



# A school for EVERYONE

HERE are the vital statistics for Rotherham's most diverse school: 421 pupils, 27 languages, 16 ethnic backgrounds, two head teachers, one community.

At least that's the aim for staff at St Ann's Junior and Infant School, the cultural melting pot a stone's throw from the town centre and Eastwood where difference is seen as a bonus rather than a problem.

Enthusiastic joint heads Lee Rowan and Sharon Blagden operate an open-door policy for their office on the school's main corridor and are familiar faces for their students.

And across the way is a "language map" celebrating the many tongues spoken by children picking up in Eastwood from all over the world.

While English is the language of learning, the diversity and different cultures are celebrated.

"We have children from all over, from parts of Africa and from Iran and Iraq," says Lee.

"When you read about what has happened to some of them it is quite heartbreaking and shocking."

"We had one student from Bosnia and I had to look it up on the map."

"The staff are learning as well. We do cultural days where we have families in and they will cook traditional dishes."

"And when it comes to cultural or religious celebrations we have them all in-house."

St Ann's was hit last year with the "brady biker" of an Ofsted inspection report describing it as "neither improving nor satisfactory" — an outcome the joint heads, who had led the school to its first "good" rating, see as harsh given its particular challenges.

"We believe we are a good school," says Lee.

"We talk it over with the challengees we face in the area of Eastwood where there's a lot of deprivation and mobility of pupils — we just can't control that."

The "mobility" referred to is St Ann's unusually high turnover of pupils — in the past two years, there have been 183 new starters, on top of the usual foundation stage intake, and 106 kids have left, often without warning.

They took the blow on the chin, re-assessing winning awards and attending conferences to drive staff development.

St Ann's is a school full of surprises. MICHAEL UPTON finds out why the popular place of learning has become a beacon of hope for pupils

and were revealed this term with a letter from schools minister Nick Gibb highlighting pupils' progress between age seven and 11 in reading, writing and maths.

Lee says staff were "over the moon" with the letter, which has been framed in the principal's office. "The vast majority of children who start here have little or no English, so accelerating their progress through school is paramount to give them a chance of being 'secondary ready'."

"This is why we're so pleased with this letter, which acknowledges the progress and all the hard work and professionalism of the staff."

One area Ofsted rated as good was rapid behaviour, an impressive situation when you think about the different nationalities, religions and language backgrounds.

"We have very few incidents which when you look at all the ethnic groups is amazing," says Lee.

"And when you think of all the new kids coming in it's a testament to the staff that the atmosphere is brilliant."

Lee says the school has had a "big push" on language.

"If they're learning in a second language it can be hard but once they get past that they can fly," he adds.

"We have a challenge with children that have not been schooled properly before — they will just be learning around, which is what five-year-olds want to do — other children help them get used to it."

"Some of them have chaotic lives and they can often have struggles."

"The hardest thing is if the parents don't tell us they are going. It can be the work, family or cultural reasons."

"Sometimes we will go to the family homes to try and find out where they have gone."

"But we welcome all kids with open arms and the ones that stay with us make wonderful progress."

"In school they are like anyone else, when all children and families can feel loved and valued."

Former governor Eileen adds: "The school is quite remarkable."

"When you walk in, it's a real pleasure."

"The children are well behaved, enthusiastic, smiling and eager to learn."

"The staff do an amazing job, and try to ensure every single pupil to reach their potential."

they're not different.

"They all have the chance to achieve and they are lovely kids and bring a richness to us."

"We have a big group of Slavonian and Romanian parents who come and are part of the family."

"There's a really positive feel of children and adults learning together and enjoying their vocabulary."

"That's so much more by attending the Roma community but this is a place where people come together and the kids can come here and share."

Neither head hesitates, when asked if they would swap for a potentially volatile life in another school.

Sharon says: "Other heads say they don't know how we do it and will come to us when they don't know what to do."

"But we would miss it if we were any where else."

"There is a joy to this job. It's hard but they are just joyous kids and with every thing we do for them, they appreciate it."

The school is full of little innovations — the children take turns with practice sessions for SATS lessons as Special Agent Training, where they get to wear a hat, coat and sunglasses glasses.

"They wear it on a special treat," says Sharon.

And when it comes to behaviour, from hall to the playground, with Lee adding: "We have rail and yellow cards for A&E, but no V&E yet, although we do tell the kids sometimes that there are cameras!"

"It's not a special treat," says Sharon.

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## They've gotta lotta bottle!

YOU need plenty of bottle to run a school like St Ann's — and the joint heads have one on their desk.

The J20 bottle filled with fairy lights is a tribute to former head Alan Staton, who died in 2003.

Popular with pupils and parents, Mr Staton is credited with fostering the school's spirit of tolerance, inclusion and respect.

He is commemorated by a pirate ship-style play frame — and the distinctive soft drink bottle.

Lee explains: "Alan used to drink J20 — it was always orange and passion-fruit and he used to say 'heavy on the passion'."

"We have one every year in his memory and one year one of the staff presented us with this special bottle."

After years as Mr Staton's deputies, Lee and Sharon — who have been at St Ann's for 17 and 15 years respectively, were invited to share the job temporarily after his death, then took it on full time after a successful Ofsted inspection.

"There are not many schools with two heads," says Lee.

"You have to have the correct lines of communication so people know who to go to."

"We have different specialist areas so it marries together quite well."

SEEKING THE LIGHT: Pupils Jine Sadek and Morgan Sanaghan take a look at the unusual memorial to past head teacher Alan Staton 190369-8



BELOW — Alan Staton



BELOW — Alan Staton

Mr Rowan & Mrs Blagden  
Headteachers  
St Ann's Junior and Infant School  
St Leonard's Road  
Eastwood  
Rotherham  
S65 1PD

Our Ref: SC6543

5 March 2019

Dear Mr Rowan & Mrs Blagden

I am writing to offer my sincere congratulations to you, your staff and St Ann's pupils on progress made in English, maths and science between Key Stages 1 & 2. I understand that your recently published results place you in the top 3% of schools in Britain.

This is an outstanding achievement. I know that St Ann's faces sometimes challenging circumstances and to excel in this way is remarkable. It is a testament to the hard work of staff and pupils.

I would be grateful if you could share my congratulations with staff and pupils and wish you continued success.

Kind regards

Sarah Champion MP  
Member of Parliament for Rotherham

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## 'It's amazing'



Jine Sadek 190369-3  
Morgan Sanaghan 190369-4



THE challenge of going to a school with so many nationalities and languages hardly seems to faze Year 6 pupils Morgan Sanaghan and Jine Sadek.

The classmates are much more interested in talking about their shared love of art and video game coding than reflecting on each other's cultural backgrounds.

Jine, whose parents moved to Rotherham from Iraq 18 years ago, is bubbly, chatty and can hardly sit still, while Morgan is slightly more shy and thoughtful but opens up when asked about his favourite types of learning.

Jine highlights that the school is big on pupils respecting their teachers and each other, pointing out the noticeboard behind her where foot-high letters spell out "RESPECT" in capitals.

She also likes the school's unusual leadership team, adding: "I think it's amazing having two head teachers."

The part of school she enjoys least, she admits, is mindfulness class.

"That's because I can't sit still," she admits. "I have too much energy."

Born and raised in the UK, Jine says she has visited Iraq numerous times, singling out the climate as the biggest difference: "The last time I went it was up to 50 deg C — then I had to come home to rainy Rotherham."

Morgan, whose parents come from Plymouth and Worsop, likes different kinds of art, noting the students are encouraged to critique their own work, and loves creating new video games at school.

"We make mini-games," he says. "It can be really hard but seeing the end results is really worth it."

Teacher Michael Skjold came to teaching 15 years ago from a drama background.

He admits working at St Ann's presented its own challenges.

"We've had children come with no shoes or holes in their shoes and we sort that out for them," he says.

"Traditionally, the school was made up of white British and British Asian kids but there was a big influx from Eastern Europe about seven or eight years ago and we had to change as a school and have a language-rich environment."

"We wanted the kids to speak English in school but they're always really grateful for that."

"It's not just about academic achievement for us — we want the children to do well but we also want them to have other life skills and being a nice person is part of that."