

IN THE BEGINNING

Learning to manage transitions is a skill for life, says *Suzy Dixon*, Head of Francis Holland Prep

I had more reason than ever to consider new beginnings at the start of this particular September, as Francis Holland's Junior School at Sloane Square moved just down the King's Road to an iconic Grade II listed building in the leafy heart of Chelsea, becoming Francis Holland Preparatory School. Having been Head of Francis Holland Junior School since 2017 and now Head of Francis Holland Prep, I have relished the challenge of managing this transition.

This new beginning has highlighted how the educational world runs to such a distinctive annual timetable; that every September is our new beginning. Not necessarily something that builders fully grasp, but doesn't every teacher in the land have that dreadful dream about losing your class on the first day of term? September is our educational deadline, and usually a nervous new beginning for us all.

Transition is a changing state, and change is usually a potent mix of excitement and fear; we tend to worry about change even when it is changing for something better. We seem to be creatures of habit who take comfort in the familiar. It is perhaps not surprising that when we are teaching emotion regulation to our youngest pupils, in trying to name those butterflies in the tummy feelings, they seem to signify both excitement and nervousness.

Our new beginning was a move into a bigger, better and more beautiful building that gave us room to spread our wings, offering a wealth of impressive facilities including the old Chelsea library, a spacious school hall with staging, a specialist STEAM facility and an extensive outdoor play area. Yet I can guarantee that every adult has felt a moment of nostalgia for the old space.

In considering practical matters like the placement of interactive whiteboards, lockers, pegs, cupboards, bookcases, desks and chairs, there was a reflection on best arrangements so that the pupils could most engage with the teaching. In unpacking the old and buying some new, there was an audit of which resources work best. In planning our lessons for new classes, we analysed our curriculum and lesson plans through fresh eyes. All excellent educational thinking, but in our hearts, we

knew the pupils needed to own their new space. How were we going to make this happen? Firstly, we had to unpack billions of boxes! This was a tremendous team-building exercise for staff, building great resilience and team spirit as a staff body. Secondly, we welcomed our pupils in. We had prepared them as much as possible for all the change. We needed to build an immediate harmony. We had old and new staff, pupils, resources, and even lessons. As Henry Ford said, 'Coming together is a

beginning; Staying together is progress; Working together is success.' I really wanted success for everyone so that their new beginning would be an inspiring and positive experience, full of optimism and the excitement of a shared adventure.

To manage this journey together, I needed parents equally involved and invested. They were keen to come into school, but also waited patiently whilst their children developed their relationship with the new school first. Some pupils did miss the smaller familiar building, so we sent them off to explore every single room to develop their familiarity and start to create their personal narrative within their new school.

Often a transition feels as if only you alone are experiencing change, but we have had the benefit of a group change. It really has been an adventure full of 'change, interest, excitement!', as Toad said in *Wind in the Willows*. However, whereas he was up for 'Here today, up and off to somewhere else tomorrow!', I can adamantly confirm that we are all happy to settle down now. Our pupils will have another transition at

age 11, so it was key to ensure this one was a happy change, preparing them for the next; providing an outstanding platform for entry into leading Senior Schools, including our two Francis Holland Senior Schools.

New beginnings are fertile learning ground; finding new experiences and friends with that positive feeling of starting afresh. Now we are enjoying the very beginning being over, and finding the time to root ourselves firmly, to grow happily, strongly, and resiliently, with an optimistic eye on the future for our school community together. ■



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