



The Good Schools Guide Review

St Dunstan's College Junior School - Summer 2021

Head

Since January 2020, Laura Whitwood (30s), previously acting head. Studied history and French at the University of Manchester; MEd (focus languages) and PGCE from University of Cambridge.

Miss Whitwood fits the current St Dunstan's model of appointing notably youthful heads. She is charming and approachable and we imagine is as popular in the staffroom as she is with parents and pupils. She also clearly loves her job. Confirmation of her appointment from acting head to head was made two months before Covid hit. Prior to that she was deputy head pastoral for three years, involved in the planning of the school's new Wellness Centre. She spent five years at Norwich High School for Girls before joining St Dunstan's.

'We've seen a lot of change over the year,' she says, and is rightly proud of the new building that the junior school has just moved into. 'We're in a very positive place now, going into a new building'.

She speaks of having 'an ambitious, forward-looking approach to education,' and we sense she is gentle when delivering this, with a commitment to pastoral care and an enjoyment of the facilities and educational opportunities the school offers. 'We want our pupils happy and settled and able to thrive academically' she says. Parents describe her 'brilliant', and speak of how hands on she is, 'she's everywhere'.

Tasked to look at languages provision 'with new eyes,' she is interested in the linguistic side of children's development. She still teaches French, and her masters was on the introduction of French in year 2 and year 6, including the need for strong links between secondary and primary school teaching so children don't regress during the transition. Her work around teaching languages as part of the early years syllabus feeds into the overall St Dunstan's ethos of studying two languages in the junior school (and Latin or classical civilisation in the senior years) until just prior to GCSEs.

At heart a Norfolk 'country girl' who loves walking, nature and swimming, she also enjoys the swing of London life, visiting museums and the cinema as well as spending time with her friends.

Entrance

Mainly from Forest Hill, Dulwich, Orpington, Greenwich Catford, Bromley, East London, and Canary Wharf. 'I'm delighted to say we're full,' says head. One form entry in nursery; two form entry from reception and three form entry from year 3. Main intakes at 3+, 4+ and 7+. Small, informal group assessments for 4+, taster sessions, friendly welcome assembly, age specific (in years and months) computerised assessments for 7+. Emphasis on making children feel relaxed and welcome. Some occasional places, so worth asking.

Exit

Majority (80-90 per cent) continue on to St Dunstan's College. Those who don't usually head for local grammar schools or relocate abroad or to the country. Junior school pupils do not sit the 11+, and the data gathered from junior school is used to make offers in year 5. There is a successful rate of junior school pupils being awarded senior school scholarships.

Our View

Our trip around the brand new junior school building started with a visit to the woodland classroom (full marks for establishing one of those in the inner city) where nursery children cling to fallen logs like brightly-coloured bear cubs, dismounting only to show us the frogspawn in the little pool. Looking at one girl, a teacher remarks, 'her outdoorsy parents thanked us for turning her from a bit of a nervous girl into this little roughty-toughty.' During 2021, nursery was mainly conducted outside as part of the Covid health provision.

A sense of outdoors continues into the junior building, with floor to ceiling windows in each of the spacious classrooms. Acoustic damping means the doors can be left open onto the wide corridors. Each classroom has an outdoor learning area and there's a communal roof terrace, with plans for children to plant a garden and design outdoor learning equipment and furniture in the pipeline. The junior school also has access to generous playing fields and a multi-use games area right outside the building.

We were impressed to come across one of the SEND learning support coordinators taking several children through an active 'circus skills' session to tamp their energy and awaken fine motor skills before joining the rest of the class. About 12 per cent of the junior school pupils have a diagnosed learning need, mostly mild, a few moderate. The school has a strong SEND department with a SENDCo, junior and senior school learning support coordinators and junior specific learning support assistants.

St Dunstan's uses the international primary curriculum alongside an enriched and enhanced national curriculum and this breadth chimes well with the co-curricular approach in the senior school. Children learn both French and Spanish from years 3 to 6 (by year 6 French is fully immersive and ready for the school trip - five nights in Burgundy), and German is offered as an enrichment opportunity. There is a popular, school-wide 'languages day' and plans to introduce Mandarin as an additional co-curricular option.

Teachers seem unfazed by the pandemic, new leadership or the major build – any one of which would herald significant transformation – but do say the rate of change has been ‘huge.’ Another spoke about making children into ‘life long learners’ and mentions the year 6 independent research project as an opportunity for children to see the point of learning – ‘when you see the purpose, that sparks learning.’ Certainly the classes looked busy and interesting and parents frequently mentioned the enthusiasm of the staff. Asked about children who might not enjoy St Dunstan’s junior school, a teacher’s response was straightforward, ‘children who don’t see the value in giving things a go.’

Pupils are expected to read every day; teachers helped choose the books that populate the library, which is replete with reading ‘thrones’ and nooks and crannies to hide away in. Homework is reasonable and increases in each section of the school, with prep homework sessions laid on in after school care (available until 6pm). Wraparound care from nursery, starting at 7.45am.

A ‘gender neutral’ core sports programme includes rugby, netball, football, swimming, hockey, cricket and rounders. The head boy opted to play netball instead of rugby in the Michaelmas term, and girls play rugby. There is a swimming pool on site, and the school takes part and hosts regular fixtures, including competitive galas.

Albam Exorna (Adorn the White), is the motto of the school, with the idea that each child has a blank shield which they can populate themselves as they define their own character and interests. The co-curricular approach of the senior school is adopted here and the juniors have a wealth of subjects to try, including calligraphy, yoga, graffiti, or Warhammer, as well as learning about wellbeing and health. And, with health in mind, the food in the canteen is fresh and delicious. From year 2 to year 6, pupils also participate in the Pupil Parliament, which is part of a wider, whole College Pupil Parliament. We enjoyed talking to some year 6 pupils about their efforts to improve the school’s environmental impact including looking at school-wide recycling policies which help inform the school’s sustainability drive.

Overnight experiences begin in year 2 with pupils camping on the College field to grow accustomed to a night away from home; the evening includes a barbecue and mini Olympics. This builds up to residential visits in family-run, smaller locations where they are often the only school, and pupils learn skills like preparing food, clearing up and making beds.

There are many enrichment opportunities in music – year 4 has a Young Maestros event which includes taster sessions of six lessons funded by the school in woodwind and brass. This has a positive reaction from parents who say their children ‘need and love it’. Choirs for pre-prep, prep and whole college and the school has links with Southwark Cathedral where students can audition to join the cathedral choir. Particularly able junior musicians can join the senior school for guitar group, wind ensemble, senior orchestra and chapel choir. The art, too, is impressive. We saw children being taught drawing techniques that produced wonderful results, and the charcoal sketches were particularly impressive with some terrific portraits being worked up.

Parents we spoke to were friendly and down to earth, and clearly supportive of what the school is doing. One parent from the junior school estimated a 60/40 split of both parents working full-time, and there is an active parent group, the Friends of St Dunstan’s which fundraises for local charities, organising regular and popular events (the Cheese and Wine event is a firm favourite).’

Money Matters

Fees in line with other local preps. Financial support is available upon application through the College Benevolent Fund.

The Last Word

A busy, energetic school where pupils are offered a stimulating syllabus and fun activities. The prep has changed to become much more in line with the St Dunstan's College approach, particularly with the shared co-curricular syllabi and the emphasis on a broad and balanced curriculum. Children enjoy being part of a large, vibrant and, above all, active community, to the extent that parents report that their children are keen to continue their educational journey at St Dunstan's after year 6.