

View on

Leicester Grammar School Trust

Head

Since April 2019 John Watson, previously head of Bablake School in Coventry. Degree from Oxford in classics and modern languages, PGCE from Exeter and advanced certificate in educational management from Leicester. He has also been head of department at Sevenoaks and Millfield and deputy head at Trinity School, Croydon. He was hugely respected by Bablake parents and pupils, not least because of an abseil down the school tower. Very quickly becoming equally liked by parents at LGS. We can see why — quite a gentle character but don't be fooled as his softly softly approach gets results. Likeable and personable.

Moved to Leicester Grammar to be principal of whole trust which incorporates three schools — 'It's refreshing to have this strategic role whilst also getting to know the children in my own school.' Quickly changed his title from CEO to principal and is taking the school back to its education roots rather than being a business. He's making it more personal and parents approve: 'He's brilliant, he's much more engaging and takes a personal interest in the children — something we did not always feel his predecessor did.' Pupils have noticed and appreciate it too.

LGS has always been an unashamedly academic hot house, but this head is placing a greater emphasis on wellbeing, empathy and the more rounded individual. Don't panic, academic results remain centre stage but — as he puts it — 'we are warming the place up a bit.' Parents completely on board — 'Results aren't everything' said more than one. 'The children are better prepared for life now.' 'I like his approach, he's good for the school.'

Entrance

Entry at year 7 based on an entrance exam covering maths, English and verbal reasoning. Some candidates interviewed. Almost half come from Leicester Grammar Junior School. All sit a transfer or entrance exam. Another 20 or so come from the prep class that is a year 6 group taught within the senior school. These children come from local primaries and gain automatic entry to the senior school as they have already sat an entrance exam. The remaining children mainly come from surrounding state primaries.

Entry to the sixth form requires minimum three 7s at GCSE in chosen A level subjects and three 6s. All external candidates are interviewed. Some 20 or so join the sixth form each year, mainly from state comprehensives. Very occasionally one will come from nearby boarding schools.

Exit

Around 15-20 per cent leaves after GCSEs, mostly to local sixth form colleges. Vast majority of pupils head to a Russell Group university — Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham, Bristol, Leicester, Newcastle, Exeter and UCL currently popular. Eight to Oxbridge in 2021. Around 20 per cent each year study medicine or biomedical courses (16 medics in 2021); economics and finance/accountancy also popular. Gap years becoming more common.

Latest results

In 2020, 79 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 55 per cent A*/A grades at A level (83 per cent A*-B grades). In 2019 (the last year when exams took place), 76 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 50 per cent A*/A at A level (82 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

This lot are high achievers. Most take 10 or more GCSEs. At least two separate sciences are compulsory — most do all three — as is one language. French, German, Spanish, Latin or Greek are the choices, and Italian is available too. DT well supported. Two Greenpower cars are raced each year. At A level, 26 subjects are offered, mainly traditional. Current head has introduced business and psychology which helps retain numbers and broadens spectrum — both well received. Maths, further maths and the sciences are very popular. 'The children are stretched but not to breaking point,' said a parent, although another wasn't quite so sure — 'I would like to see the foot slightly less on the accelerator. They are driven very hard.' One parent felt that 'the school doesn't seem to be very flexible when it comes to changing sets, up rather than down.' 'Teaching is good, excellent in many subjects and support is there. But I do worry slightly that the child in the middle, neither flying or struggling, might get overlooked,' commented another, though others disagreed, with one telling us, 'My second child is in the bottom third of the year and is treated no differently than my first who is in the top third. Both equally encouraged and supported.' Many staff are old pupils. Parents happy with lockdown teaching, particularly the second one where school really got into gear. Full timetable adhered to. 'They weathered the storm,' said one parent, 'they've done as well as they could have. Time will tell if the children kept up but I think they have, the school worked hard.'

The lessons we observed showed bright, engaged pupils, very keen to join in. Year 7 maths obviously inspired by their teacher, lots of arm raising and enthusiasm. Year 8 DT getting on with it, with very chatty, welcoming year 12s working hard on their own next door. Happy year 8s and teacher having fun cooking. Year 10s analysing Wilfred Owen poetry and keen to share the experience. The prep class sang to us in French. Sixth form classes varied from one-on-one in German to three studying politics. More in economics and labs. We liked the greenhouse just outside one of the labs, used for seedlings and cuttings during biology experiments. All focused. For such an academic hothouse there's a very relaxed, happy feel to the place.

Learning support and SEN

Learning support available. One child with an EHCP; 35 with cognitive/literacy need, 25 with physical needs and nine pupils with EAL, all fully supported. 'My child is dyslexic and was given extra English lessons rather than studying for a second language', said one parent. 'It was very well managed with no fuss and he achieved an A and A* in his GCSEs, which shocked and delighted us.'

The arts and extracurricular

Music and art very strong, particularly in the lower years. 'I specifically chose the school because of their strong music department,' said one mother. 'And if you play an instrument it's compulsory to be in some sort of band or group, which I think is excellent. It means that for a LGS pupil it is the norm. My daughter has made many friends, and in different age groups, as they are put in bands according to their ability.' 'Delighted to see boys in the choirs,' said another mother. Interesting that the music department is below the maths one. 'We get to hear lots of practicing and notice improvement during the week', one sixth former told us. There are 28 bands, orchestras, choirs and groups that meet to rehearse weekly. Lots of opportunities to perform with monthly, termly and annual events; these continued online. Also a music tour.

House singing and karaoke hotly contested, as is house drama. Drama productions last year were *To Sir, with Love* and *Alice*. The year before it was *Westside Story*.

Lots of artwork on display, particularly in the art wing, and it's good. Some of the teachers successfully sell their own work, other work by local artists brought in and displayed. A pity interest drops off in the sixth form, but those that carry on get very small tutor groups.

Sport

Sport becoming more of a focus and gaining momentum. Ex-internationals now on the staff and superb facilities on offer. Each year more than 70 pupils who achieve county representation, with regular representation at regional and international level. Some play in centres of excellence and academies of sport, both locally and nationally. Overseas team tours. Over 50 teams in the six major sports of Netball, Rugby, Hockey, Cricket, Athletics and Tennis; national titles in tennis for the last few years. 'The sports facilities are fantastic but I don't think they make the most of them, there only seems to be emphasis put on one rugby team per year, so it's a pity for the less able but equally keen players,' said one mother. The girls showing us around didn't agree, stating that 'there were lots of teams and practices.' Every parent commented on the 'fantastic facilities' that include numerous pitches, grass and Astroturf, lovely airy swimming pool, huge gym and a dance studio with mirrored walls. Oh, the joys of being in new premises.

Ethos and heritage

Founded in 1981 and originally located on the old grammar school site in the city centre. It opened with 97 pupils, but no sixth form. Ten years later it had 500 and a sixth form. There is also a junior school that opened in the early 90s on a separate site. Now both are together on the 75 acres at Great Glen. Stoneygate School (now LGS Stoneygate), just up the road, has also been incorporated into the Trust offering education up to age 16 and is less of an academic hothouse. Long driveway conceals the school from the road. Large signs and flying flags announces its presence. All buildings are new, but can't be described as architecturally appealing, in our view. Functional rather than aesthetic. It feels like a mixture of a hospital and an airport, when you drive in. A one way system with parents seemingly dropping off on the move; no-one stops. Very efficient but slightly soulless. But what can you expect from such modern premises? The first thing you see when you walk through the sliding front doors is the large library. It's an academic school and they are drawing your attention to it. Inside is light and airy, lovely wide corridors so no overcrowding and perfect for social distancing and Covid restrictions. Laid out simply and effectively. Still feels a bit like an airport though, but not unpleasant.

All very high tech. Smartcards are used for entry and for lunch. 'Once my son saw that he was desperate to come.'

Harry Ellis, England rugby international and British Lion, is an old boy now returned as a teacher.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Discipline not mentioned by any parent, which was interesting. Behaviour obviously not an issue. 'It's a kind school,' said one parent. 'The staff keep a close eye on the pupils and seem to know if something is wrong.' Another parent told us, 'I chose the school because they accept that not every child is sporty. They don't force them, but allow them to find their own niche. They are very much about including rather than excluding, and are very accepting of the quirky.' Another parent was more blunt: 'The geek or nerd will probably be safer here than anywhere else. They are very accepting of the oddball and eccentric and just seem to absorb them.'

All parents we spoke to were happy with the school. 'Child focused' and 'children not frightened of the teachers'. 'Easy to get in touch with the school and emails answered promptly'. Lots of comments about problems being 'nipped in the bud' and 'dealt with quickly'. One parent did think the school had 'been caught on the back foot when it came to internet bullying, but quickly got itself up to speed and were keen to learn where they needed to step in'.

Student support run by the sixth formers. This is a counselling course that over 40 of the sixth formers take, with a class a week for eight weeks. They then use these skills for mentoring the younger years. The counsellor and nurse also offer pastoral support. 'I was stressing about my AS levels last year and she was lovely and really calmed me down and helped me plan my time properly,' one of our guides told us. More emphasis now placed on empathy and well being, reflecting society as a whole.

Some parents felt rather isolated from the school, physically rather than emotionally. The vast site with its one way system and well planned traffic control doesn't encourage stopping for a chat. 'Because the school is away from the town centre it's not as social, for children or parents. Many seem to come home straight from school rather than socialise. A good thing in many ways, but not always', said one mother. There is a coffee shop on site that sixth formers can walk across to during the day, only to be used by staff, visitors and sixth formers during school hours. Apparently built at the request of the year 11s who were very miffed to be moving out of the town centre – where were they going to go on a 'date'? We suspect some parents are delighted with the move.

Pupils and parents

Pupils come from a wide area, but mainly from the city and environs. Pupils reflect the demographic of Leicestershire, with over 35 per cent from Asian backgrounds. Parents forward-thinking, not bothered by tradition and mainly from professional backgrounds. Many connected to the hospitals and university in the city. 'We have parents with high aspirations for themselves and their children. The mix works. We adhere to the principles of Christianity but faith, race and gender aren't important. Everyone mixes well and parents are happy with the moral stance of the school.' The children we met were all very welcoming, friendly and engaging, more than happy to chat. 'Well rounded individuals, confident but not arrogant, such a good reflection on the school,' said a parent. 'I chose the school because it is forward looking, modern and multi-cultural, which reflects our society.'

Money matters

Discount offered for more than one child, five per cent for two, 7.5 per cent for three and 10 per cent for four. Means-tested bursaries available as well as academic, sporting, music and art scholarships.

The last word

The new kid on the block is making its mark. Has more of a feel of a state city grammar than a private school. But forward-thinking parents who aren't interested in tradition, status and history are flocking to it. LGS offers very competitive fees, produces excellent results and the facilities are tremendous. Your child can complete all of their schooling here, as long as they make the grade. We think the competition will be sitting up and taking notice, and so they should be.