

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headteacher

Paul Buckland MA, PGCE, NPQH has been head since 2015. He was previously Deputy Headteacher of North Halifax Grammar School. A grammar school boy himself (he was educated at Eastbourne Grammar School), he has a degree in English literature and a masters in modern English language from Leeds. He is married with three children and originally trained as an English and PE teacher before moving into more senior roles. His youngest son is currently a student at the school. He enjoys coaching (junior football and athletics) and watching sport, having retired from playing rugby union. He has been a governor of a primary school for a number of years and is also a keen gardener. He is clearly popular with students, staff and parents, able to take the tough decisions but also to engage with the school in a warm and personable way. He has a clear vision for improving the rather dated fabric of the school, which is beginning to take shape. He has a strong inclusive philosophy and sees grammar school education as a vehicle for social mobility. He is a 'hands on' Headteacher who still teaches and personally reviews all university applications

Academic matters

QEGS is an unapologetically academic school, with a traditional grammar school ethos where aiming high is taken for granted. However the ethos is also one where education is valued for its own sake, test outcomes are not the be all and end all. As this is the only grammar school in Cumbria ability is probably broader than in other selective areas. The Pupil Admission Number (PAN) is 120 although this is regularly exceeded with 150 pupils being the current intake which usually represents approximately 50 per cent of the applicants. In 2018 results at A' level were 30% A* - A, and 55 per cent A*-B and 99.7% A*-E. At GCSE 14% of students achieved grade 9 and 49% achieved grades 7 to 9. In English 98% achieved grade 4 and above while 94 % achieved grade 5 and above. In maths the figures were 99% and 98%, as to be expected from a selective school. For 2018 the school's Progress 8 measure is +0.3. 'We bat above our average,' head says, 'but this is not a hothouse'. Maths is particularly impressive; art and geography are also extremely successful. French and German are on offer at GCSE and A' level. 96% of students take a language at GCSE. There is no classics. History classes are lively, with the head of history keen to animate learning and recently re-enacted the Battle of Hastings on the school field. Teaching is in mixed form groups in Year 7 and 8 with setting in maths, English, science and languages from Year 9 and there are regular assessments beyond the end of year exams. The school does not feel wider setting is appropriate in the selective context. All pupils are given targets based on their previous personal performance.

At GCSE students take English (language and literature), maths, biology, chemistry and physics, a full GCSE in RE and three further optional GCSEs. Outcomes in maths, art and drama are strong.

The SENCo is described as outstanding and credited with turning numerous pupils around. The school has its fair share of students with additional needs including autism. Parents feel that these are well supported. There is a strong focus on transition led by the Assistant Head and Head of Year 7 and Transition which is no mean feat in a school with such a wide catchment. The Head has visited every catchment primary school and is keen to promote the family atmosphere at QEGS. Certainly the students themselves felt that this was strong.

Careers guidance begins early, particularly to support choices in Year 9. Sixth formers are well supported with clear guidance to help steer them through the UCAS minefield, and lots of interview practice for medics and Oxbridge applicants. Students acknowledged that support was often extremely personalised and responsive. There is good support for those who seek apprenticeships as an alternative to university. Parents speak highly of the amazingly committed staff which includes

the head personally reviewing all sixth form university applications. A good balance of teachers, some with a wealth of experience and understanding of the local community, and some energetic newcomers, attracted to the quality of Cumbrian life, and the happy atmosphere.

Games, options, the arts

There are extensive on-site playing fields, although not always accessible in Cumbrian winters. Traditional sports of rugby, football, hockey, tennis, netball and basketball, with athletics and cricket in the summer are all popular. There is a large sports hall complete with climbing wall, used every evening by community, and as the northern base of Badminton England. Cross-country is popular thanks to several enthusiastic member of staff whom parents describe as inspirational.

Parents spoke very highly of the range of clubs and activities and the staff commitment to going above and beyond. There is a French film club to which students bring their own films (carefully vetted!). Staff say that a lot of activities are student generated and organised. We visited on Children in Need day and saw plenty of examples of strong student leadership of fund raising activities, including the Head playing basketball against the sixth form.

There is a fabulous art department papered with students' artwork of an impressive standard and variety: it spills into the corridors, and a choice handful is selected for the head's study on a weekly basis. It's remarkably mature, high quality stuff - one outstanding piece spent the summer at the Royal Academy 'One Show' Summer Exhibition.

There are plenty of musical opportunities, a variety of choirs including Cambiata and a swing band and orchestra. Drama is very popular, with great emphasis placed on the annual production, which parents describe as amazing, 'and everybody gets involved'. The choice of productions is ambitious including Les Miserables and Hairspray making good use of a relatively limited school hall. There is a nice drama studio but no theatre.

Parents describe their children as 'always busy'. There are plenty of trips from field and theatre trip to the Year 8 residential to Derwentwater: a year 9 trip to Berlin, an inspirational annual art trip to Venice; ski trips; foreign exchanges in year 10; and a World Challenge trip for older pupils, recent destinations including Nepal, Swaziland and Iceland. Other clubs include; choir, law society, Cakespeare (Cake and Shakespeare!), chess, debating and electronics. The students take part in an annual sponsored walk which in 2018 raised over £10,000.

Background and atmosphere

The school was established in 1564; moved to its current site in 1917, adding buildings and extensions over time, none particularly distinguished and something of a warren, but well maintained and fully employed. While much of the fabric continues to be dated further recent extension work added a new teaching block which includes language classrooms, a science lab and sixth form private study area. There are ambitious plans for further building developments which will enable the school to compete on a more even playing field with its competitors. However it is clear that facilities do not impact on the school's ability to deliver a high quality education. QEGS became an academy in 2011. There is a strong and confident governing body which gives good support to the school. The school takes its role as part of the community seriously and maintains strong links, regularly hosting a variety of local evening activities.

A small school for a state grammar, the size is much appreciated by both parents and staff. 'Everyone quickly knows everyone,' according to parents, and 'any changes in behaviour are spotted and swiftly dealt with'. Pupils were markedly good-humoured and friendly during our visit, and

parents say they are always impressed by behaviour both in school and out.

School uniform is compulsory up to Year 11, this is fairly and firmly implemented. The general look is smart which the Head is assiduous must be maintained despite some reluctance from students. The sixth form centre is set apart from the main school, in a nearby converted primary school. Sixth formers don't wear uniform, all part of the privileges and responsibilities which prepare them for the task ahead.

The staff are committed and enthusiastic. Turnover is low and staff say they often prefer to forego promotional opportunities elsewhere in order to continue to work at QEGS.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

Pastoral care is delivered via a form tutor system and Heads of Year, however the students report that they would feel confident to go to several different staff if they had an issue they needed help with. The students had a clear confidence that the staff were there for them and that biscuits were frequently on offer! Parents describe pastoral care as extremely effective and any incidents are quickly and efficiently dealt with, before becoming an issue. This view was repeated by the students who were clear that bullying is rare and dealt with well when it does occur. Year seven students commented on the work the school does to make them feel included, safe and confident very quickly.

Parents appreciate the school's straightforward and open lines of communication. Objectives and codes of practice are clear and pragmatically set out in the school's thorough and efficient website. The Head says, 'The children know what is expected of them from the outset and everyone knows where they stand, they have the freedom to grow, learn and choose.'

There is a strong student council which meets regularly with senior staff. There is a genuine pride amongst students that they have been selected to come here, some travelling some very considerable distances and passing by other extremely highly thought of schools.

Sixth Form

The sixth form students we met with were bright, articulate and passionate about what the school has to offer. While the greatest majority progress into the sixth form from QEGS itself about 14% come from other schools. One young man had chosen to travel daily from Preston after a family move while a newcomer from another local school who came to study languages at A' level could not have been more effusive in her praise. 'Since coming here I have felt so happy and welcomed. You can be who you want to be, being in a school where people want to work, where it's a good thing to achieve, people are proud and happy for you when you do well, teachers are so committed and happy to help pastorally'. There were frequent comments from students and parents about the number of staff who regularly go the extra mile to support both in academic work and extra-curricular activities. The school has been identified in School Sport magazine as being in the top 1% of state schools nationally for participation and success in sports.

The students said they had good guidance when moving from year 11, did not feel pressured to stay if Sixth Form was not right for them and that support for university applications is strong. There are opportunities to study minority subjects such as geology and environmental sciences. Progression to university is good.

Pupils and parents

Students come from all over the sparsely populated, 400 square mile area of Eden. The school has increased its roll from 120 (four form entry) to 150 (five form entry) for 2018. The wider catchment is extremely broad with students travelling from as far as Dumfries and Carlisle. Much of the transport is shared with another local school. Parents represent a very broad social spectrum, from consultants at Carlisle hospital to local farmers to families where neither parent works, but all share a common interest and ambition in the education of their children.

Parents were equally positive about the school. They say they choose it for its academic excellence and the fact that it is small enough for students to be known well. This is especially important as so many children come from very small rural schools often knowing no-one when they arrive. Parents were very positive about sports provision, not just the teams but the sports hall and the all-weather tennis courts and the commitment of the staff to supporting team sports. One family from overseas had specifically moved to Penrith to allow their children to come to QEGS. Parents could not speak highly enough of the pastoral care.

Entrance

QEGS currently recruits a significant number of local students. In an attempt to address issues of social mobility the entrance test has been changed so that those who have been coached have no advantage and to reach out to more families from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a consequence far more are now sitting the test. It remains to be seen whether this fulfils the school's more inclusive philosophy. They have a good dialogue with their feeder primary schools and always know they are getting the right pupils.

There are usually around 20 places available for sixth form entry from other schools. Entry requirements are five 5+ GCSEs including English and Maths, with 6 or 7 required in the subjects that will be studied

Exit

Around 20 per cent of students leave after GCSEs. Annually the Russell group is well represented and usually a few make it to Oxbridge. In 2018 90% went on to university, 40% to the Russell group and 5 to Oxbridge. Northern universities are always popular, particularly Newcastle, Northumbria, Dundee, Liverpool, Oxford, Warwick, Cardiff, Carlisle College, Durham, Lancaster, Manchester. A few head directly into the world of work, and are as well supported by the school as the academics.

Money matters

Voluntary school fund payment of £15 per year helps buy additional resources.

Our view

This is the only selective grammar school in Cumbria. It is small but growing in size and increasingly popular. The inclusive ethos is clear from the Head, staff, governors and students. Outcomes are good and the school works hard to get the best out of its students. Education in its widest sense is taken seriously and although selective there is no sense that this is a hothouse. There are high levels of achievement in all areas.