

A distinctive Bennett education: Headteacher's Open Evening Address

Good evening, my name is Jon Sparke, I am the headteacher here at Bennett Memorial Diocesan School. A very warm welcome to you all this evening, but particularly to our year 5 and 6 visitors of course. In this talk we hope to introduce you to what we are all about as a school and give you some compelling insights about life as part of the Bennett family.

That's probably the first and most important thing to say about a Bennett education, because we are more than just a school that achieves truly exceptional academic standards. This is a place where children learn to live life in all of its fullness. A Bennett education involves the formation of character, so that young people learn to discern what is virtuous and so have a compass for their lives, as well as the knowledge and skills to experience fulfilment and success.

A Bennett education is an education for character and of character. We hope that in touring our beautiful grounds and meeting both teachers and students this evening you have picked up on that distinctiveness, which so many visitors to the school say is palpable in everything that we do.

Our distinctiveness stems from the fact that we are a Christian School and community. This means that we understand that every single individual is uniquely created for a purpose with unlimited potential. Our role as a school then, is to unlock that uncapped potential for growth and development. I believe that it is my absolute responsibility to help all of our students become the very best that they can be and so make their unique contribution to our world.

As you would expect, in this Christian school we grow together through our common life in regular acts of worship coordinated by our Chaplain, Reverend Canon Rachael Knapp, but often led by students themselves. Whether it is as part of the daily worship as a tutor group, the regular pattern of assemblies or our termly Eucharists, students will be given the opportunity to reflect and develop in the fullest way possible. We believe that recalling the presence of God in our school is an important priority and the right way to teach children about some of the most important things in life, not least that there more to life than the obvious and material. Our recent Outstanding Church Schools Inspection report bears witness to the impact of this on our community: "Whilst being deeply Christian, it is presented in such a way as to be inclusive of those whose background or faith is different. This results in a programme that is highly valued by both students and staff and which makes an excellent contribution to the school's cohesive and inclusive Christian ethos".

If young people are going to become the very best they can be and achieve excellence, then their education must equip them with the knowledge and capability that will provide the necessary foundations for this. At Bennett we understand that it is our curriculum, what is actually taught and learned by our students that is the most significant impact that we as a school can have. Typically this is measured by examination results, and I will shortly say something about these, but when choosing a school for your child, its academic record whilst clearly important, by itself is insufficient to enable you to make your decision. Our goal at Bennett is to form young people of character, prepared to make a contribution for good to our world, and equipped with the moral fibre and confidence to do so. A Bennett education is an education **for** something.

At Bennett the curriculum is designed as a springboard for excellence for every single child, irrespective of their starting point. You simply will not find a more challenging and enriching experience. All students are expected to study at least one modern language to GCSE as well as all three separate sciences. There is the opportunity to study Latin from Year 7 right through to A level. Core subjects mathematics and English, as you would expect, take proper priority, with large numbers of students continuing mathematics and indeed further maths to Advanced level. Alongside

these are the full suite of subjects that you would expect to see, including philosophy, which all students study from year 7 through to at least GCSE. Bennett offers to each and every student the thoroughgoing development of their intellect. They are explicitly taught to reason, debate and analyse. There is absolutely no ducking of challenges, nor the following of courses designed to make the school look good but which offer students nothing portable or enduring. In November 2017 Bennett was awarded the coveted 'World Class School' status, taking us beyond 'Outstanding'. We are still the only school in Kent to hold this designation, which is only available to schools that are already judged to be Outstanding by Ofsted. In evaluating Bennett in relation to World Class status, the inspector wrote "absolutely nothing is left to chance, learning is taken seriously...the school provides a context where everything is meaningful".

Complementing this rich curriculum of traditional subjects and inter-woven into it is an unparalleled co-curriculum, designed to enrich and extend. From year 7, students routinely participate in inter-form debating, which develops their literacy in public affairs alongside the confidence and capacity to speak in public. All of the students that you spoke to tonight cut their teeth in this arena. From the word go, Bennett students are expected to participate in the school's rich musical life. All children form part of our year 7 choir who, following on from their regular singing lessons, have at least 3 opportunities to perform in public. Further to this our Music Academy provides students with the chance to learn to play a musical instrument of their choice and so perform in one of our huge range of ensembles, orchestras and choirs. Recently our top musicians have toured Italy, sang evensong in Southwark Cathedral and our Bennett Brandenburg Symphonia competed in the Pro Corda National chamber music final. This year our orchestra's summer destination is the city of Prague for a series of concerts.

Now as I said earlier, examination results are often seen as a key indicator of the quality of the work a school does, but that at Bennett our educational ambitions are much wider. This is certainly not to say that achieving well in exams is not important. Indeed, it should be a given, the necessary outcome of deeply embedded learning of knowledge that really matters. So what about those results?

At Bennett children achieve outstanding academic results. As you can see here the outcomes of Bennett's students in public examinations match the school's ambition for excellence in everything that it does. They stack up impressively against other schools locally and nationally both at GCSE and A level. Over the last 5 years Bennett has routinely been ranked in the top 5% of schools nationally for the achievement of its students and we anticipate the same being true of our 2019 results once the national performance tables are published. Certainly in 2018 Bennett was in the very top category "well above average" for its results indeed they were listed amongst the top 100 schools in the country in the National Performance tables. It goes without saying that we are intent on further improvement from this exceptionally high base.

This year's GCSE results were again phenomenal. Almost a third of entries were awarded a grade 7 (the old A grade) or higher. Nearly nine out of ten entries, secured at least the standard pass grade 4. All of this achieved in a context where Bennett admits from the full range of prior attainment.

At A level Bennett students also prospered with over a quarter of all grades awarded being A or A* and 8 out of 10 above the A*-C threshold.

These great results are important, not as an end in themselves, but because they open doors to the future. A Bennett education is for seven years, so the exceptional progress made by students in the Bennett Sixth Form is what enables our students to secure places on sought after courses at prestigious universities including Oxbridge, as this slide demonstrates. Alongside these engineers,

historians and medics, Bennett students secure places on competitive higher level apprenticeship schemes, for example at some of the top city accountancy firms.

So how does Bennett achieve such strong outcomes for students? Put simply, because we ensure that the quality of teaching and relationships in the school is second to none. The single most important thing that any school does for its students is to provide them with outstanding teaching. At Bennett teachers are experts in their field and they understand the importance of continuously developing and improving in their work. That's because Bennett is a designated Teaching School, one of only a few schools in the area to hold this special status. This means we specialise in the continuous training and development of teachers. What's more, because of the strong beliefs that we have about the uncapped potential of every single student, teachers will provide ongoing support to the nth degree, so that your child makes the best possible progress. At Bennett nobody is left behind and everyone is individually challenged to the utmost as the stellar results of our high fliers bear witness.

You don't just have to take my word for this. Our most recent Church School inspection took place in September 2017. Our inspection report clearly identifies the relationship between the quality of teaching, leadership and students' achievement in this way: "In their journey through school, they progress rapidly so that, by the time they reach Year 11, attainment is high and well above average. These excellent outcomes are continued in the sixth form reflecting the accelerated progress made by students of differing attainment levels and backgrounds. In keeping with its Christian vision of encouraging all to flourish, there is a broad curriculum offer, high aspirations and focused teaching in evidence right across the school. This is closely monitored by senior and middle leaders which means that there is a consistency of expectation."

At Bennett we are committed to ensuring that all children flourish, whoever they are, whatever their background. A prerequisite for this is ensuring that the standard of behaviour in the school is exemplary. To achieve this, we teach children about the importance of good relationships, we teach them good manners and expect the highest standards of courtesy and personal presentation. We teach Bennett students about self-control and the virtues of patience, respect, compassion and generosity. The driving force for this is our strong ethos as a Christian school. This means that there is a strong and positive framework of discipline in the school which is strictly applied. In this context, there is of course, absolutely no tolerance of bullying whatsoever.

As you would expect, Bennett does more than just create a highly ordered context for learning. To truly flourish children need to develop both spiritually and emotionally. We heard earlier of the way in which our worship life as a school sets the context for our shared life as a community. Bennett understands that to truly thrive children need to learn to navigate the complex decisions and pressures involved in growing up. What better place to do this than one which understands the importance of having a clear moral framework, and which values every individual as unique and created? At Bennett children learn that we rely on one another and that we live interdependent lives. They learn to look outwards and to realise that they are important to one another. This contributes powerfully to good mental health and to their sense of self-confidence. And when children meet some of the obstacles in growing up that are tough to navigate on your own, the school provides individual support for them through our highly effective school welfare team, which includes our dedicated school nurses and school chaplain.

So why should you want to apply for a place at Bennett? We are an outstanding school which enables all of our students to flourish. Our commitment to the development of character and the space afforded to the spiritual and emotional development of young people underpins the excellent academic outcomes that our students achieve.

If you live in Kent, some of you will have now taken your 11+, and some of you will, I am sure, shortly hear that you have done well in it. If so, congratulations: we welcome you to Bennett to join many others in the same position. What's more you too will also benefit from all of that care, challenge and enjoyment that sets this school apart.

If you want your child to come to Bennett, we invite you to apply for a place here. If this is the school you and your child want, then you should name Bennett as your first choice on the Secondary Common Application Form (SCAF), obtainable from your primary school.

You must also complete a Bennett supplementary form, and you will be handed one of these on the way out this evening. This form needs to be returned to the school, NOT to the Local Authority.

The deadline for the supplementary form, and the Kent SCAF, is 31 October. Different SCAF deadlines may apply for Medway, West and East Sussex. We will acknowledge all Bennett supplementary forms by early November.

The information you give is what the school uses to decide whether you will be offered a place. Please read the forms through carefully. Although the school is always oversubscribed, if you state clearly what commitment you have by completing the back of the form carefully, we hope we will be able to offer you a place. It is particularly important that you get a referee who is a priest or minister, or a leader of your religious community, to sign the end of the form if this is relevant to your application. They will normally help you complete the form if you are unsure, and we are happy to answer any telephone enquiries about completion of the form in the run up to the deadline. Please make sure that you include all of the information that is relevant to your application with the form and ensure that you complete all sections, as the school is not in a position to follow up on missing information.

Because of the sustained high demand for places at Bennett the Trustees have taken the decision to go ahead and make more places available in order to be able to offer places to a wider range of applicants, which is of course why we are building a brand new, state of the art teaching block which will be ready for September 2020. There is also an appeals procedure each spring for cases where places are not offered and there are good reasons why Bennett is the school for your child.

There is transport to Bennett from most parts of West Kent and West and East Sussex, and although there is now a cost for many families for transport here, parents value sufficiently Bennett's distinctive high quality education to be prepared to make some sacrifices for their children to travel here for school.

We are proud and happy to invite you to look around Bennett on normal school days over the next few weeks, although we do ask that you telephone ahead to book onto a tour at a particular time, so we can manage the numbers in the school at any one time. So once again, thank you for being here this evening, and for your attention. We look forward to welcoming many of you back to Bennett next year as new year 7 students.