



Headteacher's Update

7th March 2025

Dear Parents and Carers,

I hope everyone is well. Please forgive last week's missing newsletter, but the four-day school week beat me to it!

Return to School

The students returned to school last week, and as usual we spent time reminding students of our expectations. We also ran through a few tweaks to our expectations such as being clearer that the students must walk on the left when in the corridors and the stairs to stop any bunching and ease congestion. Similarly, we have asked the students to put their bags on both shoulders. This not only supports the student's shoulders and backs but means each student takes less space in our corridors, therefore allowing students to move more safely around our building.

Mrs Billingham ended her assembly with a fantastic pair of slides which I share below. Working and studying at River Academy is different and our expectations are unashamedly high but when Mrs Billingham delivered her assembly there was a unanimous nod of agreement from our teachers thinking about our working lives at River Academy and remembering many of our previous schools and what secondary education can be like if a school doesn't have the checks and balances needed to make it run smoothly.

It is Friday 14th February and as I drive to school I am excited to find out our Sparx Completion rates for the end of term. Last week, it was 100% - exceptional! Being around students who are so committed to their learning is inspiring and drives me to be a better teacher for them.

We have a quick staff meeting before the day starts and staff are asked to share what they are proud of. Every member of staff is quick to find one or two things that make them happy to be part of the community. They leave the meeting smiling.

As we approach our first line up of the day, the final students enter through the gate, warmly calling out 'good morning' and asking how my evening was. I am asked what book I am reading, and if I have any plans for the half term. I know I am cared about in this community. One student asks me if they can be first up to tutor time – they cannot wait to finish their Tutor Read.

Period 1 begins and students are quick to arrive and get down to their retrieval task. I am, once again, blown away by the outstanding behaviour of students. Their desire to participate is fantastic, and their focus incredible. We fly through our recall and there is a visible sigh of relief when I ask students to open up Safiyyah's War – they are loving this novel and we share in the joy of reading, showing empathy when there are sadder moments. As their teacher, I read the text out loud to them. Told by a Muslim girl, it is fantastic that Arabic phrases are used – and I have been so touched that my own Muslim students have supported me to read these out accurately.

At break time, I head out to the MUGA. A third of the school are out here. Groups mingle – several sports, overlapping across the courts. Games continue whilst students catch up – with each other and their staff – who occasionally join in with the games. There are so many smiles. It is infectious. There isn't a moment I am left alone – students are friendly and interested – and I am reminded, again, of the community that River Academy has become. I am proud to be a part of that.

It is Friday 14th February and as I drive to school I am tired. It has been a long term and I cannot wait for the end of term. Last week, I spent most of my time dealing with poor behaviour - students who were tired and had given up. Staff too – they desperately need a break from the kids.

We have a quick staff meeting before the day starts and staff are asked to share what they are proud of. Staff joke that they 'made it' and 'survived' the term. There is laughter, but I know how hard it has been with staff absence so high. Staff have had to cover and that's been difficult.

As we approach our first line up of the day, I have to shepherd students in from the gate, way after the bell. Two girls won't put their phones away. They're ignoring the bell. A group at the end of the bridge are laughing, shouting, swearing. They ignore my requests. Before the day even starts and I have a list of students to sanction, call home, set detentions. I just don't have the time, or the will.

Period 1 begins and students are slow to arrive. They are unfocused. Three are in the toilet. The usual 'good kids' settle but my attention is taken to those who hang around at the door. The 'good kids' yawn, bored, as they finished long ago. I get my copy of the novel and unsurprisingly, there is a groan when I ask students to open up *Sallyvan's war* – they dislike this novel and I must persevere. I know why reading is important, but they don't accept this. As their teacher, I read the text out loud to them. Told by a Muslim girl, it is fantastic that Arabic phrases are used – but students have been unkind – sneering at these words and rolling their eyes when I get the words wrong.

At break time, I head out to the MUGA. A third of the school are out here. Groups mingle and there are always fights. I feel tense and am reminded why I am so tired. It doesn't feel pleasant out here, and I am counting down the minutes on my watch until I can blow the whistle. Students throw their litter across the ground, and when I ask them to pick it up, I am met with 'why? It's not mine...'. This is hard work. I deserve more than this. Thank goodness for half term.

We have also changed dining to make it fairer in terms of who goes into the queue first. I led dining this Wednesday and all the students were through with queueing and our poem 17 minutes after the bell went. This left everyone with the chance to go outside and enjoy the sunshine, stay and chat, or go to the LRC to work for the remaining 18 minutes. It was a lovely atmosphere, and I feel blessed that the students are able to enjoy decent food, dine together and use this time for both leisure and nourishment.

Visitors

We hosted the Director of Education for the Greenshaw Trust and Acting Head of JMA for a visit on Friday. They had heard of the wonderful things we are doing and as they are working hard to move JMA forward they wanted to see for themselves our systems and expectations. It is a pleasure to host another set of leading educators as they come into our school, all keen to witness our offer.

We will be hosting our local MP, Matt Rodda, for a visit on March 21st. We are delighted that Matt is interested in the school and wants to see the excellent work that is going in his constituency.

National Offer Day

I was delighted to receive the data for offers from Reading Borough Council just prior to last weekend. We had 63 students who wanted a place who did not get one, despite a dip in the number of Year 6s locally. Our oversubscription number was considerably more than other nearby schools and in fact most of the local non-selective schools have spaces for September. I know there is a lot of disappointment amongst families who wanted a place, and I anticipate appeals to get in. I was also shown some great screen shots from a local WhatsApp group of the delight parents had on receiving a place, knowing that their children will benefit from the structures and systems which mean there are calm classrooms, high levels of progress and high expectations each and every day.

SEND

I know there has been some parental discussion recently regarding our SEND provision. As we have always said, we do SEND slightly differently to other local schools, but in line with research and some of the highest performing schools in the country. Our students do not have a TA whispering in their ear, limiting their

independence and distracting other students. Our TAs are used to deliver targeted interventions based on the individual educational needs of the students. Mrs Clarke, our SENCO, tracks need, initiates interventions, evaluates impact and ensures students who need support get support in a focused and considered manner. As you can see below, these are the numbers of interventions and tests that we have undertaken since September. This work is ongoing, and the numbers rise almost weekly as we discover and learn more about our cohort.

On Wednesday our Bridge Resource Base, where eight students do most of their work was inspected by the local authority and whilst we haven't had the written report yet all the verbal feedback on the day was that our approach was best practice which was incredibly pleasing.



Interventions so far

Cognition and Learning

- 1:1 Daily reading: 7 students
- ABC to Read: 3 students
- Asking for Help card: 10 students
- Coloured overlay: 12 students
- Handwriting Support: 11 students
- Lexia PowerUp: 33 students
- Rapid Plus: 27 students
- Securing Y7 Foundations: 14 students



Interventions so far

Social, Emotional, Mental Health

- 1:1 check in: 21 students
- Building Resilience in Young Minds: 12 students
- ELSA: 8 students
- *Talkabout for Teenagers*: 9 students
- Basketball mentor/coach : 2 students

Assessments so far

- Lucid Lass Literacy screening tests: 151 students
- Lucid Recall Working Memory tests: 140 students

In addition to the slides demonstrating the high numbers of students that we support week in week out, we have obtained EHCPs for three students (who should have had them at primary school), tested all students reading ages and hold meetings with all our EHCP families on a regular basis.

Ramadan

I have been delighted by the way our fasting students have responsibly met each lunchtime in the library rather than be in the dining hall. Some have sat and quietly read, some have drawn or done homework and some have prayed. It is a delight to see the mature way the students have supported each other, and I am grateful for the positive messages I have received from several parents regarding our provision on this matter. My only negative has been that one or two students have been 'fast-shamed' when they have chosen to not fast each day. We have spoken to all the students that it is an individual choice, and I hope no-one is pressured into fasting or not fasting by another member of the student community.

World Book Day

Ms Myers gave a brilliant assembly this week to coincide with World Book Day on the challenges that reading presents us with and the ways we can overcome these challenges. There followed a teacher bookshelf quiz sheet which was distributed at break time, and it was brilliant to see so many of the students looking at the sheets and quizzing the staff on their literary likes and dislikes. We also held a tutor time quiz, and the slides are attached to this newsletter as I thought you may want to 'play at home.'

Sparx

For the last three school weeks River Academy has been the highest ranked school in the country for Sparx Reader and Sparx Maths combined. Our completion rates of 98-100% each week have led to this ranking. However, the system behind the result has been the key to our success and making sure those students who most need support and time in school to do the work get that opportunity. Indeed, Sparx are now using our systems to pass onto other schools as a "How to run Sparx Reader successfully" case study.

Thank you to all the parents who support this initiative, it can only benefit as each student gets at least an extra 30 minutes each week of Maths and reading on top of what they already experience in school. If this is multiplied over five or seven years, you can see this will be of huge advantage to our River students.

As you will see from the student bulletin, we have also incentivized the students to meet the Sparx deadlines

a little earlier as well as giving rewards for going the extra mile. So many of our students already do extra maths and extra reading on these platforms each week, so it is appropriate we make sure their strong organisation and commitment to improve is rewarded.

Sport



Our netballers have defeated Prospect, The Wren and Denefield in fixtures recently. Each week almost 30 girls have been coming to training and Miss Moore could have fielded three teams. It is brilliant they are turning this determination and commitment into results.

This week, the football team drew with Highdown and suffered a narrow 1-0 loss to Denefield. The boys were all happy with how they played and hit the woodwork more than once in each game but sometimes sport doesn't always reward effort with the score on the day. However, they are turning into a strong team, and I hope next week's result is more just for them.

Hair

Our uniform continues to be a source of great pride and thank you all for our support in this matter. However, just a reminder on haircuts; grade 1 is the shortest we permit.

Have a great weekend everyone! Spring is here at last!

Take care and best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A. Hartley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Andy Hartley

Headteacher