**Letter Re: Chiswick Schools response to current educational changes**

Dear Parents/Carers

You will have probably heard about the many imminent and proposed changes to secondary education in England such as the end of coursework and modular exams, the Ebacc, and a new “slimmed-down” National Curriculum. You will no doubt have wondered how these changes will affect your son/daughter at Chiswick School? I would like to take this opportunity of explaining some of the changes and how we intend to respond to them.

I should perhaps open by stating that the quantity and the pace of change we are experiencing is unprecedented. Change can be good and is certainly not something that we are afraid of at Chiswick; it is the pace of change and the lack of professional consultation that causes me and the majority of headteacher colleagues nationally, some concern.

Mr Gove appears to be fixated on an education system that belongs in the past. I went to a school not far from here where it was deemed a privilege to be selected to attend, yet my education was limited, entirely dependent on the personality of the teacher to inspire and engage and designed to develop a privileged elite. The quality of teaching was a matter of chance and if you fell by the wayside it was deemed your own fault and your own responsibility to recover. Getting good grades was more dependent on being good at exams than being good at a subject and we were drilled in exam technique and guided how to avoid revealing our weaknesses because the tests employed a limited and often predictable range of questions that we had practised in advance. O’ Level is therefore not a gold standard to which I would aspire.

Having had the privilege of teaching since 1984 as a classroom teacher, middle, then senior leader, and for the last seven years as headteacher, I can honestly say I would prefer to have been educated by the present cohort of teachers and within the present system, for all its faults (and there are many). The emphasis in raising standards should not be on what is taught as much as how it is taught. We should not be involving schools in expenditure on new resources for a new curriculum when the investment ought to be in improving the art of teaching and on how schools can address the cultural deficit that limits so many of our young people. That is the factor that is the hardest to tackle and that we are avoiding by concentrating on the minutiae of the curriculum. We need to make space for experiences and enrichment and develop the means by which we can judge its impact.

As a profession, we have all accepted the absolute necessity of accountability in raising standards but not enough thought and research is going into how we hold teachers accountable, because that has as much impact on what is taught as the curriculum.

I would be so bold to suggest that what we need as a nation is a generation competent in the basics but excited by new possibilities and eager to acquire new skills (skills that their teachers may well not have) and it is those in the middle of the ability range and below that we need to skill and motivate, not drill into boredom and disengagement.

Some of the major changes being forced through are to the exams structure. These changes are driven by a perception that the English system is falling behind progress made by teenagers Internationally. This is by no means factual, as recently released data demonstrates that we have in fact improved our International standing over the last three years. Wherever the truth lies, the reality is that coursework will no longer be valued and from next year, students will be assessed through terminal assessment (examinations) only.

Chiswick School has improved dramatically in recent years and there are so many reasons for this, some noticeable ones being:

* We have single-mindedly concentrated on improving the quality of our core function: teaching and learning. We employ the best teachers and support them to continually improve. This requires a culture where teachers feel comfortable to take chances as they stretch personal boundaries and ask more of our students
* We have worked hard to give Chiswick students a voice. This is often superficial in schools but at Chiswick I am proud to say that we now have an active Student Council who bridge between their respective year groups and the senior team and governing body. It is their school so this is only right and proper.
* Our curriculum is flexible, challenging and offers progression for students of all abilities. In fact, I would go as far as to say that it is truly world class! This ensures that our students do not reach dead ends and are always pushed to achieve even more
* We have detailed plans on how to improve the environment so as to make it fit for 21st century education. For too long this has been neglected at Chiswick. We are blessed with solid buildings steeped in history and 1970’s buildings that let’s just say...lacked a certain amount of vision! Our students deserve the best and we are pulling out all the stops as we endeavour to make the impossible, possible

Through the above we have discovered a newfound confidence to do what is right for our students. There was a time (perhaps not so long ago), where Chiswick waited for others to lead the way whilst we obediently reacted. We now have the confidence and courage to take a lead and steer our own path to improvement.

Our three-year vision document (posted on our website) provides stability and clarity in turbulent times; we know where we want to go and how to make Chiswick truly outstanding. No amount of imposed external change will derail us from this vision.

Government emphasis centres on the introduction of the Ebacc (which singles out Maths, English, Science, History and/or Geography and a foreign language as a combined certificate). A great number of Chiswick students already study this combination of subjects and we will continue to encourage all students who can pass these subjects to take them.

By omission the Ebacc marginalises the arts. Our vision document however places an increased emphasis on this area. This is an area of strength at Chiswick and one in which many of our students excel. Ditto PE which is hardly mentioned within government reforms but is again strong at Chiswick. I mention these two subjects specifically but there are others that have been sacrificed at the altar of the Ebacc.

We firmly believe that selective adoption of Information Technology is a part of 21st century learning and one that it would be wrong to ignore at Chiswick. We are working hard on plans to innovate strongly in this area from September.

I am concerned that vocational education appears to have little value within the new structures. Whilst I applaud the deletion of examinations that have no relevance or progression, we have to recognise that students learn in different ways and will follow different progression routes with not all students wishing or able to attend university. We will continue to seek out relevant vocational paths for our students and will work with local business/industry to ensure that our students are offered relevant and exciting progression routes.

Finally, I am as passionate about the teaching of poetry as the next man, but I would no more dream of forcing all children to learn poems by heart than I would cane them for not remembering their tables. Poetry is playing with words. The poems we learn by heart do stay with and enrich us, but only if learned out of love and the thrill of discovery.

We will make key decisions this term and will of course keep you fully informed and involved as progress is made, rest assured that all decisions made will be in the best interests of Chiswick students.

T. Ryan (With inspiration taken from discussion and dialogue with other school leaders)

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