



Bournes Green Junior School

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Dear Parents,

Firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a wonderful Easter holiday, full of good food and family laughter. Also to ask you if there are any amongst you, or your family, who might be interested in giving a talk to the school, or just to a class, about any workplace experiences/ hobbies/ travel experiences etc that might act to inspire, or expand children's understanding, of the wider world. If you are, or know someone who might be, please ask them to contact the school office office@bournesgreen-jun.southend.sch.uk, and I will have a chat to see what we can sort out. These chances for children are unique and I cannot tell you how valuable (and enjoyable) the children find them. We have had a superb example of this working in Yr6 and it would be great to expand the provision. So if you think you might be up to the challenge, please drop us a line, for an informal meeting to discuss possibilities – you won't be put on the spot, or pressured into doing anything you are not sure of!

On another note, I have been made aware that during the recent parent/teacher consultation evenings, there was concern that in other schools within the local area, there are seen to be "11 plus clubs" in operation and that feedback from these was very positive and had led to a huge increase in results.

I am very grateful to these parents for bringing these issues to our attention. I have also been made aware recently that there are concerns being voiced amongst parents, that there has been a recent reduction in numbers of children attaining a selective place. I feel I must emphatically state that this is not the case at all and, in fact, is quite the reverse.

Between 1997 and 2010, the annual percentage of Yr 6 achieving selective Grammar School places has fluctuated between a high of 54.5% and a low of 40%. In 2007 and 2008 we had two unprecedented years with 68% and then 66% offered a selective place, followed in 2009 by a return to more usual numbers of 45.5% and then 54% in 2010. Over the past decades there is nothing to suggest a pattern of either an increase or decrease in percentages of children achieving a selective Grammar School place. However, there is one difference that is significant.

In **2000/1** only **69%** of the year group **sat the selective exam**; this has now risen to over **90%** in **2009/10**. Having a greater percentage of children entering the exam does not, unfortunately, mean that a greater number will be successful. Whilst a similar percentage of the year group attained the required grade, the **increase of 20%** in the number of candidates sitting the tests means that there were relatively more disappointed children and parents. This creates the impression that there is a greater level of failure and the outcome is inevitably, over-pressurised and disappointed children and parents. Evidence has shown that our teaching staff do a very good job in assessing those children for whom a high-pressure, academic Grammar School education is both attainable and appropriate. Parents are advised of their recommendations through parent/teacher interviews.

I know, as a parent, that these decisions are not taken lightly. There is huge pressure within the community to do the best for your child by using tutors to attain a selective place. There is actually more evidence that it is through developing the habit of holding lengthy, in-depth academic discussions, within the family setting, about all sorts of subjects, that has the greatest effect on children's future academic happiness, wealth and opportunities (ironically this is the principle factor that sets good boarding school education above other systems, as they find it easier to set aside appropriate time for such informal debates).

Due to our large number of highly academic children, we have always felt it necessary to address the issue of 11 plus preparation in a holistic manner. We have always held it our duty as a school, to prepare children in such a manner that they may achieve their potential in any test. As such, the curriculum in Yr 5 and Yr 6 is adjusted to deviate from the limitations of the National Curriculum to incorporate specific techniques and practice, invaluable to children wishing to enter the selective tests and useful as stimulating exercises for everyone.

From Easter, children in Yr 5 regularly investigate and practice Verbal Reasoning (VR) examples, as part of their early-morning work. This is linked to include practice in aspects of Maths and Literacy, not covered by the National Curriculum. VR, as early-morning exercises, continues in Yr 6 and practice papers in VR, English and Maths are set and marked with the children. Time is given to explain specific exam techniques, identifying and picking-up on areas of weakness. This process culminates by providing children with a practice set under "exam conditions", to help children rationalise the experience they will face when sitting in a strange hall on the following Saturday.

During this process, we develop invaluable understanding as to the children's particular strengths and weaknesses, in terms of those taking this type of selective test and the implications this has on their ability to work in a rigorously academic manner in a Grammar School situation. We feel very strongly, that in managing this situation as part of our whole school approach to education and incorporating it within the normal school day, we offer a less stressful and often more digestible route into the selective testing process.

As with three years ago, I contacted all the Junior and Primary schools east of Hamstel Junior School, in order to ascertain their provision. I have also contacted Heycroft Primary School and West Leigh Junior School. Most of these schools do run "11 plus clubs", running either after-school, before school, or during lunchtime. They nearly all run once a week and most run from the Easter holiday in Yr 5, up to the time of the test (in Yr 6), sometime in November. However, none of them (with the exception of West Leigh Junior School) have anything like the numbers of children entering the selective tests that we have. We could expect 60+ children to be interested in a club of this sort and we simply do not have the resources to cope with those numbers outside of the normal classroom environment.

If we were to offer an out-of-school "11 plus club", it would have two effects; the first would be that we couldn't continue to run our 11 plus programme within the curriculum, as the materials would already have been covered and, as such, in many cases, lose their value as educational tools; the second would be that we would have to limit numbers and in doing so, tell parents whether or not the school would offer their children any help at all. This is what seems to happen at many schools where the total number of children sitting the 11 plus selective test, is significantly smaller than it is at Bournes Green. We feel that the frequent, familiar and supportive approach applied by our class teachers in years five and six, as a part of a whole school approach to teaching and learning, offers a far more effective and inclusive option to both parents and children. It is worth noting that this is also the methodology adopted by West Leigh in reaction to their similar high numbers of children involved in sitting the selective test.

I hope you can see that our commitment towards providing all children with the best tools and skills required for this test, is as high as any other school in Southend. Our response to the situation is one that has been effective for many years. As usual, if anyone would like to contact me about specific cases, or concerns, please do so as I am always delighted to discuss matters concerning the curriculum we offer and the potential to raise development of your children, whom we are privileged to hold in our care.

Yours sincerely,

Rupert Snow
Headteacher