

Good Schools Guide review

Head

Since 2014, Michele Anderson (40s). BEd in home economics from University of the South Bank in London, but has always taught geography. Her first headship. A Londoner who previously taught at selective and non-selective schools in south London and Kent, new to Lincolnshire. 'I was looking for a headship but was very particular about the school I wanted. As soon as I walked through the door here I knew as "the feel" was just right,' she says. Finding her feet with plans for 'fine tuning and funding.' Parents are positive about the new incumbent. 'She's fantastic; she knows exactly what she wants and where she wants to take the school,' said one enthusiastic mother. 'I like her and she has integrated herself well, getting to know everyone,' said another. Getting her face known locally and forging links with other schools in the area. Still teaching geography to the year 8s and 9s, 'I love teaching and the worst thing about being a head is that I can't do more of it.' Well aware of teenage angst. 'In the upper academic ability groups stress and anxiety levels are much the same, whatever the gender. We laugh a lot and eat cake here, and it helps. I have never been to a school with so much cake.' Husband is a house husband, a great eye opener for the girls. 'I couldn't do it without him.' Daughter just started here.

Academic Matters

As expected for a selective grammar, results are good. In 2014, 42 per cent A*/A at GCSE and 35 per cent at A level (69 per cent A*-B). 'We get lots of homework,' said one of our guides, 'but they teach us how to manage our time and motivate ourselves. We are pushed to work at the best of our ability.' 'They are pushed academically,' said one parent, 'but are well supported.' All parents report feedback from staff is very good. 'If there is a problem we are made aware of it.' Spanish for all, French, German and Latin – good to see at a state school – also on offer at GCSE. Languages lowish take up at A level, but growing. Just under half take the triple science GCSE, sciences popular at A level. Sociology, sciences and psychology top A level subjects. The lessons we observed showed diligent girls working hard; this lot have got their heads down and are getting on with it.

Class sizes are large, up to 30. The occasional boy in A level science groups – they get good results, hence their presence. Gifted and talented are spotted from year 7 onwards, meaning extra work and more challenges. Art very popular with a thriving department that achieved gold Artsmark this year. Great to see the art rooms decorated by the girls from the gifted and talented group; they are given a free rein with the paints and their creativity. IT lessons for all, year 8s building their own websites. A relief to poke our head in the computer rooms and experience a blast of cold air from the air conditioning. Some of the other classrooms were stifling and stuffy – outside temperatures much the same though, to be fair.

Tech block very well equipped with lots of girls' work on display. They have a lathe, laser and 3D printers, quite unusual for a girls' school – no sexism here, hurrah. Textile room impressive. More cake being made in the food tech rooms. Sixth form has its own IT rooms, plenty of computers available. Tea and coffee making facilities in the roomy common room along with a microwave. A new tea urn is a recent purchase.

Number of pupils with EAL is 36 and rising, so more provision being made. Quite high for a rural area, but many Eastern Europeans settling and now educating their children locally.

Very few pupils on SEND list but provision made, usually within the classroom. Individual or small group support available from specialist teachers if needed.

Games, Options, the Arts

The cabinets are stuffed full of silverware at this school. Quite a few girls playing sport to county standard, or higher. They have a budding golfer and a competitive riding team. All non-school sporting achievements are acknowledged and accommodated. 'My daughter is sometimes away playing at a tournament and the school staff are very understanding. They give her full academic support.' Lots of teams throughout the school, including chances for the less able, but enthusiastic, to play. Interesting to see that they play lacrosse, unusual for a state school. Also successful football and cricket teams. Plenty of pitches, including AstroTurf. No swimming pool but impressive gym and fitness suite that is well used.

Plenty of girls learning musical instruments, tapering off in the upper years. Singing lessons very popular. Lots of clubs, sport and drama, as well as orchestras. Drama is a popular GCSE and A level subject. Whole school involved in productions of eg Oliver! The lower sixth runs clubs for younger girls including drama, pop choirs and orchestras. Winter and spring concerts held each year involving all year groups. Each subject has a club as well. All clubs are run at lunch times as after-school not successful because of the large area girls travel from. D of E offered up to silver only.

Background and Atmosphere

Based at its present site for 50 years; the 60s architecture is not particularly inspiring. Go inside and it's another story altogether. The head's description of 'the feel of the place' is apparent straight away. We were greeted with smiles from the girls running a cake stall in reception for charity – yet more cake. The main building has lots of bright airy spaces. Large windows letting in lots of light. Some very narrow staircases and corridors but no sense of overcrowding. All very

disciplined at lesson changeovers.

A school in the heart of the Fenland town of Spalding that has a strong sense of community, and is very much involved with it. A large school, that must seem vast to some of the girls coming from tiny village schools in the outlying rural areas. They're aware of this, and every girl is visited at her junior school prior to starting in year 7 – an admirable undertaking, as there are 70 of them. Successful induction days help, and a summer school is now attended by virtually all newcomers. Friendly year 8 mentors on hand as well.

Plenty of outside spaces for al fresco dining dotted around the school. Just as well, as according to one mother: 'There just isn't enough room in the dining room for the girls to sit down and eat together, something that I think is important.' Food given high praise by our guides. Delightful to walk outside and pick up the scent of roses from the flower beds.

Uniform in the process of being changed from short skirts to longer pleated ones. 'I would like to see the girls in blazers,' said one mother, 'but the pleated longer skirts are definitely an improvement.' Sixth formers wear their own clothes, but need to be smart.

A strong school council that appears to have influence. 'We campaigned for an extra study period and got it,' said a guide.

Pastoral Care and Discipline

All parents we spoke to praised the discipline. 'The girls know where they stand and what is expected of them,' was said more than once. 'They have a very strong mobile phone policy, that is adhered to strictly, excellent.' Pastoral staff are also teachers, a policy the head is very keen on. 'It means the pastoral staff know the girls well as they are with them in the classroom.' It appears effective. One parent told us, 'They quickly picked up an issue with my daughter and were in touch immediately.' Pastoral issues appear to be dealt with quickly and effectively. 'They know my daughter and the other girls well,' was said more than once.

The girls stay in the same form up to year 11 and are encouraged to socialise within that group. So much so that in year 7 they are not allowed to gather in other form rooms. 'It stops one room being completely overcrowded and makes us tighter with our own form,' said a mole. Sixth formers are encouraged to be mentors and have the 'Jackson Room,' where younger girls are encouraged to go to discuss any worries. Training is given to the volunteers who seem to be able to alleviate most tensions. Good to see that the school is aware of mental health issues and 'girls' problems' in general.

Pupils and Parents

The brightest girls in the area, from all backgrounds. Unusually for a grammar school, the vast majority of girls are not from more privileged homes, reflecting the area itself. A small, but growing contingent from Eastern European and Asian backgrounds. Friendly, happy girls with high aspirations, matching their parents. Many girls are second or third generation in their family to be pupils.

Entrance

Lincolnshire 11+ selection test sat by all pupils. All those who attain the grade are usually accommodated, even though the school is slightly oversubscribed. Pupils come from a large area covering South Holland, out to Wisbech and Peterborough in Cambridgeshire, with over 70 feeder schools. Entry to the sixth form, which is growing, requires six GCSEs grades A*-C including English and maths. Grade B or above in the subjects to be studied for A level. A handful of boys joins every year, mainly from the grammar school in the town.

Exit

Very few leave after GCSEs, less than 10 per cent, mostly to study vocational courses. A few to the local boys' grammar in the town. The vast majority of sixth formers go to university, about 25 per cent to Russell Groups. Very few Oxbridge, one or two a year. The odd apprenticeship or Forces. Very few gap years taken.

Our View

A friendly, successful school that many aspire to, and parents relish. Often chosen over local private education on offer, and we can see why. The policy of eating lots of cake is obviously working.