



LOCATION : SCHOOL HANDBOOK, SECTION I, DOCUMENT 6

ALL ABOUT US

Q. Why do we exist as a school, and what do we exist to do?

A. The reason for our existence is the same as it is for any other school: we exist to provide an education for the children who enrol with us. We aren't "just like a school"; we **are** one. We don't exist primarily to provide day care for children or to offer a home away from home. Our primary function is to educate, and because the children and young people who come to ACS to be educated have a variety of physical and social needs, we also ensure that these are catered for and that every child enjoys the highest possible level of well-being. But the provision of care is not our reason for being.

Of course, like any good school, we do more than provide children with a basic education. Our purpose is to maximise the potential of each and every one of our pupils. We take their progress and progression very seriously indeed.

We also exist in the form that we do because of decisions that have been made by policy makers and education providers, themselves influenced by parental and societal pressures to make special provision for pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties. At an even more basic level, ACS exists because medical and related developments have significantly enhanced the life prospects and general well-being of children with the conditions of many of our pupils.

Q. What *kind* of school are we?

A. In official terms, we are a special school dedicated to meeting the needs of children and young people with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties. (Technically speaking, our students have usually been statemented at level 5 or above on the SEN audit.) In Medway, ACS is also one of a kind: the only LA-controlled school catering for students with these levels of need.

It is also factually true to say that ACS is a large school for its type, and a growing school. There is ample evidence to show that ACS is and has been a "growing" school in other senses, a school devoted to its conscious evolution. Staff who have been at ACS for any length of time can look back to any number of past points in its history and say: "the school was very different then"- always positively and in regard to all lines of development. Significantly, the motto of the school is: "We grow people". External commentators as well as members of staff know that this is not a hollow claim but rather the primary process in which all staff are engaged.

A related and equally distinguishing characteristic of ACS is that it is truly self-evaluative. ACS has evolved because it seeks continuously to know itself better and to respond meaningfully to what it finds.

Another response to the above question is: the kind of school to which staff are both proud to belong and personally satisfied. Surveys of staff – and, indeed, of parents and students – have consistently revealed very high levels of satisfaction and well-being. Among the adjectives most often used to describe ACS by members of the school community are “happy”, “exciting”, “successful” and “progressive”.

Q. What are our core beliefs?

A. The following are among the key beliefs and assumptions upon which ACS staff operate:

- Our students can and should receive a first-class education, and will benefit from this.
- Every child has the right functionally to access all kinds of learning experiences.
- Small forward steps by our students can represent major achievements and developmental leaps.
- Our students should be appropriately challenged so as to extend their opportunities for developing socially and as learners.
- Our students need to be allowed and encouraged to take risks in a safe and controlled environment.
- Making mistakes affords learning opportunities.
- Our support for students should always enable, not disable, them.
- The process of recognising student achievements – processes as well as outcomes – is central to our “growing” of them.
- We are here for the benefit of our students, not for ourselves. We must do and be what they need us to do and be and not what we might feel like doing and being. Adapting to and being especially responsive to the needs and motivations of each child is one of the ways in which we activate this belief.
- We know our students have disabilities and we seek to understand them, but we believe (i) that we should focus upon their abilities rather than their disabilities; (ii) that we should not allow our students’ disabilities to define their identities in our eyes; and (iii) that we should not allow their disabilities to dominate, delimit or disable our thinking about them and what they can do and accomplish.
- We are always capable of improving, individually and collectively, and seize opportunities to do so.
- We can and should seek to impact on public perceptions of disability.
- We can and should be assertive, challenging and robust both in advancing the interests of our students and school and with regard to matters which we believe others have a responsibility to confront and address. For example, we won’t flinch in grasping the nettle with parents when we believe there are actions they need to take.

Q. What are we particularly proud of?

A. We are particularly proud of:

- the achievements of our pupils, and delighted when “outsiders” also recognise them – at Duke of Edinburgh award ceremonies for example;

- the attendance of students for whom even getting to school can be a significant achievement;
- the progress our pupils make from YR to FE;
- the physical environment of our school;
- our professionalism as a staff and our growth as professionals;
- the range of expertise at our school;
- the motivation and adaptability of our staff, which enables our teams to function so well and to be supportive;
- our strong sense of belonging;
- the positive judgements that external observers make on us;
- the inclusive approach to our staff which means that staff who are not directly involved in the education of students are nonetheless fully involved in the initiatives and training experiences/opportunities available to them;
- the variety of activities available to our students;
- our school productions.

Q. What most matters to us?

A. What most matters to us is being purposeful, and our primary purpose is meeting pupils' needs – a wide range of needs but first and foremost their educational needs.

To this end, making the best use of *all* our resources really matters to us.

It is very important to us that school is an enjoyable and pleasant experience for all and that it enhances our quality of life.

Working in a supportive environment in the context of supportive teams is very important to us.

We value having a school environment that is safe and enjoyable.

Respect is the foremost value within the school, including respect for and between all the members of our school community.

Our Students

Q. How do we see/define our students?

A. We see our students, first and foremost, as individuals thriving in a setting devoted to meeting their needs. We accept that they are also defined by their Education Healthcare Plans, their specific needs and the additional support provision attached to them.

Q. What do we think our students need from us?

A. Our students require what students in all schools require, including our knowledge and expertise, our support, respect, understanding, patience, structure, high expectations, praise and encouragement. But our students may have greater need of some of these things and/or a more nuanced experience of them than do the majority of mainstream students. Understanding is an example. Our students' well-being and progress are affected significantly by our understanding of them. They depend upon our understanding that they may need much more take-up time to accomplish tasks than do most students. They need us to

understand the significance of many of their behaviours so that we respond appropriately rather than negatively (eg telling them off).

Our students also need us to stay strong for them, pool and share our expertise for their benefit and nurture them in ways which encourage and foster independence.

What they above all need from us is to refrain from doing too much for them ie doing for them what they could and should attempt for themselves. Our policy is one of **minimum necessary support**.

Q. What do we believe we do fundamentally for our students?

A. What we do for them is educate them in the most encompassing sense of the word. In addition to “curriculum teaching”, we seek constantly to capitalise on the learning possibilities latent in so many of the experiences they have. For example, lunchtimes are learning and development opportunities, as are shopping excursions and other trips into the local community. What we do that is largely additional to most teachers in mainstream schools is to make explicit the knowledge that most mainstream children acquire implicitly and informally – like how to take turns or where to find the price on a food item. We provide them with the tools by which to develop themselves and function more independently. In addition, and crucially, we endlessly provide hope for our children and their parents and, indeed, for each other.

Q. What assumptions do we make about what they can do and achieve?

A. We assume that our students will make progress, provided they receive the additional support they require. We assume also that (i) their progress is likely to be non-linear, and that (ii) their progress depends partly upon our flexibility.

Q. What relationships do we develop with our students?

A. We seek to develop relationships which are trustful, caring, assertive, consistent, reliable and ones where there is a good sense of humour. We develop relationships that are professional and do not replicate parent relationships, though it might be possible to characterise them as “educational parenting” in that virtually everything we do with our students is motivated primarily by our caring for their capacity to learn and grow rather than by caring for its own sake. To this end we seek also to serve as role models for our students.

Developing one-to-one relationships with our students tends to be both more demanding and more vital than it is generally in mainstream settings. It is also very rewarding, and this is a major motivator for staff.

Q. How do we organise our students?

A. In many ways, our students are organised on the same bases as students in mainstream schools – on age and key stage. For focused sessions and on the basis of particular needs, they may also be organised on the bases of P-levels, interest and capacity for subject engagement (eg PE).

What we do not do is organise our pupils on the basis of their particular learning difficulties. We do not, for example, segregate children with autism from those with profound and multiple difficulties. WHY?

- First and foremost, we organise classes inclusively because that

is how society organises itself. We replicate it to prepare our pupils for it. In other words, society is not grouped into need types; we all have to learn to get on with and to mix with a wide range of people. So we group our pupils to mirror this inclusivity.

Additionally, we arrange our children as we do:

- because we believe that our children need to learn from, learn to accept and learn about each other;
- because we want our children to be models, including models of learning for each other;
- because “mixing” our children creates opportunities both for friendship and for enhancing progression;
- because we can then create new and different teaching groups each year, which in turn creates opportunities for social and educational development;
- because “bad behaviour” is not modelled and reinforced in the way that it might be in groups where all the students display challenging behaviours;
- because we can ensure that our students benefit from the strengths of a wide range of staff members.

Q. Is there anything distinctive about the way we track the progress of our students?

A. Because our students tend to make small, incremental improvements, we track them more in terms of small steps –ie in regard to pre- and early National Curriculum levels. We also tend to track them (i) more comprehensively, attending to life skills and other aspects of personal development as well as to academic achievements, and (ii) more collectively than is routinely the case in mainstream settings, given that a range of professionals is involved in assessing and tracking processes. We believe that our celebration of student achievements is also exceptionally marked; we make an appropriately big thing even of what “outsiders” may regard as seemingly little things.

(Examples are provided in later sections.)

Staff

Q. Why are there so many of us?

A. Exceptional numbers of staff are required to provide exceptional and additional levels of student support. To help our students progress and to cater for their many, often complex needs, we need to work in teams of people with diverse skill sets. We also need the specialist skills of the occupational therapists, nurses, and other professionals who make up our extended teams. It has to be said that the arrangement of operating on two sites also has some implications for the size of our staffing establishment.

Q. How are we organized?

A. As in most mainstream schools, staff tend to be deployed on the basis of Key Stages and in relation to departments. As indicated above, staff work mostly in class teams, the composition of which will be related to the requirements of the students, though most will include a teacher and 3 or 4 TAs. Staff are not generally appointed or deployed on the basis of students’ specific special needs.

Q. What binds us together?

A. We are bound together by a shared philosophy, shared priorities, shared goals and by policies and procedures common to both sites. Our vision for our students is “long term” or over-arching in that it stretches from the moment they join the school to the time they leave it and beyond. We do not see ourselves in terms of the primary or secondary phases in which we may operate, and this both comes from and reinforces a sense of being one staff with a common mission. Our Headteacher and her roughly equal presence on both sites also helps to bind us together.

Q. How do we relate to one another?

A. We relate to each other through shared experiences, enthusiasms and goals. We are tolerant of one another and respectful of our various areas of expertise. While acknowledging and utilising each others’ strengths, we are also open and honest with one another, and not afraid to disagree. We are also bound together by a sense of fun.

Q. So are role distinctions important to us?

A. Status differences are not emphasised or generally important to us, though we respect the fact that there are hierarchical distinctions – a Senior Leadership Team, for example – and believe that we benefit from knowing that problems can be referred “up” and being clear about who specifically to refer things to. We believe also that it is important for our students to know that there is an authority structure, and that they also need to relate to it.

Although role distinctions are not always blindingly obvious in everyday classroom settings (eg it is not always obvious who the teacher is), there *are* role distinctions and these come with associated limits of responsibility. The clarity of our roles enables us to be as complementary as we are, and this in turn accounts for much of our success with our students. We benefit our students by working effectively as teams.

Q. How would we define our staff culture?

A. Our professional culture might best be described as one of “High Pressure, High Support”. Much is expected of us, but we also have the support, resources, opportunities etc by which to meet those expectations.

The words which best capture the character of our culture include the following: open, honest, open-minded, supportive, cohesive, cooperative, mutually-respectful, welcoming, good-humoured, adaptable, enthusiastic and evolving.

Q. Is there a “typical” ACS member of staff? If so, what are the defining characteristics?

A. We believe that all or most staff members share certain qualities and traits, including a conscientious commitment to the work of the school, approachability, a willingness generously to give of themselves and their time, high expectations of themselves, others and students. Staff members are also flexible, patient and comparatively unflappable – qualities necessary to flourish at ACS and ones which the school undoubtedly nurtures in and so adds value to its members. However, there is a range of personalities at ACS. Not all staff have all the above qualities and there is no “typical” personality type. We regard this diversity as a strength.

Q. How do we know that we are valued?

A. The reactions we get from our involvement with students lets us know that we are valued by them. Our achievements are acknowledged by colleagues and line-managers, including through the context of performance management, and we are given plentiful, high quality opportunities for professional and career development. The school's "We grow people" motto is evidenced in practice by the staff who are funded to undertake degree and other extended courses. We also know that we are valued by the opportunities we have to contribute to planning and decision-making. We appreciate that external validation (eg by OFSTED) can also enhance our sense of being valued.

Q. Do we have "navigational capability"? If so, where does this come from?

A. Yes. We know what decisions and actions we can take within our defined spheres of responsibility, and we know what to refer on and to whom. Our navigational capability is set up initially through quality induction and subsequently both by experience and on the job training. We have opportunities to hone our navigational capability through observing best practice and familiarity with policies and procedures, but maybe above all by developing a capacity to sense what students need, when to change tack with them etc. This intuitive capacity comes from knowing and understanding our students individually and from our intent to do our very best for them. The later includes passing on what we know to other staff members.

Q. What do "externals" (outsiders) need to (i) know, (ii) do, and (iii) be in order to understand and appreciate us?

(i) What they need to know.

- **They need to know that ACS is a school not a care-home for disabled children.**

For us, our children and young people are above all students. We treat them and provide for them as students. They are taught the same National Curriculum as all other children in state schools. We are not here primarily to "look after" children with special needs nor to provide a kind of daily respite care for their parents and carers. And we are not a hospital, so if one of our students is unwell we expect them to be kept at home until they are better.

- **They need to know that our students are taught differently from students generally in mainstream schools.**

Although our students get access to the full curriculum and are most definitely taught, don't expect to see them taught using conventional teaching methods. These rarely meet the needs of our students. So our staff have constantly to find creative ways to engage our students so that they can benefit from functional rather than just formal access to the curriculum.

- **They need to know that our students are also taught things that maybe taken-for-granted in mainstream schools.**

In addition to teaching the National Curriculum, we ensure that our students have opportunities to acquire the skills which other children do not need formally to be taught, including many seemingly simple personal and social skills – like picking up a

cup or putting on a coat. We teach them these skills because one of our major aims is to equip our students to live as independently as possible.

We also teach things which we believe that all schools should teach – manners, for example.

- **They need to know that many of our students enter the school with unusually low baseline ability levels.**

Many of our students start at ACS with ability levels low even for children with severe learning difficulties. (One reason for this is that a lot of our children have survived only because of the expertise of staff at a special care baby unit in Medway renowned for its survival rates. So we receive children with exceptional levels of need.) It is important to know this when making judgements about what our students can and can't do. Knowing this also helps explain why our staff often seem exceptionally effusive about what for outsiders may seem like trivial student accomplishments. Our staff know that doing something as simple as touching an interactive plasma screen to cause an effect may represent a major achievement for one of our students. So for people unfamiliar with ACS, knowing about our students' low baseline entry levels of achievement can be puzzlement-reducing.

- **They need to know that working at ACS is not a professional cul-de-sac for the staff.**

We are aware that some people external to the school, including some educational professionals who we would expect to know better, assume that ACS (and special schools in general) are not appropriate for teachers and others seeking professional and career development. We are aware, for example, that some college lecturers believe that we do not teach the National Curriculum and so discourage ITT students and NQTs from taking teaching practice placements and jobs at ACS. We know of other myths that are pedalled, including that the expertise staff gain from being at ACS is irrelevant to mainstream, and that there are very limited career development opportunities available to staff at schools like ours. Nothing could be further from the truth, as the career trajectories of many of our current staff bear witness.

- **They need to know that we are not being cruel to our students when we get them to do things independently, such as move without mobility aids.**

We seek constantly to promote the independence of our students including their ambulant independence. When we encourage or require them to move around without the use of wheelchairs and other mobility devices we are not being harsh with them but rather helping them to develop the skills and confidence they will need to function as independently as possible. The same applies when we get them to do anything – hold their own cups, for example. Challenging them like this and even getting them to take risks are also ways of showing our respect for them.

- **They need to know that our responses to and requirements of our students show our respect for them.**

When we challenge our students to do things and even to take risks we are showing our respect for what they can (potentially) achieve. We show respect in other ways and want other professionals and visitors to the school to do the same. For example, we want our students to be addressed directly not spoken about as though they

weren't present or incapable of interacting with others. We won't treat them in an emotionally unprofessional or personally invasive way by, for instance, giving them kisses and cuddles. We don't have the "pitying" attitudes towards our pupils that some outsiders expect us to have and they themselves display with such comments as: "The poor things!" and "I couldn't do what you do. It would be too upsetting".

- **They need to know that we may need to physically intervene with students and why we do so.**

Sometimes it is necessary to intervene physically to prevent our students inadvertently harming themselves or others, or to get them to do what the situation requires. For example, a student who refuses to board a mini-bus or who tries to jump into the deep end of a swimming pool when they can't swim requires the physical intervention of staff members who are trained to handle these kinds of situations.

What you will notice if you see any of our staff physically intervene with students is the respectful and thoughtful manner in which they do so. You will notice, for example, that they don't shout but rather talk encouragingly, constantly explaining to the student what they are doing so that the student is assured and comforted. Moreover, we are continuously reassessing the needs of our students to ensure the appropriate level of intervention. Our policy is most definitely one of using the minimum necessary physical intervention.

- **They need to know that we have and operate a clear Health and Safety Policy.**

Occasionally, parents and even people not part of our school community express health and safety concerns regarding our students and how we look after them. What we ask is that they first of all take up their concerns with us. Most often concerns come from not understanding students' needs and we can explain what these are and how our actions are designed to meet them. It is not helpful when the Local Authority is the first port of call, though of course concerns not allayed by the school can be taken to the LA.

They need to know that the school is scrupulous in recording both in-school incidents and all interactions with parents and externals.

If you phone the school, then you can be assured that we will keep a record of the details of this. The same is true if you have a meeting or some other exchange with a member of staff. Our policy is also rigorously to follow through on any issues raised, and these actions too will be recorded. If a child has an accident, for example, then we will record the details of this.

One of the benefits of this is consistency of implementing the Health & Safety Policy throughout the school.

(ii) What they need to do

What we would like and advise "outsiders" to if they want to understand us better is:

- Question us – about what they see and hear, rather than to pre-judge us or come to the wrong conclusions
- Visit us in a spirit of interest and open-mindedness
- Give us feedback

- Use our expertise

(iii) What they need to be

- Open-minded
- Interested and curious
- Willing to suspend judgements and check out their perceptions with us
- Unfazed
- Respectful and tolerant

These attitudes and ways of being apply as much to visiting professionals as they do to members of the public.

What we believe is truly distinctive about ACS

- **The togetherness of the staff**

The one-ness of our staff is noticeable and exceptional. This is attributable largely to the size of what might be called the school’s “common core” – the pool of agreed and shared values, beliefs, priorities and practices. To give just one example: all staff are primed by their values to see and affirm the best in our students and to express delight in their accomplishments. What also contributes to this one-ness is the extent to which staff work collaboratively and share information. This increases inter-connectivity and the sense of operating as a single organisation with a unified culture.

We can say confidently that there are no significant cliques or sub-cultures at ACS.

One other aspect or expression of staff togetherness is the enormous generosity of staff. We believe that our willingness to give of our time and our energies is one of strongest distinguishing features.

- **Whole staff involvement**

When we talk about “whole staff involvement” in decisions or school activities we mean whole school involvement. So, for example, site and office-based staff will be involved in staff training and curricular activities.

- **Staff Resilience**

Our staff have been described as “psychologically hardy” because when faced with challenging behaviours – as they often are – they do not collapse or become self-pitying but deal with them calmly and without drama. This speaks volumes for the dispositions of our staff but is also a result of the professional development and nurturing they receive, the professional culture of the school and the mutually supportive relationships between them.

*** Embedded Practice**

We believe that the extent of fully embedded practice at ACS is something special. This means, for example, that all staff, including new and generally non-teaching staff are fully aware of and operate CP procedures. We are confident that in our school rhetoric and reality match.

- **Commitment to Improvement**

We believe that we are all fully committed to the continuous improvement of what we do with and for our students and that we are always pushing the boundaries of what could be possible for them. This is not ego-driven, and we believe that we seek and readily accept any feedback we get that might help us individually to improve.

- **Training Opportunities**

We believe that we receive and benefit from a range of high quality training and development opportunities and that our senior leadership is committed to the provision of these.

- **Exceptional Resources**

We believe that our senior leaders are committed also to ensuring that we and our students benefit from the best possible resources, of which our minibuses, ICT, hydrotherapy pool and sensory room are just a few of the more obvious of these. We are assertive advocates for the resources we believe our students need.

- **Impeccable Environment**

We believe that the physical and sensory environment of our school is unusually good, that it creates positive first impressions for visitors and that more importantly it provides an excellent learning environment for students and staff.

- **Reception of Students and Visitors**

Our warm, personalised welcoming of students each school day is truly distinctive and one of the things about ACS that visitors most remark upon. We believe that visitors also receive a warm welcome.

- **Relationships with Parents**

We seek not only to build good but to develop “life-time” relationships with parents. We are continuously seeking feedback from our parents regarding how well we are serving their needs and communicating with them. Many parents continue their relationship with ACS long after their child has left the school or, in some instances, died.

- **“Moral Outreach”**

We believe that we have an important role to play beyond the school, and that we are distinguished by our commitment to shaping public perceptions of disability and promulgating the values of inclusiveness. We take opportunities to do this educative work when we take our students into other schools and into the community as well as when we receive visitors to the school. There are also opportunities to shape the perceptions of outsiders when we vigorously champion the needs of our students with external agencies and service providers.

- **Problem-Solving**

We believe that confident problem-solving is our norm and one of our distinguishing characteristics. In particular, we are continuously innovative when it comes to engaging and motivating our students. Our intention is that no student should be barred from doing anything that is remotely possible for him/her. Based on positive expectations, we will apply ourselves to find a way to make “this” possible.

© Abbey Court School / Dr Mike Waters (June 2009)

Reviewed Summer 2011, Summer 2013, Summer 2015, Spring 2017, Summer 2019