

THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE



St Dunstan's
College

The Good Schools Guide Review – St Dunstan's College, June 2021

Headmaster

Since 2014, Nicholas Hewlett BSc, PGCE (40s). Brief stint in the City, followed by a geography degree from King's College London and a PGCE at the Institute of Education. First teaching post was at Dulwich College followed by Magdalen College School, Oxford where he was head of geography and later housemaster. While in Oxford he also sang as a lay clerk at New College and performed as a tenor soloist.

Mr Hewlett, who became head of St Dunstan's aged 34, reflects with hindsight (and understatement) that the trust the Governors put in him could have been risky 'because I was so young.' The risk paid off. Seven years later he is still crackling with energy after overseeing a development programme worth £30 million that includes a new junior school, sixth form centre and STEM block. He and his team have also devised a 'renaissance' syllabus that leaves the national curriculum for dust. The school has enjoyed a significant increase in applications and won the Co-ed School of the Year Award in 2020.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Mr Hewlett predicts that the independent school sector will need to 'move with the societal temperature.' He is striking in his interest in change and social equity and challenged the heteronormative model personally, rather than theoretically, by coming out during an on-line senior assembly. The move garnered national and international media attention, something that left him 'a bit surprised, to tell you truth'.

He thrives leading this 'incredibly diverse' school that lives and breathes its motto, Albam Exorna (Adorn the White). Three quarters of the school crest are left 'white' or blank for each student to decide how to fill them in.

'St Dunstan's is in a golden era,' he says and with 94 per cent of 2020's year 13 pupils holding offers to Russell Group universities one has to agree. But it is not just golden because of academic results, Mr Hewlett stresses that these results are achieved because pupils participate in a school day that includes learning above and beyond the three R's – from sport, art and music to life skills such as how to make a barista-quality Cortado coffee. 'I want a school body full of hundreds of individuals who are at ease with themselves.'

Born and bred in South London, and educated at Whitgift, in 2011 he was part of the team that helped to lead a flagship school on the island of Jeju, South Korea, under the banner of North London Collegiate School. This might be why, when asked what he models St Dunstan's on, he says 'maybe a really, really good international school'.

Entrance

By ISEB followed by an interview. Entrance preparation scheme in place (for a fee), preparing candidates from all schools for the exams across three Saturdays. Entry from nearby primaries in Catford, Dulwich, Forest Hill, Orpington, Lewisham, Bromley, Greenwich - as well as East London and Canary Wharf - also Heath House Prep, Oakfield Prep, Rosemead Prep and the Pointer School.

Small 13+ intake for 2021 and 2022, candidates take English, maths and verbal and non-verbal reasoning papers. Prospective sixth formers are also required to sit papers in English, maths and verbal reasoning. Same interview process and references but the offer is conditional on GCSE grades. Music, drama, sport and art scholarships at 16+.

Registration up by 150 per cent compared to five years ago due to a surging academic profile and a hefty capital development programme.

Exit

Majority to Russell Group universities to study a diverse list of subjects that includes biomedical science, engineering (mechanical, chemical, aeromechanical, and design), architecture, film practice and neuroscience. Two to Oxbridge in 2020 and two medics. There's a dedicated medical school preparation scheme run by a member of staff, and a medical society that begins in year 10.

Latest results

In 2020, 61 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 82 per cent 9-6, 57 per cent A*/A at A level (87 per cent A*-B). In 2019 (the last year when exams took place), 57 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 35 per cent A*/A at A level (69 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

Pupils have 17 different subjects taught up to year 9, which, as well as academic topics, include music, art, sport, as well as CCF, Duke of Edinburgh, cookery, Warhammer, chess and a host of other interesting activities. 'We want them to do this while their neural pathways are young. This builds neuroplasticity and shows them how to learn better for GCSEs,' explains a teacher, while we try not to goggle at the timetabling challenge. Staff are young, energetic and engagingly foot forward - 'bright young people,' says a parent 'who don't lack maturity'. 'Teachers say try something new, try something different,' said another. Classics is compulsory until year 10, as are French, Spanish or German. One parent noted that having two languages plus Latin was 'a bit over ambitious'. Saying that, there are plans to introduce Mandarin as an option.

There was real velocity in the classes we saw, with students discussing whether evil is innate using

the Jamie Bulger killers as a case study in a religion, philosophy & ethics class or asking about the properties of photons in a physics lesson. We spotted a scanning electron microscope - loaned by the Natural History Museum - in one of the state-of-the-art science labs, and hopped on to the St D science twitter feed to see for ourselves the coccolithophores (ancient marine single celled organisms) in Norfolk chalk.

'The children are busy' is a phrase we heard a great deal from staff and parents, and as we walked through the school's airy new halls looking into humming classrooms, it certainly felt that way 'We ask a lot, but they are talented children,' a teacher adds. Huge value added for a relatively small school (c. 900 pupils). 'The breadth is really good,' says a parent, 'They've used their freedom from the national curriculum.' The students are 'not being hot-housed' says a parent and – in counterbalance to a demanding syllabus – the homework load is reported as 'not particularly heavy'.

Teachers have changed the marking system so the focus is on learning ability and potential, with reporting to parents in initial years focusing on students' approaches and attitudes to their studies through 'learning scores' rather than lots of grades.

Further up the school, years 12 and 13 take four A levels although most reduce to three and they also write a thesis as part of the St Dunstan's Diploma which provides an IB style global perspectives and critical thinking pathway. One parent noted that the range of A levels on offer wasn't as broad as expected, which was surprising given the breadth of curriculum at GCSE level.

Learning support and SEN

While academically selective, St Dunstan's encourages parents to disclose any SEN when applying. There is a team in place led by a SENDCo which includes two other learning support co-ordinators, one for the senior school, one for the junior. Emphasis is on keeping pupils in the classroom as much as possible. About 12 per cent have mild to moderate dyslexia in the secondary school and they can support pupils with mild ADHD and anxiety. The aim is to ensure the pupils experience 'as level playing field as possible' and to that end specific skills building activities are built into the co-curricular programme with ACE club, Shorts (a short story group), Lego teams to improve social interaction and Let's Talk for social communication.

The arts and extracurricular

The co-curricular programme ensures arts are timetabled into the day. Music standard is 'very good' says one parent, who notes that it's 'really unusual' to have boys carrying on with their musical education throughout senior school. Singing is popular and there is a number of choirs – including a community choir which parents can join. As well as a music director, each instrument group has a teacher leading it. Music has 'come on a lot' observes a parent, 'possibly because Mr Hewlett is himself a musician'.

Design and Engineering has a well-staffed department and fantastic facilities in the new STEM building, and the popularity of DE is reflected in the subjects chosen at university level, in particular the engineering subjects.

A highlight of the year is the two-week long St Dunstan's Festival. Some events such as the open

air cinema are open to the wider community. Students showcase music, drama – including community drama with actors drawn from across Catford – design, technology, sport and history. Recent senior school productions include Chicago and Legally Blonde.

Sport

Large spaces on campus where the juniors have a sports field and the swimming pool resides and more a few minutes' walk away on the Jubilee Ground, home to a sports centre and newly developed netball and tennis courts, football pitches and multi-use games areas. A gender-neutral sports programme gives access to cricket, rugby, hockey, netball, swimming and football, and St Dunstan's has one of the oldest fives courts in the country (currently being rebuilt). Some students on the Kent talent pathway for cricket, rugby, hockey and netball, and the school had great success in basketball at the Lewisham and London Youth Games. Fencing, water polo, yoga, dance and badminton, among many others are on offer at the senior school through the co-curricular Forder Programme, built into the school's timetable each day.

Ethos and heritage

Great care is taken to preserve the heritage of St Dunstan's which was founded in 1888. Academic, co-curricular, wellbeing programmes, and the school's additional curriculum, are named after former headmasters (Hecker, Forder, Usherwood, and Stuart) and the school motto - *Albam Exorna* - is frequently referred to by staff, pupils and parents. New build is understated, careful not to challenge the lovely main hall and other original buildings. The head often looks back to look forward, for example resurrecting the St Dunstan's Festival which had its origins in the 1990s, when the then deputy head, Dr Anthony Seldon, started a two and a half day Catford Arts Festival.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

The wellness centre (opened in 2018) is staffed all year and focuses specifically on student mental and physical health and well-being. Head has introduced a chaplain, as well as a counsellor and a full time nurse. There are several rooms where pupils can 'sit and be quiet', plus an old fashioned sick bay. The wellness centre has been an even more important part of the school as pupils come back after lockdown.

Inclusivity is a given here - the new build includes science laboratory desks that can be adjusted to accommodate wheelchair users and a lift.

The active College Parliament tackles issues like sustainability and being carbon neutral, diversity, inclusion and gender neutrality and also had a significant voice in the new build. Pupils are elected from Y6 upwards and those we met over lunch were good company - impressively articulate whether chatting about language and sexual politics or the optimum siting of the school buildings to avoid air pollution.

The head says that the focus on inclusivity and equality means that issues seen recently around Everyone's Invited have not been apparent, as the culture seems not to tolerate it. A couple of students referred to an instance where someone had made an injudicious comment on social media, which was given short shrift by the student body, and picked up at school.

The approach to discipline is one that focuses on the ‘collective good’, and is described by the head as having ‘restorative underpinnings’ with pupils ‘supported to build and maintain positive relationships and consider the impact of their decisions on the community.’

Pupils and parents

We have ‘possibly one of the most diverse student bodies of any private school,’ says the head. Parents mentioned the down-to-earth nature of the students: ‘They know they are privileged because they go to a good school, but they don’t have a sense of entitlement.’ One reported her children were unwilling to even sit entrance exams to other schools when they were progressing from the junior to the senior school.’ We spoke to a good mix of parents who were supportive of what the school is working towards. ‘Look, we’re in a part of London where 50 out of 50 councillors are labour. Many kids join from local state schools and some of us are reluctant private school parents. St Dunstan’s provides something that doesn’t have the feel of a traditional school and does embrace a current, contemporary outlook on life.’

Interesting group of alumni includes Chuka Umunna, Matthew D’Ancona, Michael Grade, Lord Drayson, and the Very Revd Dr John Hall, Dean of Westminster as well as a smattering of sports stars, a Nobel Laureate (Sir Martin Evans), musicians, actors and assorted high ranking military chaps and clerics as you go down the years.

Money matters

Fees competitive for the area, and generous means-tested bursaries available. Scholarships in music, drama, sport and art.

The last word

Diverse in every way – academically, socially, and intellectually. The St Dunstan’s ethos could come across as a bit ‘woke’ on paper, but in real life we found the school to be inspiring, both liberating and liberal thanks to interesting leadership, committed teaching and a very engaged student body. A great school for unstuffy polymaths.