

# What The Good Schools Guide says

## Headteacher

Since September 2016, Ruth Luzmore (30s), who has brought her enthusiasm, warmth, appreciation and energy to this one-form entry, successful primary school. As the daughter of a primary school teacher she never thought she would follow the same career path, but memories of a very happy primary education, and experiences as a teaching assistant, led her to teaching. She studied in the evenings at Birkbeck College for a degree in politics, philosophy and history whilst earning a living in the daytime. She has continued working days and studying evenings since, gaining a masters in leadership at the Institute of Education whilst working as deputy head in another Islington primary school and now, as head of St Mary Magdalene Academy (SMMA) Primary, she is working towards a PhD in enquiry based professional development. She says, 'it is good to have a life outside the job, which otherwise can be all-consuming'.

Her commitment to working hard and the importance of education for social change can be seen here - involving teachers with an active senior leadership team, engaging parents through the parent-teacher association, good email and newsletter communications. The school also gives a voice to pupils, who not only have a school council but say 'teachers listen to you' and 'you can talk to Ms Luzmore or teachers about any issues'. Since arriving she has appointed a deputy head and several of the teachers, so has staff loyal to her: 'they are open to change and we are evolving policy together'. Many of the TAs have been at SMMA for years, some having taught the parents of current pupils and monitored in the playground - 'that way the care continues from the classroom into the playground and they can be aware of pupils' issues'. 'We keep them because we are a team and all genuinely care for each other.' Staff meetings weekly (if needed, 'I don't waste time on unnecessary meetings') as well as a Friday breakfast meeting to check diaries and plan for the week ahead. 'I like being part of the academy group because it means I run a small, friendly school but can look outwards too, to the senior school.'

## Entrance

Strict admissions criteria managed by the academy admissions secretary (advantages to being linked to the academy infrastructure). Priority to children in care, then children who regularly attend one of the three local churches - St Mary Magdalene, St Luke's or St David's, then residents of Islington who attend another church, then siblings (some years as many as half the reception class is made up of siblings), then distance from the school (has been as local as within 0.3 of a mile). Oversubscribed in reception and there is a waiting list for each class.

## Exit

Almost all go on to the secondary school of SMMA, though a few to Dame Alice Owen, Highbury Fields, City of London (both boys and girls).

## Our view

Having a previous literacy coordinator as head has ensured that literacy is a real backbone of the school: 'they need to leave not only reading but enjoying reading for pleasure'. Phonics taught formally using Sounds Write system for a short session each day, but then literacy taught in the widest possible way - topic based, class readers, buddy reading, reading road maps to lead pupils through age-appropriate books, as well as staged reading books for the younger pupils. The library maintained by the academy librarian. Writing in evidence on the boards and neatly marked homework in books with the emphasis on self-expression. Spelling homework given weekly. 'Enough homework to please parents but not so much kids spend all the weekend working,' according to one parent.

Maths coordinator makes sure that national curriculum covered but also, wherever possible, that maths included in topics ('units of enquiry') and in practical ways (eg visiting fruit snack bar run by sixth formers, raising money for charity - 'generating money is empowering for the children and helps them to realise money needs to be earned'). No setting in maths - 'we don't want to

put limits on anyone's ability' - and extra tutoring groups by deputy head in order to extend or support pupils in particular topics. There are booster classes after school which are, apparently, 'really fun and help with your learning,' according to pupils. Pupils said, 'there are different levels of work and you can choose your challenge'.

Mandarin or Spanish taught from reception. Other subjects do not follow the national curriculum tightly, but skills included within units of enquiry. These allow child-led learning to extend subjects further into areas of the children's interests rather than needing to follow national requirements, with pupils encouraged to have 'intellectual conversations around themes, so that the year 6 conflict module started with Middle Ages and battles and moved right on to Trump and Kim Jong Un'. Parents said that 'kids become obsessed with the theme for six or seven weeks, we prepare it during the holidays, discuss it over meal times - they are always thinking about it. It gives them a chance to really get into a subject in depth'. Year 1 were learning about people's jobs - a lovely set of dressing up clothes and equipment for role play. 'I was disappointed the kids didn't chose me to come to speak in class, but I suppose my job is less interesting to them than other work,' said one parent. Learning done 'in a playful way,' according to parents, and pupils said, 'teachers are not too strict, they give us chances, listen to us and are fair'.

Good results at KS2, above national average in all subjects. However, it is the ability to discuss and articulate ideas that makes this school shine - pupils are used to developing ideas and forming opinions and backing their ideas up. After Sats in year 6, pupils create an 'exhibition where they present a poster with their opinions and collected thoughts which they explain to visiting parents and teachers - a sort of conference (PhD students in the making?). Topics covered included 'How terrorism affects society', 'How do we work for political honesty' and 'The influence of government on health care around the world'. Mentor teachers work to support these mini presentations.

Music taught by inspirational and dedicated teacher - both in class and during Wednesday's 'singing assembly' - the four-part harmony sung 'put goosebumps on my skin, it was so impressive'. Peripatetic music teachers for some 10 different instruments. Pupils enthusiastic about the music, acting and dance. And they, plus parents and teachers, all look forward to the annual Shakespeare production that involves the whole school learning, acting and dancing the play.

One afternoon PE per week with specialist teachers ('really good PE teachers,' according to pupils we spoke to) as are the language teachers and the dance teacher, who comes in for at least a term each year to help prepare for Shakespeare production. Swimming in years 3 and 4. Recent win at the London Schools Football Championship particularly impressive for a one form entry school and a cause of great delight. Girls' football well coached, according to pupils. The fact that there are a good number of male staff helps with regular break-time football practice. Playground spacious - pitch, table tennis, outside learning area, outside toilets etc but money currently being raised to improve the amenities and possibly to include making even more use of green roofs and flat roofs outside classrooms. Reception shares really well-equipped Astroturf playground with neighbouring Islington nursery. School lunches cooked on the premises and eaten from china plates in older years. 'Younger years get to the salad bar so there is less left for us,' bemoaned older pupils, who also said 'you have to eat vegetables, which makes you get used to healthy eating, but we wish older children could get seconds'. 'Bring a parent to lunch' scheme allows parents to see lunch at school and parents say school is receptive to feedback - not only on the shepherd's pie.

Pastoral care a highlight thanks to the full-time school chaplain who works in the academy. American by birth, upbeat, leopard-print wearing and totally involved in the school and the pupils. She leads a prayer meeting for parents and staff, she knows all the pupils by name and comes to support them in sports fixtures. She runs one of the mid-morning assemblies and helps ensure that the Christian knowledge and ethos is embedded in the school. One pupil said, 'We don't just talk about values, we use them too'. They said that 'problems are sorted out straight away and you can talk to teachers about every issue, even things at home'. 'We learn about bullying and

are trained as mini-mentors.' There are 'worry boxes' in the classroom for anonymous concerns.

SEN supported by academy SENCo, and several pupils had individual TAs. 'We have helped a few pupils acquire an EHC plan' and there are some 20 on the SEN register for medical or educational needs, though 'if I had a child with additional needs I wouldn't probably send them to SMMA,' said a parent, unsure if there is sufficient extra support. Pupil premium used in part to pay for extra helper in reception: 'We focus on reception because if we invest lower down the pupils have a solid knowledge to carry up the school, so we aren't trying to catch up in year 6'.

The school shares a governing body with the senior school with one of the primary parents voted in. Parents involved as much as possible - invited to help with trips, raising money, running clubs, attending weekly Friday coffee morning, in the autumn term welcome BBQ, and at the inclusive and community spirited Christmas fair. 'We are raising money for the school but we want everything to be as affordable as possible for everyone'.

Our opinion: everyone knows everyone in this small, friendly school with different year groups playing together and parents who are involved. A really solid, well-planned education with plenty of extracurricular clubs and activities, creating articulate, thinking pupils who have been listened to and encouraged to engage in, and have meaningful conversations about, all their learning.