



Weekly Newsletter: Friday 11th December

Dear Parents and Carers,

Well here it is; my last ever newsletter to you as Head Teacher of West Jesmond. After 10 years and hundreds of newsletters I could never have imagined that the context for my departure from the school would be so unusual and that the planned term would end next week so suddenly without all of the usual exciting festivities.

I felt it was appropriate to share with you all the introduction to my last Head Teacher report to governors from our meeting on December 1st. I think in many ways this encapsulates so much about our journey together and what I am most proud of in our school. Supervising the children on the yard on Tuesday lunchtime to cover staff currently isolating, I watched the children play, argue, laugh, skip, run, chase, play tag, and invent their own little worlds as they have done so on this playground for the past 115 years. I hope they will continue to do so for the next 115 years too.



Executive Head Teacher Final Report to Governors

On November 29th and 30th 2010 I attended two days of interviews for the post of Head Teacher at West Jesmond Primary school. It was bitterly cold and there were snow drifts all over the country. One shortlisted candidate for the job never made it to the school, lost in a snow drift in North Yorkshire.

I was offered the job at around 8 pm on November 30th and accepted immediately. I handed in my notice to South Tyneside Council where I was Assistant Head of Service and Head of primary Education on December 1st 2010; I started working with Jo Elliott, the Acting Head at the time and took up post officially on March 1st 2011.

Executive Head Teacher: Gary Wallis-Clarke MA in Education BA (Hons) NPQH

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I am now in the very privileged position to reflect on the past 10 years of my career at West Jesmond with immense pride, happiness and professional success. There is no doubt that I leave the school in a better position now than it was when I started in 2011.

Together we have increased pupil numbers from a critical 545 to 620. Together we have moved the school from a shaky 'good' OFSTED grade to a very secure and confident 'outstanding' in 2015. We became a National Teaching School in 2016 and have successfully fulfilled all of our obligations and pressed ahead with new DFE initiatives including Initial Teacher Training, SSIF projects (Strategic School Improvement Fund), Newly Qualified Teacher support and accreditation and school to school support.

We have developed the reputation of our school across the region through our outreach work in subjects and in my role as a National Leader of Education. We have increased our income and contingency to a place of financial security with an annual budget of nearly 1 million pounds more than when I started in 2011.

We have continued to develop staff and I look back with immense pride at 5 former members of my SLT at West Jesmond becoming Head Teachers and 6 former members of my SLT becoming Deputy Head Teachers. In my entire career to date every single Deputy I have trained has gone onto Headship. I fully expect Mr Tom Jones to let me down and blemish my record!

At our last OFSTED Moira Fitzpatrick commented on this as a strength of the school and we continued to fulfil this commitment to education leadership in the region. In my 10 years of Headship we have had over 60 babies born to members of staff and managed successfully every maternity and paternity leave.

We have attained academic results that have consistently placed us in the top 5 to 10% of England and received a number of special recommendations and acknowledgements for our achievements, including those for pupils on Free School Meals.

I have managed and led the school under 5 Conservative Secretaries of State for Education, through Brexit and the COVID 19 national pandemic.

I have worked with a huge number of governors over the past 10 years and a huge number of staff. The changes have been immense.

But I look back with immense pride over these 10 years – double the length I have ever stayed in any previous job. Being the Head teacher at West Jesmond has been without doubt the pinnacle of my education career; all my jobs led to this position and our record of achievement and success. I have been very happy here.

Leading West Jesmond is not an easy job and is not for the feint hearted. I often compare it to captaining a huge ocean-liner travelling across a choppy ocean at full speed. We have a huge crew, vast passenger list and some very demanding customers. But that is why it is a joy.

Together we have travelled the world (quite literally) and seen some amazing things. I am handing this amazing school to a wonderful school leader and I wish Matt Ward every success for the future. I sincerely hope he is as happy here leading West Jesmond as I have been. The future will be challenging, especially the immediate next few years, but I am confident the school will go on to ever more great things.

I would like to thank all staff, parents and governors for their support over these past few years. I hope we have made a difference to the lives and education of the young people we have educated. I hope we have educated them to make informed choices, to be compassionate, to be curious and inquisitive and to make the most of the life they have around them and to make the best life-choices they can.

The very first question I was asked at my interview 10 years ago was “What is the purpose of education?” I answered from my heart and replied “Choice”. The more education you have, the more you learn and the more you want to know. And with this journey comes choice in life evidenced through aspiration, ambition, resilience, perseverance, determination, hard work, study, finding a passionate interest and knowing who you are as a unique individual.

I can only end this newsletter with the lyrics from Barbra Streisand (Yentl) that have guided and driven my own educational philosophy from a back-yard in Sunderland in 1970 to Jesmond in 2020. I shared this with staff at my first INSET day with them in 2010 and it still rings true; even more so now than ever.

I am ready to move on, and sad though leaving will undoubtedly be, it is the right thing to do; for me and for West Jesmond. I will never forget my time, success and friendship here. Never.

A Piece of Sky

Tell me where, where is it written what it is I'm meant to be?

It all began the day I found that from my window I could only see a piece of sky.
I stepped outside and looked around, I never dreamed it was so wide or even half as high.
The time had come to try my wings and even thought it seemed at any moment I could fall,
I felt the most amazing things, the things you can't imagine if you've never flown at all.

Though it's safer to stay on the ground, sometimes where danger lies

There the sweetest of pleasures are found.

No matter where I go- there'll be memories that tug at my sleeve.

But there will also be more to question yet more to believe.

Oh, tell me where; where is the someone who will turn to look at me and want to share my every
sweet-imagined possibility?

The more I live - the more I learn.

The more I learn - the more I realize the less I know.

Each step I take- Papa, I've a voice now!

Each page I turn- Papa, I've a choice now!

Each mile I travel only means the more I have to go.

What's wrong with wanting more? If you can fly -
then soar!

With all there is - why settle for

Just a piece of sky?

Papa, I can hear you... Papa, I can see you...

Papa, I can feel you... Papa, watch me fly!



SCHOOL CLOSURE CHANGE

I also wanted to inform you all as soon as I could, that West Jesmond Primary school will now be closing for the Christmas holiday on **Thursday December 17th at the end of the normal school day.**

This follows a sudden announcement from the Department for Education on Tuesday night, asking and allowing schools to consider changing term dates in relation to supporting contract tracing pre the Christmas period.

Many parents have already requested time to voluntarily self-isolate in the last week of term, to protect vulnerable family members and many parents have also tried to return to their respective home countries.

We also currently have 6 classes and over 20 members of staff now isolating at home.

In light of all of these factors and contract tracing procedures in place for all families at the school until December 23rd, with the support of the Governing Body, we have decided to end the term 1 day earlier than planned as sanctioned by the government.

I do appreciate this may put some parents in a difficult position and we do apologise for this very short notice change to our diary, which under normal circumstances we would never do.

Please do bear in mind that even with this reduction in term length the school and/or Public Health England may contact families with a request to self-isolate up until December 23rd 2020. Beyond this date, there will be no further COVID infection risk linked to your child attending school in the last week of term.

With my very best wishes to you all for the future and thank you. For everything.

Gary Wallis-Clarke
Executive Head Teacher

