

**James Allen's Girls' School
including
James Allen's Preparatory School**

**Notes from the 'Meet the Governors' Evening held on Tuesday 24 November 2009 to
be placed on the website**

11 Governors and 18 parents were present, together with the Headmistress, Headteacher of JAPS, Bursar & Clerk to the Governors and other members of the School staff.

A. Introduction

Mary Francis, as Chair of the Board of Governors, welcomed everyone, and thanked those who had submitted questions in advance. She had recently been elected Chair of the Board having taken over from Dame Valerie Strachan in August. She was a former pupil of the School, and was in her third term as a Governor of the School.

She confirmed that the purpose of the evening was for everyone to meet, for the Governors to inform parents about their plans for the School, and to listen and respond to what parents had to say. The format of the evening would therefore be for the Governors to introduce themselves, then to make a series of short presentations addressing the questions raised in advance, and then for the meeting to opened up for questions from parents. This would be followed by a more informal session where parents and Governors could meet individually over a glass of wine.

AI. Matters relating to the Governors, who they are and what they do

Mary Francis explained the manner and recruitment of governors, and confirmed that the School was a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. Accordingly, Governors were both directors of the company limited by guarantee and charity trustees, and all were co-opted. The Board had a nominations committee to consider the range of skills required by the Board, and to bring forward nominations for consideration to fill those skill requirements. Mrs Francis invited parents who felt they had appropriate skills to contribute, to bring their names forward if they wished to be considered for co-option at some stage in the future. Governors also had specific areas of particular responsibility, ranging from Health & Safety to Child Protection and Public Benefit, as well as being link Governors with various school constituencies.

At Mrs Francis' invitation, Governors introduced themselves, the skills they brought to the Board, and the reasons why they had become governors.

The main Board met formally four times a year, the Finance & General Purposes Committee three times, and other committees as and when required. It was explained that the Governors were responsible for ensuring that the objects of the charity were fulfilled, and to provide strategic direction and rigorous oversight as well as support for the Headmistress and her staff across the whole school. Mrs Francis cited the Board's recent Away Day as an example of the commitment of Governors to developing the correct strategy for the School going forward. They had a duty in law to safeguard the charity's assets and to ensure that legislation was complied with. They decided the strategy within which the school was run, and appointed the Heads who had operational responsibility for the running of the school – it was not for the Governors to take decisions on educational content, but to maintain oversight in relation to curriculum development.

Whilst the Head of JAPS had much operational autonomy, the Headmistress had overall responsibility for the running of the organisation as a whole.

B. Matters Raised by Parents Before the Meeting

BI. The first question raised before the meeting asked for the new Chair's personal vision of JAGS' future. Mrs Francis advised that the December meeting of the Board was to consider the next five-year development plan. She summarised her personal vision for the School as:

- Maintaining academic excellence
- Confidently confirming the School's status as both fee-paying and selective, whilst ensuring that the opportunity of attending it and of using its facilities was extended as widely as possible
- Increasing the number of bursaries so that, eventually, any talented girl could attend the School irrespective of her family's financial circumstances
- Ensuring that the School continued to foster a spirit of warmth and well being in its pupils, staff and parents, and that pupils were happy at School
- Ensuring that community action and community links were an intrinsic part of the ethos of the School
- Maintaining JAGS' facilities at the highest possible standards that funding would allow

Mrs Francis commented that such words were easy to say, but required a great deal of effort to put into practice. She had a very high regard for the Headmistress's dedication to the School and her knowledge and encouragement of all pupils.

B2. A question had been raised beforehand as to whether there would be a freeze on fees during these times of financial (and economic) uncertainty?

Nicky Meredith, as Chair of the Finance & General Purposes Committee, responded on behalf of the Board, indicating that fees increased by 2.8% (2.9% in JAPS) last September, less than many in the independent sector.

Mrs Meredith said that, every year, the Governors deliberated long and hard before deciding what the tuition fees for the following academic year should be. Budgeting was 'zero based' and built up from there rather than a simple increase on the previous year. Governors did not decide fees on what they believed the market could bear; there were many parents on the JAGS Board, and so were well aware of the impact of fees on family budgets, especially in times of financial uncertainty. Governors spent a lot of time analyzing and debating what costs were needed to be incurred to maintain standards and keep the school moving forward in response to pupils' and parents' needs and Governors' views of the future.

Mrs Meredith felt sure everyone would agree that staff were the School's most precious asset, and that JAGS was in competition for high quality staff with other schools. It was essential to preserve and support our staff and Governors had to be sure that salaries (including on-costs, 77% of tuition fees), the largest single constituent of running costs, remained competitive. Mrs Meredith also mentioned that, according to an independent benchmarking survey, JAGS spent more of its tuition fee income on actual teaching costs than peer schools. Parents' tuition fees did not subsidise the School's bursary scheme, which was funded by financial investments and income from the Dulwich Estate.

Parents' attention was drawn to the many displays around the Holst Hall which gave details drawn from public sources of JAGS & JAPS tuition fees and those of other schools with whom JAGS &

JAPS were frequently compared. Whilst it could be difficult to be sure that comparisons were valid, nevertheless it was interesting to see that whilst our school was not the cheapest, JAGS & JAPS fees were far from being the most expensive. The Bursar had written a comprehensive letter to all parents in August giving details of how the School was continuing to strive for real value for money and minimize cost increases. In that letter he had also pointed out that Parents facing financial difficulty, particularly where their daughter was in a public examination year, were encouraged to contact him at an early stage to explore whether they would qualify for the Bursary Scheme.

B2. The third question submitted before the meeting suggested that there had -traditionally been a markedly low proportion of black and Asian children in the prep and lower school, and whether this was of concern to the school?

Tom Van Oss, on behalf of the Governors, did not agree with the tenet of the question. He advised parents that, at the time of the inspection in 2008, records showed that approximately 15% of the JAPS pupils were of an ethnic minority. However, not all parents completed the Ethnicity form so the School could not be sure that these figures were entirely correct. This academic year, based on current data, ethnic minority children made up 25.2% of the roll.

Mr Van Oss was at great pains to point out that entry to the School was totally transparent, fair, competitive and equal for all; there was no sibling nor family preference policy. Admission was subject to the availability of a place and to the candidate meeting the entry requirements at the time. Paraphrasing the School's Equal Opportunities Policy, Mr Van Oss stated that JAGS and JAPS have regard only to the merits, abilities and potential of the individuals concerned and not to their , colour, ethnic origin, age, socio-economic background, disability, religious or political beliefs, family circumstances, sexual orientation or other irrelevant distinction. The Schools' objective was to provide for every pupil equal encouragement and opportunity to take full advantage of the schools' facilities and activities.

Various statistics in respect of ethnic minority make-up of schools generally, independent schools and the London Borough of Southwark were given, indicating that JAPS was not far out of line with the various averages mentioned. Accordingly, the Governors did not see this as an issue at this time.

B3. The final question raised before the meeting sought clarification about the length of the school day, and could it be shortened either by school beginning later at 9 or 9.15 am or finishing earlier 3.15 or 3.30pm?

Erica Pienaar answered this point on behalf of the Governors. Education throughout the School day was not a gallop through a curriculum to an externally assessed examination at the end. Rather it was a time for children to be able to exploit their talents and embrace new learning, to develop social skills and create friendships and networks, to expand their minds and develop leadership skills. Sufficient time needed to be set aside for this, and in this respect the five hours fifteen minutes of lessons plus the breaks for recreation and refreshment during the School day was a standard to which many schools subscribed.

JAGS and JAPS had developed rich extra-curricular activity programmes to encourage pupils to develop their skills and to provide a very rich learning experience. If the school day were to be shortened, it would be at a cost.

C. Other matters raised in subsequent questions and discussions

C1. Were admissions holding up in these difficult economic times?

The simple answer was that registrations for 2010 entry at both JAGS & JAPS were holding up to historic levels. There was some indication that parents who might otherwise have sent their daughters to boarding school were choosing a day school.

Some smaller, mainly preparatory, schools had been reported as being in danger of closing, but both JAGS and JAPS were seen to be well placed in the market as evidenced by continuing strong demand for places.

C2. How did JAGS see itself in terms of Charitable Status/Public Benefit

David Smellie responded by referring to the fact that quite often the press delivered the wrong messages on this issue.

Whilst not complacent, by any yardstick JAGS was seen as a national leader in this area. Bursaries totalled 13% of Senior School fees in 2008/9, well above the perceived 5% yardstick, including a number of 100% funded places, apparently applied by the Charity Commission in its assessments of Public Benefit. Of the 104 pupils in receipt of bursaries in 2008/9, fully 59 provided full fees. The School also had an enviable reputation for its community links and outreach programmes – this had been the case for many years before the term ‘Public Benefit’ had been coined, and had been a feature of school life because it was felt to be the right thing to do, not because it represented a required activity.

C3. The final question asked how the school and parents together might best prepare children for the challenges of balancing work and children (following recent media coverage of the work-life debate specifically in relation to women)..

A lively discussion ensued, summarised as to

- Girls should be encouraged to develop and to try things they want to do, balancing work and family life as necessary
- Girls should be prepared to leave school as contributors and leaders in our society, and certainly not be prepared to play second fiddle
- It was likely that many girls of today would have a more flexible ‘portfolio’ career and so should have the opportunity of developing all their talents with a ‘good to learn’ attitude
- Encourage girls to think outside the box, about their peers, and about others outside the school environment
- Encourage recognition and appreciation for diversity in all its aspects
- Recognise that many future career opportunities have not even been thought of yet
- Girls to be prepared so as to be able to choose the right career at the right time.

Discussions then continued until 9pm on an informal basis.