



6 June 2008

Dear Parents

I am sure that the events of the last few weeks are leaving many of you bewildered as to what is happening, and how your Board plans to move forward with a comprehensive strategy for ensuring the future stability of the school. Below I touch briefly on these issues but the report published on the website, which I invite you to read, gives more detail.

I believe this school continues to be a great place for our children to learn and grow: The academic and extracurricular achievements outlined in my report are proof of this. Recent events, including the resignation of Mr. Church and higher staff turnover are being managed by the school with the Board's support. We will start the new school year with clear direction and a strategy to provide a top class facility, academic excellence under the guidance of a new Principal, whilst maintaining all of the values of a caring and stimulating community that the Sir James is known for.

The report also provides a round up of the school's achievements over the last year and my thoughts on the school at the end of what is for me my first complete year as Chairman of the Board of Governors.

Going forward I would intend to make the Chairman's report an annual communication to be sent out towards the end of the academic year which will review the events of the year, progress of the school during the year and the plans for the future. I hope that you find this document informative. If you have any comments or questions, these can be sent for my attention at the Board's email address: board@sjhschool.com.

Yours Faithfully

James R Noble

Chairman of the Board of the Sir James Henderson School

Report to the Association from the Chairman of the Board June 2008

Educational excellence indicated by results and extracurricular activities

As has been reported in the past, and throughout the current year, the school's academic results continue to be of a very high standard. Pass rates and levels of achievement across the whole school position us in the top quartile of the league of schools against which we like to compare ourselves. These schools include British Independent schools, including all of the major private schools in the UK, and the many other well respected international schools based in other European capitals, which several of you may well know. This is a fantastic achievement when you consider that only a minority of our students are mother tongue English, so the school's results are achieved by children studying, in what for most of them is a second or even third language. We have 45 nationalities represented by the student body, and we achieve results that place us at a higher level than many English schools that have a completely English mother tongue student body.

It is not just academic success that distinguishes our school. Over the last year I have spent time on the school's premises in contact with the students and the environment in which they are taught and one cannot fail to note that our school offers a rounded and exceptionally well balanced education. One example is the quality of art work on display in the corridors for everyone to see. The work is not just from a small group of students in Upper School; students of all ages have pieces of art work on display of a quality of which the school should be proud.

On the music front we all know how exceptional the school is at bringing out almost every student's musical ability, some times to a level found only at a Music Conservatory. It is probably fair to say that there is not another non-specialist school in Italy with the same level of musical achievement.

Drama is also making its mark, with productions throughout the year by all age levels. The achievements of our sports teams are impressive, especially considering the limitations of the school's facilities and sports is still a very important part of school life in which everyone participates.

The School Inspection: Successes and Action Plan for Improvements

Not only do the exam results demonstrate that our children are receiving an excellent education. We also have a report from the Independent Schools Inspectorate who visited our school during the first term of this year which was full of praise for the quality of education that the school provides to our children. It would be incorrect to state that there were no criticisms; there were, and an action plan has been prepared by the school management team and progress is already being made in addressing the points raised.

Promoting and maintaining the schools' values for personal growth and responsibility in the community

As important as these measures are, it is not just the achievements of academic, artistic or sporting success that defines the school. There is something else which we should not forget which is best summed up in a couple of extracts from the inspection report:

“Personal growth is a strong feature of the school. Pupils feel valued and are given every opportunity to be successful and have their success recognised, so that they grow considerably in self-confidence and self-esteem. The pupils and students who were interviewed were impressive in discussion, confident and articulate and unafraid to express views. In the lower school, spiritual development is reinforced by well-developed RE and PSHE. Through sensitive discussion in a secure environment, starting simply with circle time, pupils come gradually to a greater understanding of their own identity, they learn about religions, what separates them and what they have in common.”

“Pupils develop very well socially, accept responsibility for their behaviour, show initiative and understand how they can contribute to community life. Pupils move between lessons in a composed, organised and well-mannered way, respecting each other. In the lower school playground, they play together considerately in an involved and engaged manner. Pupils co-operate well together in the library, sharing knowledge. The qualities of leadership and teamwork are strong through activities which allow pupils to work as teams and take responsibility as prefects, and as members of the school councils. Year 13 students and Year 6 pupils mentor pupils younger than themselves. Trips and residential visits provide further opportunities for pupils to develop socially. The PSHE course provides regular input into the pupils’ education as citizens, though this is limited beyond Year 9. The school councils are not only an exercise in democracy and committee work, they also demonstrate to pupils that such debate and corporate decision-making can produce results; several school initiatives have emerged from their deliberations. Pupils are aware that they are privileged and work very hard and successfully to help those in need, through fund-raising for charitable causes which they often initiate themselves”.

You will all agree that these comments are evidence of the non-measurable elements of teaching in our school. They illustrate the exemplary way in which the majority of our students conduct themselves to the extent that students’ qualities have been noticed and commented upon by people who have never visited the school before. It’s not just the inspectors who have noticed, but also new families who are considering placing their children in our school. We often hear favourable comments from potential new parents on student behaviour and school atmosphere when they compare our school against the schools where their children are currently being taught or other schools in the Milan area that they have previously visited.

Managing the transition to a new Principal

You may well reflect that this is all very well but relates to the past and will undoubtedly be wondering what is currently happening in the school and what action is being taken to maintain the high standards that we are used to.

To answer this let me take the time to discuss first of all how the school and Board are managing the departure of Mr Church, and then I will provide some details of the strategy that the Board of Governors have drawn up over the last year and how the Board and school management are and will be implementing this strategy going forward.

Mr. Church's resignation

As all of you are no doubt well aware, Mr. Church has decided to tender his resignation for health reasons. This was a difficult decision to make after a very challenging year in which major milestones were reached whilst Mr. Church was battling a serious illness against which, thankfully, he is responding well to therapy which he is following. The school still faces many challenges: we have a higher than normal staff turnover and several groups of parents have expressed their discontent with certain matters concerning the school and the level of education being provided.

These challenges ahead will require considerable effort by all involved if we are to overcome them. If we take all these considerations into account, the timing of Mr. Church's decision allows the school to take the necessary steps to ensure that the current year will close smoothly and to enable it to prepare for the new academic year with the energy and dedication to a quality of education for our children that we have all come to expect. I have worked closely with Mr. Church since I became Chairman just over one year ago and I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for the work he has done over the years and to wish him a full and speedy recovery from his illness.

Day-to-day management by acting co-Principals

Let me first of all assure you that, at least within the school walls, it is business as usual. Together with the other members of the Board, I am confident that the two co-Principals, Miss Dean and Mr. Wright, with over 70 years of combined experience in our school, are providing a much needed element of solidity and continuity in these changing times. The quality and experience of these two individuals allows us to take time to find a first class new Principal rather than rushing to find a replacement that does not fulfil all of the very demanding characteristics that the Board has defined for the profile of the individual we would wish to hire.

Classes are being conducted as normal and various year groups are currently undertaking exams and, as happens at this busy time of year, many events are taking place.

I know that there is a different perception outside the school walls and several parents have expressed their concern to me and other board members about the climate among teachers, the high staff turnover, the numerous rumours that are sweeping the school, the disciplinary procedures in place and their application, the worry over the use of drugs or alcohol by the students and last, but not least, the teaching of Italian within the school.

These are legitimate worries and I will attempt to address the concerns which have been expressed.

Getting buy in from staff

Soon after Mr Church's resignation, I and several other members of the Board held a series of meetings with all of the school's management, teachers and support staff to explain the situation and to hear their concerns. These meetings also allowed me to explain what the Board's strategy is going forward and what the Board expect from management and teachers.

The first meeting took place with Mr Wright and Miss Dean together. We explained the reasons behind Mr Church's resignation and asked them to run the school as co-Principals until a new Principal is hired to take over. We also met with the deputy heads and the curriculum coordinators in a separate meeting and completed the process with a meeting with the entire school staff in the middle of last week. At all of these meetings the staff was encouraged to express their concerns, which several did during the meetings. We also offered the possibility to the staff to reflect on their concerns and to communicate them after the meetings to either Mr. Wright or Ms. Dean, or directly to myself as Chairman if they felt uncomfortable in talking to their direct superiors in management.

Certain concerns raised already, such as lack of communication to staff of strategy and decisions taken, are very valid and the Board is already looking at how we can resolve them. Others need more consideration and will be addressed in due course.

Keeping staff turnover to healthy and predictable numbers

Turning to staff turnover, if we look at the absolute number it does appear to be above the average of the last few years, even for an international school such as ours. Typically staff leaves for various reasons: retirement, moving back to the UK for family reasons, and promotion opportunities in their field which are not possible in our school due to lack of vacancies. If we consider the number of staff who are moving on because they are not happy with the climate in the school, we find that no more than two or three people fall into this category, one of which I am happy to say has reconsidered his position and has withdrawn his resignation..

As of today, I am very pleased to say that all positions for next year, bar one, have already been filled by people who are coming to our school with impressive track records. However, in order to gain from the insights, observations and perhaps complaints from the people leaving the school, a member of the Board is currently conducting exit interviews with all staff leavers in a process that will be completed in the short term. Exit interviews will become standard practice for staff leavers from now on, in order to be able to constantly assess the level of staff satisfaction and to correct any negative features of how the school is being run that school management feel should be corrected.

Parent and staff morale

It is normal that in a period of significant and rapid change on several fronts, people will worry and feel uncertain about what the future will bring. In times like these, it is vital

that the information flow be constant and accurate; otherwise rumour and gossip drown out the key issues and we begin to lose focus. I am afraid to say that when this happens, nothing can be done other than to appeal to the common sense of the school's stakeholders. The Board has asked management to monitor that this phenomena does not take hold among staff and we hope that parents will also bear this in mind. When rumours and other misplaced actions take over, this can and does lead to damage to the school's reputation and should not be tolerated in an institution such as ours. More importantly, however, is that it does not help foster a healthy and respectful environment for our pupils.

Preserving the social and psychological welfare of our children

Within the philosophy promoted through British education guidelines on "Every Child Matters" the school has been reviewing its policies and practices for preserving the welfare of students. These include enhancing the role of the school counsellor, revisiting the PHSE programmes offered to students in school, and running a series of workshops to encourage a partnership with parents to help our youngsters and adolescents deal with the many social issues they face

Establishing and applying sanctions

The school is revisiting sanctions and their application and the rules and information on this topic are being reviewed since recent events have highlighted some inconsistencies in both the school documentation in relation to disciplinary procedures and their application. Procedures will be issued to explain what types of student behaviour will be the subject of disciplinary sanctions, and the Board will look at procedures to ensure that the rules and regulations are applied indiscriminately in a transparent manner.

Preventing alcohol and drug abuse

The school already has a zero tolerance policy regarding the use or the possession of drugs and alcohol within the school and in the immediate surroundings of the school. Teachers have all been instructed as to what procedures need to be followed if any students are found in possession of drugs or alcohol in the school. Likewise teachers have been instructed to look for signs of students who are suffering from the effects of drug use or alcohol abuse so the Board is comfortable that the situation in this area within the school is under control. Parents however should be aware that it is neither the school's duty nor responsibility to try to monitor or control pupils' drug and alcohol use after the school day has ended and at weekends. This is solely a parental responsibility. All students have received instruction in the damage to themselves and others that the use of drugs and abuse of alcohol can lead to but it needs parental back up to ensure that the message gets through.

New staff for Italian teaching within the British and IB curricula

Last week the Board issued a statement regarding the teaching of Italian in the school. The recent changes in the Italian teaching staff have in effect led to the retirement of three part-time Italian teachers who have been replaced by three full-time teachers allowing the school to substantially increase the flexibility for the teaching of Italian. The changes were made to improve the quality of teaching of Italian, both to mother tongue

Italian speakers and to other students who want to learn Italian, and there is absolutely no intention of changing the importance of Italian teaching within the school. Three new teachers have been hired after a detailed selection process and I think that it is only fair and reasonable to judge these individuals on their performance over the first few months of the new academic year rather than prejudging them.

A clear strategy for the school to become a top class facility offering educational excellence

In terms of the school's strategy going forward, over the past few months the Board has been considering what needs to be done to achieve its mission and has now developed a strategy covering three broad areas. These three areas are Facility, Education and Management; and all three areas are intertwined. Our strategy has been developed by considering where the school is positioned today in these three areas and where we want the school to be positioned in three to four years from now.

Building

Starting with the school facility. Our current situation is a rented property which, although it has served the school well over the years, is now inadequate to meet the challenges of the future. The Board believes that today the provision of an excellent education requires an excellent facility offering not only classrooms and science laboratories but also language laboratories with audio visual facilities, libraries for both Upper and Lower schools with adequate study areas, music drama and art facilities, IT laboratories, assembly areas and first class sport facilities. As a result the Board has considered various options, visited various potential sites and properties, and has determined that to ensure the long term interests of the school the best option would be to build a new school, including sport and recreational facilities. This would fully cater to the needs of a school such as the SJHS from the nursery level at three years old through the sixth form where the eighteen and nineteen year olds area are preparing for University entrance.

We are currently actively pursuing two possibilities both of which would allow the construction of a world class school with all of the above characteristics but at the same time we have not closed the door to considering other properties which have been brought to our attention.

The Board has determined that it would be inappropriate for such an asset to be held by the SJHS Association. It was initially believed that the creation of a Foundation would be the ideal entity for this purpose and for the creation of bursaries for deserving students who otherwise would not be able to attend our school. However, this way of funding development projects and bursaries is currently under close investigation because, as many of you are well aware, the Italian tax and financial regulations are quite complex and not usually favourable for institutions such as ours to establish such a foundation. I will communicate to you the selected route once we have all the information to make this decision.

Once the Board has determined which of the properties under consideration should be pursued to completion, we will provide regular updates of our plans for the new school and how we would intend to finance the cost of construction.

Education: From “good to best of class”

The Board’s strategy for education is quite simple. We strongly believe that the school currently provides a very good British style education which has been greatly enhanced by the introduction of the IB, but we still aim to truly become a “best of class” International school while maintaining the British principles which have governed the school since its foundation forty years ago. This belief is reflected in the new mission statement drawn up by the Board and management and which will soon be distributed to all stakeholders. Achieving “best of class” will not happen overnight, but from the position the school currently holds it is not unreasonable to think that we should be able to achieve excellence in the short to medium term (3 to 5 years). Over the coming months the Board will be working with the existing school management and the new Principal, whom the Board has already started to search for, to prepare a detailed implementation plan which we will present to the parent body.

Revisiting Management, Governance and Parents

The Board is convinced that to realise a building project, to run a world class educational facility and to guarantee an excellent education for all of our children, the school’s management structure and governance needs to be revisited. New management skills will need to be acquired and developed and the school’s management needs to get back to managing the school without the overbearing presence of a hands-on Board or the interference of parent interest groups pursuing a specific agenda. As for the Board’s role, we agree with the principle that we are here solely to guarantee the financial well being of the school, decide strategy for the school, monitor its implementation, judge the results and revise the strategy if results are not in line with expectations. When the latter occurs, the Board may decide to make necessary changes to the school’s management. Traditionally, and going forward, the parents’ role as members of the Association is to elect the Board, judge the results obtained by the Board, and, if not satisfied, vote to change the Board.

Parents’ role in the life of the school is very important; parent volunteers in the classroom, the library and the cafeteria and embody the spirit of community of our school. We also have the SJHS Friends, without whom many events involving the school community would not take place, we have numerous events during the year where parents, teachers and students participate; indeed they all perform together in our concerts which are the one of the highlights of the school year, and I would hope that this level of participation continues to define our school community

However, it is a fine balance that must be achieved to ensure that parents do not get involved the management of the school. This can easily lead to conflicts of interest and

conflicts within the parent body which in turn can only have a negative impact on the school.

Our current Board structure where all members of the Board are parents elected by parents can also lead to conflicts and I think that the Association needs to consider whether the school's best interests are served by a Board entirely composed of parents. Furthermore, the process by which Governors are elected does not always ensure that the Board is made up of the ideal professional skill set. Nor does it provide a voice for the staff body. The Board will be looking at this over the coming months and will be making recommendations to the Association of any changes that it may feel need to be made in the composition and voting procedures for the benefit of the school.

Conclusion

This for me has been a very demanding year with the many challenges faced by the school at the beginning of the new academic year being successfully dealt with during the year with excellent results. The big events that come to mind are the very successful completion of the School Inspection, the Application and Accreditation to the IB program, which has led to new staff training programs and changes in work practices. In addition, we finally have a revamped internet site which has contributed to an increased flow of information among all of the School's stakeholders and is proving to be an excellent communication tool. It is also been a year in which, in the light of specific events, including the Inspection report, the IB accreditation and certain disciplinary matters, the Board and the school's management have taken stock of the School's existing procedures and are working together to redefine some of these procedures which we hope will improve many aspects of the day to day business of the school and the pupil's welfare, such as in the area of health and safety. Many challenges remain to be addressed, as explained above, and undoubtedly more will arise going forward but I feel very confident that the school with the support of the Board and parents will easily deal with them maintaining the quality of education, and indeed improving the quality where appropriate, to enable the school to meet its goal of "Providing a Best of Class International Education" as set out in our new Mission Statement.