

# THE BLESSINGS AND CHALLENGES OF LEADING A SMALL SCHOOL.



Dorothy Marlow was headteacher of Ponsbourne St. Mary's C of E Primary School, a setting with just over 100 pupils, for nine and a half years. Mrs Marlow left the school at the end of December 2023 to develop her career by taking up a new post at St Catherine's C of E (VC) Primary School, Hoddesdon, a much larger school but not before we asked for some words of wisdom about running a small school.

I can honestly say that I have loved my time at Ponsbourne. The school, which opened in 1847, is at the heart of the community. The staff team are wonderful and have made coming to work an absolute pleasure. There is a unique, family atmosphere where parents are also encouraged to become fully involved in their children's education, supporting the school in a variety of ways from listening to children read, computing, art, cooking and sewing, to accompanying children on school trips.

There are huge benefits to small schools; I know every child by name and have strong relationships with their families which means I usually know when there is a need for us to offer additional support and I wonder if this might get missed in a larger setting. I also believe our school offers the opportunity for our children to make good progress within a nurturing and caring environment. The school's values, including love, forgiveness, respect and hope, thread through every aspect of school life and our pupils understand that demonstrating these values will help them to 'let their light shine'.

The school is close-knit and friendly and we are proud that when hurtful behaviour does happen, any incidents are addressed and rectified quickly.

We have 4 classes at our school and our teacher to pupil ratios are higher than the national average with 15.3 pupils per teacher which, I believe, means that our students are better supported.

That said, because of the financial constraints on small schools, balancing our budget is a juggling act and we have to be very creative about how we offer additional support in the classroom.

I do feel very grateful to the school community who volunteer where possible. Things would be quite different without this support.

## The teaching of reading is a priority.

Starting in the Reception class, and throughout Key Stage 1, our pupils develop their phonics skills through structured activities that build their confidence and understanding, using the Little Wandle phonics scheme. Well-trained staff, and equally well-trained volunteers, encourage pupils to persist when tackling unfamiliar words. Consequently, pupils make good progress with their reading. Most pupils become fluent readers by the end of Key Stage 2.

It is no secret that funding for schools and small schools in particular is stretched. We have struggled with soaring fuel costs because our buildings are old and not insulated quite as well as more modern schools but we have found innovative ways to ensure we can still offer the best possible learning foundations for our pupils.

We are lucky to have a lot of outside space and our FTS (Friends of the School) committee raised funds to restore our forest school area for our young learners which allows them to leave the classroom and develop different skills and an appreciation of the natural world around them.

This is something, bigger, suburban schools often have to pay for and travel off-site to benefit from. We also have Ruby, our trained school dog who supports our students wellbeing.

Last year our FTS also raised over £6,500, with money put towards the purchase of a new school piano and PA system, new music equipment, PE & Art supplies, contributions towards school trips and Year 6 leavers tops and a class trip to Chessington World of Adventures. The school would be much worse off without the hard work and dedication of this group of parents and friends and the annual May Fayre is a real community event.

We are fortunate that we have a fairly consistent number of children on our roll but just one year with a shortfall of intake numbers would have a catastrophic effect on our finances and our ability to cover our staffing costs and I know that half of all small schools worry about their survival too. This has been a constant topic of conversation for our dedicated team of governors.

Retaining good staff can be a worry too as we cannot offer the same pay progression opportunities as other, larger schools. We rely on the wonderful loyalty of our staff who enjoy the variety that working in a small school brings and are keen to take on many responsibilities but, because most of us have dual roles in the school, it can leave huge holes to fill if someone leaves.

Being the head of a small school can also feel isolating sometimes as you don't have the same number of people on the senior leadership team to talk to about issues and problems.

I have forged strong relationships with other local schools and we support each other both practically and pastorally and I would encourage a new head of any small school to do the same.

These relationships have allowed us to pool resources or come together for activities which may otherwise have been financially prohibitive. I am also lucky to have Reverend Theresa, who is in charge of the local five parishes and is a regular visitor to the school and a huge support to me.

I have found the opportunities and challenges of 'wearing several hats' interesting. As a headteacher of a small school, I have responsibility for all the usual things, but I am also the caretaker, fire warden, designated teacher and help in lessons. I have learned so much, but I will admit, it will be a relief to leave some of those responsibilities behind and have a bigger team to support the school.

I believe that if you can work in a small school, you can succeed in any school. The teachers all teach mixed-age classes which can be difficult, but my team make it look easy! And they cope amazingly well with the lack of physical space – we have no hall or dining room – and yet the day runs smoothly.

There are benefits to mixed-age classes too. Younger children have the challenge and support of working with older pupils; older children learn from supporting others but can also benefit from revisiting topics without losing self-confidence or moving classrooms.

I am now embarking on my next role as headteacher of a school almost three times the size of Ponsbourne St Mary's which I'm sure will come with its own challenges! My new team have been warm and welcoming and I am excited about this new venture and Ponsbourne will always have a special place in my heart. I am handing over to a fantastic headteacher who I know will continue to grow and strengthen the school.



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