

## **Focus Groups Assembly**

You may already know that I have been meeting with groups of pupils and staff. I wish to understand what the experience of school is for every member of our community. The initial impetus to engage with the opinion and experience of pupils came in the summer of 2020, following the death of George Floyd and the growth of the Black Lives Matter protests. However, since then the remit was widened to explore pupil opinion as widely as possible. I took guidance on how to proceed from an expert - Baroness Ruby McGregor-Smith CBE.

Her experience is impressive. Baroness McGregor-Smith was the only Asian female chief executive of a FTSE 250 company. She then joined the House of Lords in August 2015. Baroness McGregor-Smith has served as a member of the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission and works at the Department for Education. Her special expertise comes from leading a review to support businesses in developing black and minority ethnic talent at all levels in their

career. Her report 'Race in the Workplace: The McGregor-Smith Review' was published in 2017. It has led to many changes in Government policy.

Baroness McGregor-Smith advised me to lead a series of focus groups, in order to hear the voices and experiences of pupils. I then identified 17 different groups whose voice I wished to hear – I later added an extra group of pupils at St Helen's School, as I wished to hear their experience of Merchant Taylors' School as well. I expect that there are many in this Hall who were part of one of those groups. I know that those who joined me were pleased to do so – they told me that they were glad their opinions and experiences were being heard. The good news is that the general experience of school is very positive. That was good to hear. However, we can improve.

We were able to make an early move by renaming Clive House in honour of John Raphael. In addition to that important step, I have learned a great deal from listening. When I reported my findings to

the Governing Body at its last meeting, I put before them the words that were spoken by the pupils in the various focus groups. I do not propose to do that now – but I want you to know that your unfiltered thoughts and opinions were faithfully reported. From those words, we have formulated a variety of proposals, questions and actions. This was not just a listening exercise – the focus group process is only validated by actually doing something substantive in response.

I have divided responses into five key areas. I will begin with the curriculum – what we teach. The first thing that we will do is revisit the PSHE curriculum. Much of what we teach is required by the Government, but we can look again at emphasis and we can explore the ways we teach and what we teach. You also commented upon the breadth of the curriculum. Many wished that their heritage were better reflected in the topics we cover in lessons and the individuals we refer to. Again, we are to an extent limited by the content required by the Exam Boards, but there is certainly room for greater flexibility. A further interesting outcome from discussions was a request for

support. Some pupils felt that they came under pressure from their parents to choose certain subjects to study, and were guided to follow certain career paths. They asked the school to help them express who they were and to be allowed pursue their interests. You unequivocally have that support. We support all our subjects equally and we want you to be happy. We will promote that attitude and if you ask for our help we will give it.

The second area of focus is pastoral. I spoke with pupils who work with the Learning Support Department and with pupils who have scholarships – both felt well supported and reported high levels of satisfaction. However, it was clear the pupils who have been awarded bursaries sometimes placed themselves under pressure. I want to give absolute reassurance to these pupils that what you already do is great – I want every pupil to wish to seize every chance the school offers, but no groups should put themselves under more pressure than any other.

I do not want any group of pupils to feel that they are discriminated against. I was glad to hear that pupils in the focus groups felt appreciated and well looked after. However, it is clear that their experiences of school were not free from unpleasantness. Although slurs are rare, they are sometimes heard. We can have none of that. If a racial slur or a derogatory term is reported to me, the expected outcome is, as it always has been, a fixed term exclusion.

And while we are about it, let us get rid of 'banter'. To be clear, I think banter is weaponised humour. It is too often a means to smuggle unpleasant words and thoughts into conversation and then pretend that it is all in fun. It is not in fun and it must stop.

Names are important. They represent us. We show respect to another by respecting their name. Although it is rare, I heard from the groups that it is very important that we do not make fun of another's name because it is different, or longer, than other names. It is important that we take the trouble to pronounce each other's name properly. Nor

should we replace someone's name with a nickname, unless we have their approval to do so.

Finally, a very few reported an experience of racial stereotyping. A small number of pupils have found that assumptions were made about them according to their ethnicity. These assumptions were that someone would be good at something rather than that they would not be good at it, but that is not important. The person getting it wrong may even have thought they were paying a compliment when they told someone else that because of their ethnicity they could be expected to be good at sports, or Maths or Science. However, it is not a compliment. We cannot behave in such a manner. To generalise from ethnicity to have certain expectations of an individual is just plain wrong.

The third important area is the extra-curricular. There were some interesting findings here. One thing that struck me is that sports and sports fixtures can be flashpoints for bad behaviour. Our pupils have

occasionally heard racist abuse from players from other schools.

When it has occurred, our teams and players have behaved with real dignity and courage. Should it occur again, immediately report it to the referee. Of its nature, sport combines moments of high emotion with an informal context. This means that people can let themselves down. Let us stay aware and demand the best behaviour from ourselves. Moreover, when pupils from St Helen's join the CCF as cadets, let us offer them the best behaviour and total respect. They have the right to visit our school and feel valued.

We will also continue to ensure that the range of clubs and societies we offer meets the needs of every pupil. One new club is the Afro-Caribbean Society. I am glad it has been formed and I look forward to working with the group to support the school's celebration of Black History Month and Steven Lawrence Day.

Finally, we conclude with well-being. We are exploring two ideas with regard to this important aspect of school life. The first is to

promote more awareness of heritage or faith in the lunch options that we offer. The second is to see whether we can use the impressive group of OMTs who remain engaged with the school to act as mentors for existing pupils.

I found the process of meeting the various focus groups, which has taken over a year, to be valuable. However, I will not conceal that there were also challenges. It did occasionally feel odd to pursue an understanding of the community as a whole by separating that community into distinct groups.

Separating groups of individuals out according to labels risks precisely the sense of objectification that a strong community should look to counter. This labelling discomfited a small number of those involved. One or two were prompted to see elements of themselves or their identity as problematic. One or two felt that they were apparently being defined in terms that they did not recognise. Many, however, felt validated. For the great majority the process was

welcomed; I think I can truthfully state that we have concluded the exercise with a great sense of positivity.

It is important we all understand that this process has started a discussion rather than concluded it. We have begun a process of reflection and self-examination. Although the general feeling was very positive, no school is perfect and there is always something more that we can do to be even better. That is true of each of us as individuals as well. We learned that much of what we do is great. We also learned that some of what we do can be improved. I have since tasked key school committees to review our practice, and implement the change I have described. I have also begun to work and consult with the School Council.

I thank you all and especially those who took part in the focus groups, for your help. Let us use this moment, and those in the years to come, as a launch pad for an even better school.