, with more fixtures than in the past especially in football and netball. Panathlons and disability sports also played, with and against other schools, for which school has brought home silverware. Good facilities include a pitch for ball games, running track, cricket nets and two tennis courts though no indoor facilities bar the main school hall. Some KS2 and all KS3 pupils swim locally (in non-Covid times) – 'We were in shock when we saw how well our child could swim on holiday,' said a parent - and a nearby sports centre provides a climbing wall. Sports GCSE and BTEc are popular, but a parent cautioned, 'If your child was really sporty it wouldn't be the place for you – generally the children aren't team players so they do much better at single sports but as with everything here, they're encouraged to have a go which is brilliant.' A pupil told us, 'I didn't like sport at my old school because I never felt good enough but it's not like that here.'

Ethos and heritage

Founded in 1988 after the merger of two private prep schools, Egerton Rothesay – which lies just outside the historic town of Berkhamsted - has developed the original low-level buildings with a couple of timber-clad new additions. It's not going to win any architectural beauty contests ('it has a very temporary feel,' as one parent put it) but inside classrooms are cheerily decorated and there's a feeling of order and space. The science lab is old-school but functional and the libraries have sadly

been swallowed up for other needs since the pandemic. The sixth form room opens directly onto the grounds. Rowan, for children with complex learning conditions, shares the ground floor with a large dance studio, also used for PE and assemblies. Therapists and social communication specialists have their own wing with cosy, sensory room. Corridors are jazzed up with all manner of displays – everything from ‘word of the week’ to ‘I believe in my selfie’ in which students pinned their own photos up of eg a Blue Peter badge. Outside there’s a sensory garden, polytunnel growing fruit and veg (which staff can purchase) and plenty of field space. Younger ones have a small separate playground with cabin, climbing frame and tyres to swing from.

We were promised calm and that’s exactly what we go – zero rowdiness, with most of the children so engaged in lessons that they barely noticed us. Sensible sensory-friendly uniform - navy sweatshirt and navy skirt, grey trousers for boys. Lunch is prepared and cooked onsite and after trying that day’s fodder, we weren’t surprised to see excited looking students in the dining room – the menu: a delicious curry with trimmings (all deconstructed, as is the norm here even the pies).

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

The supervision team is headed up by the school chaplain and there are regular services at a local church in addition to two assemblies a week – this is a Christian school although they welcome all faiths and none. A system of ‘listening ears’ is available to students, which includes class teacher and base leader, although our year 9 guide reckoned he could talk to ‘anyone’ – ‘there’s really nobody that doesn’t know and understand you and notice if you’re not quite yourself.’ Four houses, named Plantagenet, Tudor, Stuart and Hanover get the year groups mixing together. ‘My daughter’s friendships were fading fast in her old school but now she has lovely friends,’ said a parent. Some children have difficulty going into school after holidays ‘and they are brilliant at allowing for that, using their practical strategies to help,’ said a parent.

Not much is needed by way of behaviour management – the detention system is rarely used, although the head will give internal or external suspensions for more severe transgressions and has permanently excluded two students in his tenure. Mainly, though, the mutual respect, drive to build confidence, positive rewards (there’s a merit and de-merit system) and a comfy, cooling-off room usually stops anything reaching crisis point. Bullying is rare, though school is not complacent about it, and no mobile phones are allowed in school until sixth form.

Parents appreciate how ‘you can pick up the phone or email any staff member at any time – you feel part of a family and everyone is frank – nobody feeds you nonsense.’ A home/school linkbook records a daily query, and termly parents’ evenings enabled frank face-to-face chats. The school goes that extra mile to keep parents in the loop, with bulk texts, bulk emails, twitter updates, a weekly newsletter and a phone-friendly website.

Therapy and staffing

A full-time SENCo oversees six SLTs, four OTs and seven maths and literacy specialist teachers (not all full-time). There is also a social and emotional development team of three who provide support eg calming sessions in the sensory garden, although no counselling or therapy is offered ‘as these children have to go back to normal lessons straight afterwards so we don’t think it’s the time to start digging deep and unearthing difficult issues.’ Dyslexia and dyscalculia teachers give tailor-made tuition, and a physio visits the more complex children, as required. A separate admin team works on timetabling and the statutory side of things, running annual reviews and funding etc.

The vast majority of students have either one-to-ones or group sessions (costs extra, usually four hours per week maximum) with at least one (often more) of these professionals in their separate annexe. The team also works in close collaboration with all teachers and in some cases comes into the class eg an OT to help with knife or washing up skills in a home cooking class. In juniors, a sensory timetable exists for the younger children’s attention needs in the form of calming and alerting activities, while Makaton signing is used by teachers in class to support communication where needed. The SLT also helps out within the class. Students with social difficulties can chill on

the beanbags in the sanctuary room. There is a distinct parents' evening to meet the therapists once a term. All staff are trained in first aid, including epilepsy care.

Pupils and parents

Students come from far and wide – as far as Greenwich in the south and Oxford in the west, with a school bus route working the 35-mile radius as much as it can, even for the youngest children. Parking has improved, making drop off and pickup less stressful. Not too much by way of a parent community, we heard from some parents, while others told us they'd made 'friends for life' – seems to depend where you live. The Friends of Egerton PTA arranges coffee mornings, quiz night and the winter fair.

Students converse naturally and respectfully and speak with confidence and insight. When we asked one what he liked about the school he told us, 'it's the routine, quiet, calm and understanding teachers – I used to dread going to school and I never feel that now.' Be sure to check the gender ratio in the year you apply for – overall it's 80:20 boys:girls.

Money matters

Eighty per cent of students are funded by their LA via EHCPs – the school currently works with 17 LAs. Several parents have had to brave tribunals for a place but while the school will offer 'heaps of information' it won't attend them.

The last word

An aspirational, intimate school that offers a highly flexible mainstream education with a thoughtful, caring approach and an abundance of individual attention. What it loses in showy facilities it gains in specialist teachers to boost confidence and surmount learning differences. 'My son had shut down with learning altogether before he came here and he's now a keen, curious and engaged learner – but most of all he's happy, confident and busy building life skills,' said a parent.