

# Reputation, Reputation, Reputation

It's the top performing, non-selective mixed school in Islington, with enviable facilities, high parental engagement, and outstanding teachers. And it's still under local authority control. Helen Mulley visits an educational establishment that's refusing to follow the script...




**C** During the first half of the autumn term at Holloway School, Islington, there is an open invitation for prospective new parents to come and visit the place with their offspring. There's no need to book – you just turn up any morning at 9.00am expressing an interest, and Bob Hamlyn, the head teacher, will take you round the entire site, opening doors onto classrooms, encouraging interaction with teachers and students, and maintaining a constant, cheery patter that falls just the right side of a hard sell as he describes the school of which he is clearly



extremely proud.

“If you don't choose me, I won't be upset,” he says. “But I *will* be upset if you don't come and see me in the first place.”

I know this is what happens, because when my photographer and I arrive for our own look at Holloway School, we are able to piggyback onto one of Bob's so-called 'head teacher's tours', as he shows a mother and her ten-year-old son around one of the two schools they are considering for him next year. She is perhaps a little nervous at first, and I definitely sense a hint of negative prejudice, but she knows what she wants and is full of pertinent questions



“Probably the first four years of my headship were about 'normalising' the place...”

about how her child's specific needs (he has dyspraxia, and is gifted at sports) might be addressed at Holloway, all of which are dealt with by Bob with convincing, reassuring authority. By the end of the visit, which takes maybe fifteen minutes or so, she is openly impressed.

"I had quite a few reservations," she admits, when I ask her if the visit has changed her mind about anything. "This place has had quite a bad reputation, and someone I spoke to, who is in education, said it's not as good as other school we're considering. But coming here... it's not just the sports [Holloway is a specialist sports college, with excellent facilities including a swimming pool and fully equipped workout gym], but it's seeing the kids in the classes. They're not... rowdy. It reminds me of my own school; and I really like that."

I ask her son, who has been silent but interested throughout, what he liked best.

"The swimming pool!" he replies instantly, with the first flash of a smile he's shown all morning. He has a point – it's superb – but I know what his mum means, too, and after they have left and Bob and I are back in his office, I try and find out more about how he and his team have developed the calm, engaged, and yes, happy atmosphere of teaching and learning that both the prospective parent and I have just observed across all age groups, in a school that up until seven or eight years ago was by all accounts 'challenging' at best, and worryingly chaotic at worst.

"When I arrived nearly nine years ago, and took my first assembly with Year 11, there were 80 boys on the roll, and 50 turned up," begins the 46-year-old head teacher, with a wry grin at the memory. "There was no library – these young people weren't considered good enough for a library – but



IN 2012, HOLLOWAY SCHOOL STUDENTS CELEBRATED RECORD-BREAKING SUCCESS WITH THEIR GCSE RESULTS, CHALKING UP A

**78%**  
PASS RATE, AND  
**60%**

INCLUDING ENGLISH AND MATHS, WHICH WAS AN INCREASE OF 25 PERCENTAGE POINTS ON THE SCHOOL'S 2011 RESULTS. A\* GRADES WERE PARTICULARLY PREVALENT IN MATHS, CHEMISTRY AND SPANISH.



there was a staff smoking room the size of a large classroom. The students were in uniform and the teachers were in jeans. Results were on the floor; but because it was a 'tough school' with a difficult demographic, that was apparently OK. So probably the first four years of my headship were about 'normalising' the place. Making people realise that we were part of society, part of UK plc – that just because the students came largely from difficult backgrounds, that didn't mean we should have low expectations of and for them. It meant putting a library in; getting rid of the staff smoking room;

and introducing a dress code for the adults as well as the young people they were teaching. It's fair to say that these initial changes may have caused anxiety amongst some staff members... but it all needed to be done."

The vision Bob brought with him to Holloway from his previous school in Sheffield, where he had been deputy head, was one of excellence.

"I said in the first staff meeting that I wanted to raise



expectations,” he points out. “I was determined to make everyone realise that you *can* aspire to excellence in a mainstream comprehensive, and not at the expense of equality, equity and inclusion, either. When you look at the tables, we’re on the highest indicator for everything – SEN, free school meals, overcrowded households, EAL – but that’s irrelevant within these walls. We have a strong sense of community, but the young people leave the street stuff, if I can call it that, at the gates. There are no hoodies, no mobile phones, no bangles or bandanas. They’re here to

learn, and be happy, in a safe, secure, calm place. With the best will in the world, we can’t fix everything that goes on outside the school, but we can make school a place they want to be (our PAs are down from 118 four years ago, to around 19 now, [thanks to a highly proactive programme aimed at improving attendance through positive reinforcement]), and where they can concentrate on achieving everything of which they are capable.”

At this point in our conversation, I realise something that I’d noticed earlier, but not really registered – the girls don’t even wear make-up. None of them. It’s quite a revelation to me just what a difference this makes; it’s a real leveller, somehow, with natural, youthful beauty not confined merely to those with the most expensive cosmetics collection.

“That was a bit of a battle,” confirms assistant head teacher Julie Griffith, when I talk to her about it later on. “But it’s important. We had



HOLLOWAY SCHOOL GROUPS STUDENTS BY YEAR, AS OPPOSED TO VERTICALLY. THE SAME FORM TUTOR TAKES Y7 PUPILS ALL THE WAY TO Y11, AND THE UNIFORM INCLUDES A TIE, THE COLOUR OF WHICH REPRESENTS YOUR PARTICULAR YEAR GROUP AND STAYS THE SAME AS YOU TRAVEL THROUGH THE SCHOOL (UNLESS YOU ARE A PEER MENTOR, SENIOR STUDENT, OR HEAD BOY OR GIRL), THEREBY FOSTERING A STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY FROM THE START.



“Anything that connects the community and the young people in Bob’s care is of vital importance...”



girls of 13 or 14 saying they ‘couldn’t leave the house without their mascara and lipgloss’, and we were not prepared to accept that. They don’t need that kind of pressure on top of everything else, and I think that now, they really appreciate just being able to be themselves, not having to try and compete to look most like something out of a celebrity magazine.”

Alongside the gradual but relentless change in culture, replacing lethargy and discord with aspiration and mutual respect, Bob’s time as head teacher at Holloway has also seen a dramatic improvement in the physical structure of the school, which benefited from the first wave of the previous government’s BSF programme, and now comprises a fantastic £20 million development, all pale wood cladding and great expanses of glass, which blends beautifully with the elegant, refurbished Edwardian buildings that remain, along with state of the art equipment including a suite of Apple Macs as well as plenty of PCs, and a collection of electronic keyboards that enable every pupil to learn to play.

“We got in just in time,” says Bob about the funding. “We were in such a shocking state. Every decade they’d felt compelled to build a new block, so the school was a hodge-podge of different