

PARENT FORUM 7pm Tuesday 20 October 2009

David Chivers, Chairman of Governors, welcomed the parents present.

INTRODUCTION (Julie Robinson)

In my first year as Head here, I addressed a crowded theatre full of Vinehall parents in a question and answer forum which we called 'Meet the Robinsons' and Geoffrey Whitehead said at the time that it was either bravery or madness – I think that he described it as 'reckless'! It went quite well, however, and the text of that session is lodged on our website for your interest and entertainment.

In 2005 there was a second parent forum which was a much quieter affair, rather like this one, with very few issues to answer. The last one was very quiet indeed and we liked to think that a low turnout demonstrated a happy parent body. Our aim through these forum sessions is to ensure that you can raise issues freely and hear the Head's and the Chairman's views so that you know how Vinehall is being led and can have your say.

An awful lot of paperwork comes home electronically and by post and I know that some parents appreciate an opportunity to meet the Chairman of Governors in person and to hear our views first-hand.

Perhaps inevitably, the main issue for today's forum is the future of Saturday school, following our recent questionnaire to parents. Indeed, the timing was designed to coincide with the results of our questionnaire.

SOME HISTORY...

In November 2002 I said: "parents may well want different things and it is the School's job to find the best fit system, making Vinehall as relevant and helpful as it can be for the whole pupil population. The senior staff piece together an overview and then we work with you to support individual children within that framework." This still holds true and I know only too well that we cannot please everyone.

Issues raised in 2002 included boarding, the continuance of the co-ed ethos, school catering; please can we have an earlier finish to the day; please may we have sibling discounts; any changes in the pipeline...and the most emotive issue was that of Saturday School: will you abolish it and will parents be consulted (calling for a referendum!); can it at least start later now that there are fewer young boarders. At that time the School and the Governors directed me towards maintaining the six day week.

As you know, we do start Saturday school at a later point nowadays, in Year 6 rather than Year 4, and there is a sibling discount as well as a slightly earlier finish to the school day. And we have now conducted our Saturday School referendum.

Over the past five years there has been a sea change. In my 2005 parent Forum the Saturday School issue was raised again and since that time we have become aware that a number of our potential prospective parents are voting with their feet, against Saturdays. Some parents choose not to visit Vinehall once they know that we have Saturday school and that is an important consideration for our future as a leading prep school.

Our current Vinehall parents at least tolerate or at best appreciate the opportunities afforded by the six day week but for future parents, Saturdays have become a disincentive in the sense that the thought of Saturday morning school is unwelcome: it is considered inconvenient. Local schools have underplayed Saturdays and the tide has changed so that, now, Saturday school appears to be less attractive than ever.

However, that does not mean that Saturdays are not valued by a significant proportion of families, particularly by boarding parents and by those who have come to terms with the need to provide an extra four hours of opportunity and tuition, especially for the top two years of prep school. How can we know how much that extra time means in creating the special features and the excellent results that Vinehall enjoys?

The Governors recognise this situation and over the past year and a half we have been discussing options for Saturdays. Leavers' questionnaires were sent to the parents of pupils in Year 8 last academic year and this term's Saturday School questionnaire provides an insight into the views of our parent body.

In fact, the findings of this well-supported survey of parents give us the following insight:

Saturday School Questionnaire Analysis

There were 89 responses (an excellent return from 203 families)

36% (32) clearly FOR, 22% (19) in the middle, 43% (38) clearly AGAINST Saturday school

only four responses were anonymous, all in the "against" camp

32 responses in the "FOR" camp

of these 32:

17 respondents thought Saturday school was VERY important

15 respondents thought Saturday school was IMPORTANT

30 said Saturday school had not much compromised their family life

virtually all said that Saturday assemblies were hugely important as a contact point for working parents

more than half said they based their decision to come to Vinehall on the fact that we offered Saturday school, the other half said they accepted it as a fact of life. **None** said they only accepted it reluctantly

about one third thought that abolishing Saturday school would be detrimental to the school

a slightly later start would be welcomed

Concerns:

loss of boarding (especially for overseas/distant parents)

loss of standing as a major prep school

loss of breadth of curriculum

loss of extra curricular opportunities

children need structure not choice

compacting the timetable will be more stressful for both teachers and children

more homework might be given to compensate

"It will be sad if Vinehall moves to weekly boarding, as the full boarding experience has been nothing short of outstanding. When you entrust your young children fully to a school, and live very far away, only outstanding will do."

19 respondents thought Saturday school was QUITE important (in the middle)

of the 19 respondents only 5 thought Saturday school had GREATLY compromised their family life

almost all mentioned Saturday assemblies as being a very important contact point for families (only three said they never attend)

only four said that they only accepted Saturday school reluctantly when choosing a school

most thought that Saturday school was necessary for the senior two years

many thought that lack of structure along with an optional programme would cause problems with inclusion in activities

many liked the idea of extra revision or exam sessions

many mentioned the effect that loss of Saturday school would have on boarding

Concerns:

Monday – Friday would be busier

Advance planning necessary in order to make sure parents didn't arrange other things

loss of academic standing

marginalisation of non-academic subjects

necessity to come in on a Saturday for short session, making it more inconvenient for parents

loss of teaching time

lengthening of the term was suggested to compensate for loss of teaching time (although a few respondents thought this was a good idea)

flexibility too woolly

children need structure not choice

"It really worries me that subjects like art drama and DT will be pushed into an optional Saturday. These subjects are already marginalised and should be far more central to the syllabus."

38 respondents thought Saturday school was NOT important (against)

of those, **18 HAVE** experienced Saturday school and **19 HAVE NOT**

Of the 18 who HAVE experienced Saturday school, 12 thought that their family life was GREATLY compromised, 6 thought A LITTLE

Of the 18 who HAVE experienced Saturday school, 12 only accepted it reluctantly

Of the 18 who HAVE experienced Saturday school, 11 thought the proposed structure was VERY ATTRACTIVE

almost all said that Saturday assemblies were important but many commented that assembly did not compensate for the negative factors

many thought that focussed study/revision sessions for seniors would be a good idea

several thought that only non-academic subjects should be optional, but many expressed concern about taking non-academic subjects out of the timetable

several would prefer the holidays to be shortened in order to compensate for loss of teaching time

2 suggested that the change be brought forward to next term

Concerns:

children who did not choose "optional" activities will be disadvantaged

what would happen to Wednesday afternoons?

optional programme would affect boarding and erode our current fabulous weekend boarding structure

this is an attempt to please everyone which will end up pleasing nobody

Of the **19** who **HAVE NOT** experienced Saturday school, **16** said they DISLIKE the idea (the other three were blank)

2 said that Saturday school was their only substantial concern when choosing Vinehall – yet they still chose us!

Concerns:

children get too tired

adults don't have a 5 ½ day week

children should have a choice of which activities they participate in

sport might be cut to make up for loss of academic teaching time

"I just hope that the school will not lose those things that make it so special."

Generally:

There were many comments that uniform should be worn at school

Overwhelming consensus that Saturdays are essential in the senior part of the school

Many parents would accept losing a week or more of school holidays to maintain the current level of excellent provision of (compulsory) co-curricular subjects

THE CASE FOR CHANGING SATURDAY SCHOOL

Over the past twelve months through recession, the independent schools sector has become more competitive and we are under pressure to move with the times. If we cling to the traditional six day week as a unique selling point, we might find ourselves in a fast diminishing market. What VH must do is adapt to the expectations of parents and I believe that the time has come to take a fresh look at Saturday provision. However, we will not drop four hours of weekly teaching time wholesale, hence the planning that is underway to determine the best programme of Saturday lessons/activities aimed at the top end of the Prep School. Parents seem to understand very well the value of Saturdays in those final two years, Y7&8, where we can best use the sixth day for broader opportunities and academic preparation in order to maintain our educational profile. Certainly, we do not wish to undermine our scholarship and CE results and it is very clear from our questionnaire that we all share that view.

IMPLICATIONS/CONSEQUENCES

We know that abolition of Saturday school would impact on the breadth of the VH curriculum and could further pressurise the weekly timetable

Educational standards are at the heart of all that we do.

Boarding, at least full boarding and appeal to overseas boarders, would be affected adversely by the loss of Saturday school unless we could convince parents that our weekend programme is full and varied enough.

We listen to the needs of current parents and guard against alienating our future parents who – we know from feedback from the Registrar – are loathe to accept compulsory Saturday school.

WOULD CHANGES TO SATURDAYS MEAN A REDUCTION IN FEES?:

No! All teaching staff work a five full day week and those who teach on Saturday mornings merely take a half day in lieu during the week so the loss of Saturdays for Y4&5 currently is cost neutral. There is, therefore, no fees rebate for parents attached to Saturday schooling.

WHAT IF WE DROPPED SATURDAYS WHOLESALE?

We don't intend to do this, but if we did, we could not squeeze a further four hours of schooling into our already busy weekdays. We couldn't have it all and some time would be lost, of course. We would review the overall weekly timetable, just as we did for Years 4&5, and would shave small amounts of time from a range of activities in order to maintain the broad range of subjects and activities which parents and pupils value.

WOULD THE SCHEDULE OF EXEATS BE AFFECTED BY ANY CHANGES TO SATURDAY SCHOOL?

We value our boarding for the opportunities that it affords children to develop in independence. We would maintain the exeat schedule so that everyone has a break. We would also maintain the current, busy weekend schedule of activities so that boarding remains an attractive option. However, the intention is to continue to value and develop the opportunities that temporary, regular and full boarding offer to our children.

IS THIS CHANGE TO SATURDAYS PURELY FOR THE BENEFIT OF PARENTS?

Yes, it is a response to the demands of parents who quite often deselect Vinehall when they discover that we have compulsory Saturday school. Vinehall cannot plan for the long term without taking this important issue into account. It would be foolhardy and short-sighted to ignore the wishes and priorities of our parents.

A message which came through the recent survey was that parents do not like the idea of optional Saturdays: you would prefer the School to take responsibility for forcing children in on Saturday mornings and learn to live with it! You value occasional Saturday matches and you appreciate the need to add sessions on Saturday mornings in the top two years of prep school.

The children themselves rarely complain about Saturdays. Indeed, we know from our recent leavers' questionnaires that alongside impressive individual achievements, the children are very happy indeed at Vinehall.

At this point, David Chivers read some comments from the recent Leavers' Questionnaires complimenting Vinehall on its high academic standards and caring,

family atmosphere. These were considered to be the most important factors for parents and the average length of time for which parents completing the questionnaires had been associated with Vinehall was just over six years. There were mixed views about Saturday school from the leavers.

Julie Robinson continued:

THE WAY FORWARD

So, whatever the final decision about Saturdays for Year 6 and also for Years 7 & 8, we have learned how important it is to maintain our educational standards and breadth of provision which really are appreciated by parents, and at the same time to downplay Saturdays in our marketing. Indeed, certain local schools market against Saturday school. Word of mouth recommendations are our life blood and if every current Vinehall parent tells other potential parents how happy they and you are with the overall educational provision here, then we will keep attracting good numbers of new families to Vinehall.

If, for example, we drop Saturday school for Year 6 yet retain it for Years 7&8, it will be important to monitor how well this works and whether the overall provision is indeed best for the children and attractive to our parents.

OTHER ISSUES?

The only other issue arising from our invitations to parents for this evening was on the subject of setting and streaming. We were asked whether a two-form Year group posed any particular challenges compared with a three-form Year group.

We would set our maths classes anyway, and small classes are a strong feature of a Vinehall education. Our staff are trained in personalised learning so that individuals within any class can be catered for.

Any child deemed to have a learning support need already has an individual education plan and some highly able pupils also have IEPs so that teachers can know what to specially focus on in terms of skills and priorities term by term for those individuals.

In the case of a three form Year group we tend to have a top academic stream and two parallel classes. In a two form Year group we will take a view as to whether to have a smaller or larger top stream, depending on the cohort. There would be a stream with academic scholars in it and a CE stream.

There are occasions when we have CE and scholarship pupils within the same form and this has been the case for some years.

Mr. Whitehead worked at Vinehall with a two form year group system and shared his thoughts. He felt that there would not be a problem, whether pupils were in a two form or a three form Year group. The staff are used to teaching mixed groups.

Mrs Redstone is responsible for class placement and commented that there could be further flexibility for streaming other subjects.

Further questions from parents included “Is the loss of Year 6 Saturday school a done deal?” to which Mrs. Robinson answered no, not until Governors had met in November. Mr. Chivers took a straw poll in the room and there was a strong representation present of parents who wished to continue with Year 6 Saturday school. Further discussion ensued and several parents spoke about how they had come to realise the value of Saturday morning school. Mrs. Robinson and Mr. Whitehead underlined the importance of new parents and convincing them of the value of Saturday school before they lost interest in Vinehall. There were also parents present who wished Saturday school to end for Year 6. There was general consensus from all present that Years 7 & 8 value the opportunities afforded by Saturday school.

Following further discussion with parents on the subject of the merits of Saturday school, David Chivers brought the meeting to a close and thanked parents for coming along.