

## Spa School - What The Good Schools Guide says

### Head

Since 2006 Simon Eccles has developed this school in a quiet and gentle way, making it a haven of calm for pupils with a diagnosis of autism. It has grown in size since he has been there, with a new school about to open nearby. He trained in Australia (primary diploma in teaching) and then moved to the UK where he first taught at a primary school in Tower Hamlets, working with children with EBD while studying for an MA in psychoanalytic psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic. These developed his interest in special needs and autism and he moved to TreeHouse School, first as a senior teacher and then rapidly becoming Head. He then worked for four years at The Bridge School in Islington, where he headed up the autism provision which was now his specialist area of interest,

He moved to Spa School in 2006 and has been slowly and steadily growing the school, both in terms of its buildings and facilities, and in terms of the quality of the teaching and monitoring. He is self-effacing and no publicist, but well able to plug into the many wonderful resources London has to offer, getting involvement of others: PWC pay for pantomime tickets each year, the Oval hosts their cricket lessons, Millwall their football training, the Globe their theatre outings. He is clearly enormously engaged and proud of the school, and very well loved by all the pupils, who spoke fondly of and to him. Parents said they can contact him at any time - 'no restrictions' - and they know their opinions and concerns will be dealt with respectfully and effectively. A down to earth, practical head, cycling to school, joining in all school events, visiting classrooms daily and setting an example to both pupils and staff of gentle, purposeful action.

### Academic matters

The Head has a Deputy and four Assistant Heads who meet daily, and the Assistant Heads monitor planning of learning objectives and teaching, as well as giving training after school and feed in 'development points for teachers' so there is 'a constant emphasis on improving the quality of teaching and learning'. Teaching assistants stay for daily after-school meetings so they can all review lessons and make plans for the following day. These systems help to ensure that teaching and learning are really effective and the pupils are getting the benefit of lessons that have a very clear focus.

IEPs have three goals - communication, independence and aspirations - and pupils also have weekly targets in literacy, numeracy, reading and speaking and listening. Small classes of between six and nine pupils, several with individual teaching assistants, ensure that learning matches a child's ability. This is further enhanced by having vertical groupings according to needs rather than age. One tutor group was for girls only when we visited - 'It worked better for them that way' - but no hard and fast rules: the pupils' needs lead the teaching and organisation, rather than the other way round. Parents said, 'It is really inclusive, no child is left out, they all do the same lesson but at different levels'.

Each day starts in the tutor group - so that if a child arrives late, they are not rushing between classes - making sure everyone knows the plans for the day with plenty of visual timetables and visual cues. Maths in the morning, then a lesson followed by a break, then a further hour's lesson followed by lunch. This means not too many room or subject changes, reducing transitions and thereby reducing stress levels. Even lunch time is structured - half an hour eating time (most children have lunch cooked on the premises in the canteen) and then half an hour for clubs or set activities. After lunch there is half an hour reading and shared attention time before afternoon lessons. As well as daily maths and English, there are science lessons in the science lab and computing in classrooms (though this is not a school that relies on technology - newsletters sent in paper form, not emailed, parents phone rather than sending messages, limited use of voice activated technology, relying instead on PECS and Makaton). 'These pupils participate in games which are repetitive and safe, we want them to be involved in practical doing learning, not screen time'. Having said that, one of the students recently gained an Oscar in a competition for a short

film they had made.

There is an emphasis on communication and those skills are reinforced in lessons all through the day as well as having specific social communication lessons - how to stay safe, how to be polite, how to look at people when you are speaking to them, how to complete forms for independent living. The school uses a benchmarking system to compare the progress of Spa School pupils against other similar level pupils and thereby ensure that Spa pupils are making better than average progress. Qualifications include ASDAN, Entry Level and Foundation Level accreditation. It is not unknown for pupils to take GCSEs - though it is not common - and the school can link with mainstream schools for teaching and exams. Students we spoke to said that one of the things they liked about Spa School was 'the chance to work and get levels', and parents also spoke about the 'steep learning curve' they observed in their children.

## Games, options, the arts

There's a well-planned playground with climbing equipment, a scooter path, covered sitting areas, a chicken run and raised vegetable beds, as well as a stream and generous grassed areas, fully grown apple and cherry trees, planted beds and a rambling vine. Not at all bad for a central London school! Space to be alone but safe, and space to run a little wild when you need to. We liked seeing pupils using the playground for their horticulture lessons, and that kids collect eggs from the chickens for the canteen or using in their cooking lessons.

PE is popular with students we spoke to - and there are plenty of options for those who don't like team sports too. Cricket (at the Oval Cricket Ground), football, fitness (a generous suite for working out), BMX bike training, and martial arts. There is plenty of gymnastics, table tennis and trampolining in the school gym, and a trapeze in the local sports centre. Ballet Rambert are involved in some dance workshops on top of weekly street dance lessons. The need to stay fit has been emphasised recently at school while obtaining their Healthy School status, which means that pupils are aware of the need to eat healthily and also to keep active, and this new drive has pupils eating fruit at break time and doing more fitness work, with a consequent reduction in obesity. 'My daughter loves trampolining - not only in PE lessons but also at other times to use up some energy and to help her feel better'.

Drama at Spa is important to help students gain confidence and hone speaking skills. A specialist drama teacher gets pupils to perform in end of term plays - whilst we were there pupils were acting as children during the occupation of France, where they were hunting out acts of kindness. Parents felt there was evidence of inclusion here too: 'even though my son is non-verbal and was reluctant, he has been in school plays, dancing and playing instruments'. Role play is encouraged in weekly communication lessons as well as during drama classes - there are two drama studios, but also theatre trips as part of the drama curriculum, which includes trips to the pantomime and trips to the Globe, Young Vic and Southwark theatre. School minibuses are used for trips and for sports.

Food tech is taught in a dedicated and well-equipped kitchen where we saw pupils tucking into chicken pizzas that they had made. This is a weekly class across the school as it also helps to encourage independence - e.g. how to use a knife, how to make a hot drink. Many pupils achieve food hygiene qualifications this way. Older years have their own common room and can use the small flat that helps to prepare them for independent living as well as preparing meals for them to eat at the dining table. These older pupils also gain work experience in the attached School House Café in an adorable Victorian cottage adjoining the school. Pupils get to help with cooking, serving and cleaning in this community café. Whilst enjoying a coffee there, we saw other local groups coming to have good food at reasonable prices and the general interaction between the pupils and the public is clearly of benefit to all.

The art room is a well-used generous space with a wide range of art techniques - we saw model making, ceramics, collage, painting and printing. We watched a class of boys totally immersed in the pinch pots that they were creating and decorating, and explaining how they intended using them. Design technology is mostly wood but also some plastic modelling.

Horticulture is taught with a specialist teacher, so pupils can grow vegetables for the school house café and gain further employment skills.

There are weekly music lessons with keyboards and instruments – with opportunities for performing in the weekly assemblies.

## Background and atmosphere

The traditional red-brick Victorian building in a residential setting makes this feel like a community school. The solid feel, high ceilings and wide corridors create space and light, with room to breathe and spread out. The heart of the school may be the open plan library with sofas that is used in break times as well as for lessons. Classrooms have high windows which help keep distraction down. There are enough wall displays to give information and share good work, without creating visual overload. Brick walls and solid stairs help avoid damage if a child becomes anxious, and there is room to move and a very tight timetable so things feel controlled and orderly. Everything immaculately clean, from the toilets to the dining room. Parents say that ‘my child walks into school and feels secure. It is safe for him here’. And ‘my child is happy to get on the bus to school and always says he has had a good day at school’.

Plans are well on their way for a new school in Camberwell to be run by the existing Deputy Head for 120 pupils from 5-16 years, and there are hopes for a new college for 19-25 year olds to provide high value vocational training for pupils leaving Spa School.

## Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

Very individualised teaching and learning is possible thanks to small classes and high teacher to pupil ratio. A main emphasis is on structured time - both inside and outside classes. Break-out rooms available for students needing time alone as well as several sensory rooms. Large amounts of communication between the school and parents ensure that issues dealt with very quickly. ‘If something has upset my child, the school deals with it straight away, they sort it out and find solutions. For example, when my child found it difficult to go in to school with the other children, they agreed that he could go straight to the classroom a little later to avoid the stressful transition’. Phone calls are a routine method of quick communication, but parents also appreciate the communication book ‘so I can say how he has slept and to give some idea of his emotions’. All staff trained in restraint techniques, but there is a great deal of respect between all the school community, and this feeds down to pupils, who know not only that they will be treated with care, but that they should treat others likewise.

## Pupils and parents

There are a hundred pupils in 14 classes of six to nine pupils each. All are locals, some 35 per cent white British, with a ratio of 80:20 boys to girls. Parents get huge amount of help from the school, with a full-time family liaison member of staff to help them negotiate state bureaucracy for transport, funding, support and ways to work with their children, and also to ensure good parent/school communication. ‘They always help you out,’ said one parent gratefully. We saw a parents’ meeting to explain about a residential trip where parents were encouraged to voice their concerns. ‘Our son, who had never been away from us, went on a two-night residential last year and is happy to go again this year’. ‘My daughter has gained confidence and has learned so much.’ Parents said they feel the school keeps their children safe, helps them to gain independence and communication skills as well as learning within the school curriculum. ‘They are so considerate’ and ‘they know each child really well and are so involved in their learning’.

## Entrance

Pupils are referred by Southwark on the basis of having a diagnosis of autism and having moderate or severe learning difficulties. All pupils have an EHC plan and since the school is oversubscribed, pupils come from an ever-narrowing catchment area within Southwark. This reduces the need for transport for pupils and ensures a more local intake. 'We can take pupils with complex needs and because we have excellent sensory and visual support in place'. The school says that 'Southwark is supportive and we work together on admissions. Often problems in behaviour are reduced once students come here, though if a pupil's main needs are behavioural, Spa might not be the right place'. The LA pays the fees, which allows the school to have a stable income, and the school says, 'We never charge for any extras, ever'.

## Exit

Almost none leave at 16 since 16-19 provision is very good at Spa. A few move on to mainstream Lambeth or Lewisham Colleges, or to specialist Orchard Hill or Aurora Centre, with plenty of help with transition. The school would love to consider opening better value provision for 19-25 year olds, but so far these are just plans. When pupils leave, they all have accredited qualifications, and all will have had work experience in the School House Café next door to the school.

## Money matters

The school has a steady income from the LA of around £3m per annum and seems to manage its budget effectively, allowing for building plans and a high staff ratio. Twelve governors, including ex-parents, help raise the profile of the school as well as actively monitoring and being helpfully involved.

The School House Café only covers costs as it is a community cafe, and the school does not do big fundraising amongst parents, who are not expected to pay for any extras - even clubs.

The school is about to become a multi academy trust because it is opening a second school in Camberwell.

## Therapy and staffing

All pupils are assessed on arrival at the school. Speech and Language Therapists work in class wherever possible - ensuring the pupils carry through their skills to the classrooms and that TAs know what expectations are and how to best help, though there are small rooms for individual work when needed. There is an Occupational Therapist who attends the school two days a week. Specialist art and music therapists also give individual therapy sessions in school and an Educational Psychologist is also available.

## Our view

Spa School is growing in reputation and size, thanks to really solid educational practice led by a calm and kind Head. No gimmicks here but planned teaching, purposeful lessons and reflective teachers building on the quality of their teaching. This is paying off, with a school where pupils are safely moving forward and growing in independence, confidence and well-being. Teachers, parents and pupils are all really well supported - that is why this is such a good school community. Clever Southwark to have nurtured this haven.