

**THE BLUE COAT SCHOOL**  
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**An Academy 'Leaders in Science and Mathematics'**

23 November 2015

Dear Parent/Carer

**RE: Rationale for curriculum changes 2015/16**

Over the past year and a half the Governing Body has been faced with some very challenging issues regarding the school's current and future financial position. A number of carefully considered necessary decisions have recently been taken to stabilise our immediate situation so that we can withstand further anticipated pressures. These decisions seek to minimise the potential for swingeing national funding cuts to cause long term damage to our cherished purpose of delivering the highest quality and broad based education to our students.

I know you will all be aware of the unrelentingly harsh financial climate that we, alongside all providers of education, already face and which will only become harder in the coming years:

- Teaching and support staff pay awards and increased pension contributions, along with normal pay spine increases, are adding 6% to our staffing costs this year – a significant additional cost given staffing forms 87% of our budget commitments
- Post-16 funding has fallen by a fifth since 2010
- Whilst funding levels per student are being maintained at the 2010 level, they are not rising in line with inflation or costs. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates this equates to an 8% cut to budgets in real terms since the 1990's and, for The Blue Coat School in 2015/16, it means a decrease in our funds of £98k.

**If the Governing Body and school leaders take no action** i.e. continue to spend at our present rate and make no changes to anything, the projected overspend of £250k in this academic year, will be followed by additional overspends in the next two years. This would exhaust all our current reserves and leave the school perilously exposed thereafter. **This is not an option.** We now recognise that we can no longer delay acting upon the very explicit professional advice given to us last year.

We are seeking a balanced in-year budget by September 2016 by ensuring that the income and expenditure gap reduces and we can better address the continuing and additional deficits we foresee in the next two years. We can achieve this by implementing a number of curriculum changes and carefully considering the resources we need to support them. The Governing Body requested Mr Pennington (Headteacher) and other senior leaders to undertake a review of provision immediately in September. It is the view of the Governing Body that he has produced a balanced and affordable curriculum model which uses our finances, staffing and accommodation to support the current and future needs of the vast majority of our students.



We are particularly grateful to Mr Pennington for mitigating the consequences of our belated look at curriculum provision with his speedy but thorough and carefully considered conclusions. These have, at their heart, an understanding and application of 'cost' versus 'value' and 'need' versus 'want'. Mr Pennington has shown a determination to have the maximum impact on reducing all spending while seeking to minimise the impact on what we seek to offer our students.

School leaders have also made important savings in other areas. The following initiatives have already produced significant reductions in overhead costs and turned a deficit of £131k into a break even result last year with a further £57k identified this year through:

- Restructure of back office support levels and working practices
- Improved procurement and contractual arrangements
- IT investments which have reduced the need for staff replacements
- Greater accountability of budget holders aided by better management information and professional support
- Culture of financial discipline throughout the school and a shared responsibility for the effective use of what monies we have available to us.

A failure to take these steps now, would mean the Governing Body would still face the challenge of how we can 'live within our means'. Since there is no prospect of any change to current government financial commitments to education, any further deterioration to our financial position would necessitate a more far reaching response than the carefully constructed and measured steps school leaders are currently taking.

We are particularly conscious that these decisions have recently required the Headteacher to communicate to you that A-level options for students starting Year 12 in September 2016 will no longer include Design Technology, Physical Education, Philosophy or Computing. We are also aware of the understandable disappointment and, indeed, some disagreement of parents and students with this decision.

The Headteacher has already advised you of the rationale for the withdrawal of these subjects but I consider it is worth repeating, alongside some further observations and reassurances:

- Whilst recognising the arguments for the retention of Philosophy (which was introduced in 2011) and the retention of the other subjects, it made eminent sense to identify those subjects known to have very little or least impact on what we know our students require to reach their next steps in education.
- Governors have noted that the passion expressed in various quarters for these subjects is not actually reflected in the numbers of students currently pursuing them. We value those courses no less than others, alongside the various arguments presented for their retention. However, our decision to withdraw these courses from our curriculum are made on the premise that in our experience, Blue Coat students have rarely needed them to successfully continue on to the next stage of their education.
- The wide variety of the retained 17 A-levels are necessary for our students to pursue their chosen subjects / courses at degree level. We know that in the past, students wishing to pursue any of the above four subject areas at degree level can very often do so without an A-level in that subject.
- We remain determined to protect, as far as we are able, what defines a Blue Coat education: enjoyment, enthusiasm, challenge and stretch delivered through the broadest possible range of



subjects which totals an impressive 17 subjects at A level and includes opportunities to study a range of arts, humanities, languages and sciences.

- Despite our financial challenges, we remain fully committed to protecting our students' access to 4 A levels which exceeds what is offered by many other grammar schools.

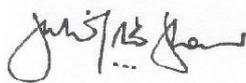
I would also like to refer to some claims relating to recent spending decisions that have been presented as examples of profligacy, wastefulness or indeed ineffectiveness. I fully understand that, at a time we are highlighting our concerns about our financial position and communicating how we propose to address them, students and parents will challenge any expenditure which is perceived to be diverting much needed funds from our core purpose or which are portrayed to not 'add value'.

I have reviewed the presented examples and I wish to assure you that the majority of items referred to have actually been funded by the Parents Association and the Development Board as part of their work to enhance the school environment and improve facilities for our students. It is not appropriate for the school to spend these funds on the provision of core education. The remaining examples are not recent procurements and are considered to be necessary investments to assist the good running of the school. While the Governing Body fully respects the expression of opinions that do not agree with the school's conclusions on some aspects of our spending, I wish to reassure you they are made only after careful consideration and in good faith.

In the past decade, The Blue Coat School has been fortunate that significant improvements in the fabric of its buildings and the provision of additional classrooms have been possible only through the generosity of its charitable arm: The Blue Coat School Foundation. It works to 'meet future school needs which cannot be met from increasingly pressurised central government funding'. We already know that government funding to improve school buildings is four times over-subscribed and so we will be working closely with our Foundation on ways in which we can improve the environment in which our students work, play and socialise.

We have always maintained that the story and successes of The Blue Coat School are founded on our ability to respond positively to any challenges we face and to embrace any changes that progress or circumstances require of us. Today the challenge is to ensure that we overcome the significant but not insurmountable financial difficulties we face whilst protecting our ability to provide the highest quality education we can deliver. We seek your understanding and support for our decisions and efforts.

Yours sincerely



Julia M. SHAW  
**Chair of Governors**



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