

# The Good Schools Guide review – Bethany School

## Head

Since 2010, Mr Francie Healy. A graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, he began his teaching career at an inner city school in Dublin, before taking up a post as maths teacher at Bethany in 1989. He's never wanted to leave the place, and grew his role to head up the IT department, then through director of studies, academic deputy and deputy headship. He doesn't, however, plan to stay quite as permanently as two previous heads, who are buried in the grounds.

'Genuinely held in high regard by the students. He is also very funny,' commented one parent. Not many heads would go to the lengths he did in a charity raffle which resulted in him changing places with a pupil for the day. He rang the school's uniform supplier to ensure he could be properly kitted out for the day, and queued up with his tuck money at break.

Known for his friendliness to both parents and pupils, it's hard to imagine any stern reprimands delivered in his County Clare burr. As we wandered through the sixth form common room and the boarding houses where pupils were converging at lunchtime, we noticed how relaxed the children remained in the head's presence – there was no straightening up or jumping to attention.

'Loves those children with a passion,' a parent told us.

## Academic Matters

Bethany is characterised as a mainstream school with a specialist learning support department, and around one-third of pupils receive support for specific learning difficulties, and 45 foreign nationals have English language support. Its day intake is also skewed by the density of grammar schools in the region, which tend to cream off the top achieving pupils at 11. Given its broad ability range, it produced a very decent 44 per cent at A\*-B at A level and 53 per cent A\*-B at GCSE in 2015.

As a small secondary it also appeals to those not suited to the rough and tumble of bigger schools. 'The small class sizes and, therefore, closer relationships with the staff have really helped her find her feet,' commented one parent. One boy who has moved here from another secondary told us, 'The difference here is the teachers spend more time with you'.

The broad ability range is catered for through setting and an individualised approach. 'Get to know and understand the child, then you appreciate how that child learns and thinks. Then you set targets, and as soon as those are reached, raise them,' is Healy's approach.

Those on full learning support are not expected to study a language. Others who don't have an aptitude for languages are free to choose an alternative subject for GCSE. Only those in the top two sets study English literature in addition to English language. 'Bethany treats its pupils as individuals and is really flexible, it will change the timetable to suit the pupils, not the other way round like most schools,' said a parent.

Setting begins in English, maths and science from year 7. We saw this at work in English classes, where one group was tasked with finding unfamiliar words in the dictionary, and

composing a sentence with them. All were working on laptops. Another group were looking at how sound and visual effects were conveyed in a piece of writing. The EAL group meanwhile were working separately on language skills.

Science is moving to the three individual subjects (previously all pupils took the dual award), enabling the strong scientists to do all three, and those who are less keen to opt for one or two science subjects. There are two well-equipped labs each for biology, physics and chemistry. Pupils were working on decomposition – looking at bread under what they told us were the optimum ‘wet and warm’ lab conditions, as well as a dead bird they had handily found outside.

Pupils will also begin a different IT course in 2016, as the school opts for computing instead of ICT, which focuses more on coding.

Mandarin is introduced from year 7, and the school has an exchange programme with Taiwan. This, says the head, is because 28 per cent of the world’s economy will be Chinese by 2050.

Food tech is compulsory for years 7 to 9 (split for half of the year with design technology), and in the sixth form, where they do a ‘university gourmet for life course’ to prepare them for living away from home.

DT has a good following to A level, and the workshops are well equipped with all the kit to cut, stick and mould. A level students were hard at work on their final exam pieces, the range clearly indicating their own interests - a golf cart, electric guitar, go-kart, a desk with a built in fish tank, and a dog house.

The work on display in the art rooms is a joy to behold – some catwalk-worthy costumes on mannequins produced by the A level textile students, and tremendous portraits by the art students. Others working on installation pieces were allowed to take over whole areas of the art room – one based on the birth of a lamb, complete with sound effects, straw bales strewn with lambswool, and film footage.

There is no requirement at sixth form to stick to the traditional/academic subjects. Those wishing to take three creative subjects are free to do so, and the school also offers two BTECs, in sport and business. ‘They truly do find what you are good at and therefore make the things you aren’t so good at much less important,’ said a parent.

Learning support is given either as full support (10% of timetable) or part-time support (3%). This is all timetabled with no sessions outside of school hours, as Healy says, ‘pupils with learning support work harder in lessons therefore they are the last pupils who should be getting extra lessons’. So the support is given instead of French in years 7 to 9, and in place of one GCSE in years 10 and 11.

Support for external exams is reportedly excellent, and we saw a small group in the learning support room being coached in revision techniques. In year 9, the learning support team sift through the whole year group to establish who should apply for exam concessions, and who might need to get an educational psychologist’s report.

All of the pupils have a laptop or iPad, so use of these in lessons is no big deal, and the school uses Dragon speech recognition and Read & Write Gold dyslexia software.

All children receiving support will have an IEP (individual education plan) which identifies strengths, weaknesses, strategies, and targets. Subject teachers can look up the strategies for that individual child - which might be asking short questions; looking at the resources they are giving out and ensuring key words are highlighted; using coloured overlays; using cards so the child doesn't blurt out the answer; and advising where they should sit in the classroom.

The school's specialism is dyslexia, so this is the area of need where you will find the best support, but parents suggest it is not as focused and effective for other areas of special need.

Parents commented on the stability of the teaching staff – that the same people were there as the child reached the top of the school as when they joined. 'On the very odd occasion that teachers have not been up to scratch, issues have either been dealt with, or the teacher has been replaced,' said one parent.

### Games, Options, the Arts

There are compulsory activities four afternoons per week. Teaching finishes at 3.40pm, and after a 20 minute break, children go to activities which finish at 5pm. The wide range of options includes the likes of chef's school, bushcraft, horse riding, sailing, model making, symphony orchestra, life saving and pilates.

Bethany is a very creative school, and those who like to tread the boards are well catered for. Ex-pupils include the Brit award winning music producer Charlie Andrew, who pops back to cheer on the pupils. Music productions are reportedly terrific - one father's voice was breaking with emotion as he recalled a performance from the previous evening. Music teacher Grant Tunbridge 'turns them into gold', he said.

Everyone does sport all afternoon on Wednesday - alongside the traditional team sports there's options to suit all including clay pigeon shooting, tennis, basketball, badminton and table tennis.

Sport is an inclusive affair, with fixtures matched to schools of similar standard – one or two parental grumbles that standards in sport are not demanding enough. But Bethany also caters for hotshots, with current pupils including a boy ranked third on the European golf circuit, and a pupil placed 16th in the world for sailing. Arrangements are made for the sporting stars to catch up if they need time out of school to attend key competitions. As they were for a boy who had acting commitments, and was allowed to take his A levels over three years.

Sixth formers have a Young Enterprise Company – they sell shares in it, with the aim to give a dividend back. They choose a different product to sell each year, and outside advisers come in to give timetabled sessions on business strategy. Pupils learned an important lesson when they tried to sell scented candles at a Christmas ice rink at the wrong price point.

### Boarders

Around one-third of the 355 pupils board, and around 40 per cent of the boarders are international students. One weekend in each half term is designated as a 'home' weekend, but full boarders and overseas students can remain in school for these weekends.

Most weekends will find about 80 students in residence. There's no Saturday school, but Saturday activities – trips to Brighton, London, Thorpe Park, shopping trips, sporting activities – are compulsory. Sunday activities are optional.

There are three boys' boarding houses, one for girls, and a co-ed one for the sixth form. In the sixth form block all rooms are singles with ensuite bathrooms, modern, and a reasonable size. Some sixth formers stay in the houses for younger pupils if they want a leadership role, or prefer to live in the sixth form house – this has smaller rooms, which are not ensuite. Younger pupils' dorms vary from twin to five bed rooms.

The last ISI inspection report relayed pupils' complaints about the food – this has been addressed by a supper boarding committee, and greater sensitivity to the preferences of international students.

### Background and Atmosphere

None of the usual eau de cabbage, trainers and pencil shavings smells greet you here – instead you catch wafts of strategically placed aromatherapy diffusers.

The school is a mixture of the glitzy and homely. Classroom blocks are utilitarian – you could be inside a comprehensive school. 'We don't do posh,' says the head. You might beg to differ when it comes to the facilities – a swanky £1.7m swimming pool; a fitness room groaning with running machines ('five grand each'), rowing machines, weights and exercise bikes; the cricket pitch and pavilion, tennis and squash courts. A digital performing arts centre with a performance space, practice space, concert space, and the digital equipment to film, edit and make music is in planning.

The school has a strong Christian ethos, and chapel twice a week is compulsory. But head says the sermons have a moral rather than religious bent.

### Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

'Seem to have them on a long flexi-lead which they will let out quite far, but they know when to pull it in,' said a parent.

There's no pussy-footing around on the serious issues, though – boarders are checked for drug-taking by random mouth swabs and the occasional appearance of sniffer dogs.

Pupils are made aware of their relative privilege, and duty to those less fortunate. The head reeled off a series of recent charitable events, including a tour to South Africa where pupils helped to build a school in a township. 'They can bring an idea and know they will be listened to,' says Healy, relating how the school celebrated the Indian Festival of Colour at the behest of three year 8 pupils, who successfully convinced him that its tradition of dousing each other in coloured dyes would be a great post-exam stress reliever. They raised funds for Unicef in the

process.

'Bethany has the knack of bringing out the best in each and every child, not only academically, but by drawing out hidden talents, and recognising the gifts and abilities children have that are not measured by grades or traditional accolades,' summed up one parent.

Parents are given email addresses for all staff, including the head, and there's a policy to respond within 24 hours. Healy's first step as head was to make all his correspondences on first name terms. Parents agree this helps to build relationships, and that any issues are dealt with quickly.

## Pupils and Parents

The school is set in the middle of nowhere but a fleet of buses bring the day pupils in routes from Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks, Tenterden, Kings Hill and Frant.

About 15 per cent of pupils are international students, hailing from Russia, Ukraine, Europe, China, Hong Kong, USA, Nigeria, South Africa, Cambodia, and South Korea. The biggest group – around one-third of the total – comes from Hong Kong and China, but the school keeps numbers in any particular year group small to encourage them to converse in English.

Its dyslexia provision is a lure, but its small and nurturing ethos also attracts those pupils who would find the hurly-burly of a large comprehensive too much to cope with, and the parents who want something more holistic, and to avoid the treadmill of the highly competitive schools. The head's own three children have been through the school - the elder two now at university, and the youngest is in the sixth form. His daughter got 10 A\*/As at GCSE, proof indeed that they cater for the high fliers.

There's a preponderance of boys, owing perhaps to its one-time legacy as a boys' school, or the fact that boys tend to be diagnosed with dyslexia more readily than girls. 'I would tell prospective parents of girls to check that there are enough girls in the year group, as some year groups have literally a handful of girls which would have made our experience of the school very different,' advised one parent.

However we also heard repeatedly of the friendships that form between different year groups, perhaps making the girl issue less of a thing than it might be in schools where friendships stick rigidly within year groups.

The parent community is also warm and supportive, we were told – to the extent that 'a number of parents choose to remain involved with Bethany once their children have left,' according to one parent.

## Entrance

Pupils wishing to join in years 7 to 9 take the school's own entrance assessments. Sixth form applicants need to be predicted at least four C grades at GCSE level, although for some subjects a grade B is preferable. Overseas students can take assessments at their current school, and have their headmaster's interview via Skype.

Where a student has additional learning needs, the staff will, if necessary, go and see them in their current school, consider school and educational psychologist reports, and sometimes suggest that the prospective pupil spends some time at Bethany. They will usually be looking for standardised scores no lower than 90 (where 100 is average), but this can be flexible where a child has a particular ability in some areas. Autistic students are considered if high functioning, and if they can manage appropriately in the school environment (one former autistic pupil is expected to get a first in her university degree). The school promises that if the pupil is not best suited to Bethany, they would always recommend an alternative school to approach.

## Exit

Two-thirds to three-quarters of pupils stay on into sixth form, and at this point leaver numbers are matched with new entrants. Those leaving at the end of year 11 are usually those not best suited to an A level curriculum, and they go into higher level apprenticeships or further education courses. Joiners come from overseas, or for the curriculum choice. One girl came because her school wouldn't let her do three art A levels – at Bethany she achieved A\* in each of art, photography and textiles.

At the end of sixth form more than 90 per cent go to university, and the school's creative bent sees high numbers achieving places at the top art and design colleges – one recently grabbing one of only 30 places in the country on an automotive design course.

## Money Matters

Scholarships (10 to 20 per cent of the fees) are offered for entry into year 7, year 9 and the sixth form in art, dance, drama, music, technology and sport. Academic scholarships are also offered to a maximum value of 40 per cent of fees. Two special scholarships called Christopher Jackson Scholarships can pay up to 100 per cent of fees, and bursarial awards are available covering 30-50 per cent.

## Our View

What we loved here was the sense of letting children be free to be who they want to be. There's no shoehorning into option blocks, or diktats about studying certain loathed subjects. If they want to do three art A levels, fine, if that's what they're good at. Dyslexic? Then no need to do a language. The result: happy children, free to do what interests them, and all the more successful for it. 'We let the children excel at what they are good at,' says the head. We wish a few more schools would follow Bethany's lead.

If you have a creative, goes against the mould child; or the deep thinker who can't bear the hustle and hassle of a huge school; or a bright dyslexic; or you just can't stand the competitive treadmill of some schools – then you have found your place.