



Downs View

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Dear Parents and Carers,

Goodbye

To parents, carers and families across Downs View's four sites, recent and longstanding, I want to say goodbye as I will not be able to do it in person or at an occasion for now.

As I won't be standing up to make a speech, I am going to set out more than I might have said by way of a goodbye. Though school and college are closing imminently for the summer, I will be working throughout the summer so my email address will be open (and being checked by me) until 31st August when my contract at Downs View ends.

To be honest, it would be difficult to make a speech, I am far too emotional & managing Downs View through the pandemic has been a trial indeed. In 25 years as Headteacher I have never had so many sleep affected nights.

If you have the energy to read all this I think it will certainly help you to understand that I have fully grasped how challenging this pandemic has been for every family and also why the decisions I have had to make have been so professionally and personally difficult for me, probably the most difficult decisions of my career.

With everything I know from my childhood and my parent's lives, making the decisions I have had to make over these last four months has been a constant and ever present stress. I have had to balance safety and government guidance, buildings and staffing to ensure everyone is as safe as possible given the imperative to save lives and protect the NHS. I wish I could have made different decisions about access but that would have been impossible if pupils were to remain safe.

If I could have done things differently I would have done.

The impact of the pandemic on all our families has been appalling. The SEND world, indeed the world itself has been turned upside down by it. I have always prided myself on how Downs View has tried to do more than many schools to ensure families, not just pupils are supported. Honestly I am sure that a large number of families (despite outstanding support from teachers calling and sending resources home) have not 'felt' the support of Downs View because ultimately what matters and provides support is attendance.

I am sorry that, at the tail end of my career here, the functioning of Downs View as an organisation is not that which parents or I would recognise as 'usual'. However, I am entirely confident that Vanessa as my successor and our wonderful SLT and brilliant staff will get Downs View back on track when the pandemic allows.

The ethos and practices of Downs View we have developed over my 16 years here are too strong and embedded not to bounce back.



So that you can all understand why leaving Downs View is so enormous for me I think it is helpful to understand some Carver history. Equally I want you to understand some of my frustrations and concerns about the issues and themes which remain to affect you and Downs View which I have sought to change over the 16 years I have been here.

My biography – which may help you to understand that I know something of how you may be feeling

I was born in December 1959 as the first child to my mum and dad. My parent's histories are important (and very different) in understanding me, my work ethic, my resilience and my world view of special needs and disabilities (SEND) and particularly severe learning difficulties and autism.

My mum spent the first 15 years of her life in India because her dad was a Lieutenant Colonel in the British Army posted there. She spent her education in a residential school so far away from her parents that she did not see them for 9 months of the year. Her two brothers were there too but they were only allowed to meet for a couple of hours (over a fence) on a Sunday afternoon. It was a very difficult though potentially privileged upbringing.

By contrast my dad was the youngest of 7, born in Lambeth in London to a street sweeper dad. He was orphaned at 12 years old and moved to Brighton to live with his eldest sister. He flew in Bomber Command in World War 2 in Lancaster bombers from 1943 to the end of the war, something that affected and influenced him through his entire life. He worked at the fruit and vegetable market (now demolished) in Circus Street from the age of 14 to his retirement. Waking at 3am every day, 6 days a week for his entire working life.

They got their resilience and strength in childhood, and so did I.

In May 1962 life changed radically for the three of us. It saw the arrival of my brother, my only sibling, whose influence has absolutely permeated my life since. This influence underpins everything I have done in my career, including why I have fought for families not just children. Not least because of my and my parents' experiences at the hands of professionals, medics, therapists and services.

Stuart, my brother, had Down Syndrome (and autism... but that only dawned on me years later). It was never defined as part of his needs, but he clearly was autistic.

Mum and dad knew something was wrong from the start but local medics denied the problem, as did the family. When Stuart was 9 months old my parents took him to London to see a specialist. It was one of the shortest but traumatic meetings of their entire lives. Lasting only minutes but with a devastating impact because of the insensitivity and lack of care shown:

Specialist: *"Why have you come?"*

Mum: *"We think our son has Down Syndrome."*

Specialist: *"Yes, of course he has, and...?"*

Mum & dad: silence.

Specialist: *"I suggest you go back to Brighton, put him in a home and get on with your other son".*

Mum & dad: left, in tears, obviously.

Obviously too, they ignored the advice, returned to Brighton and started the 'fight' for the family until Stuart's death in September 2011 at the age of 49. He lived at home throughout his life until he was 48.



Stuart started at the original Downs View in Coldean Lane (a health rather than education provision) in 1967. He was at the more complex end of need in respect of the condition. From the age of 10 to about 14 years he was incredibly difficult both at school and at home. Downs View and other services gave little support to us and ultimately suggested my parents look at residential schools. The visits proved so upsetting that we resolved to keep him at home. Importantly, this experience is what has led me as a head to ensure Downs View does everything conceivably possible to sustain children at school.

As for me, as a teenager I did voluntary work at Beaconsfield Villas (then a home for children with severe learning difficulties (SLD), now an adult service) and holiday playschemes at Downs View. I applied for an Economics/Business degree course but in the meantime I became a TA at Downs View in 1979 and worked for 18 months. It was during this time I gave up the idea of business and applied to do a specialist course to learn to teach children with SLD in Birmingham. Even at that point, 1980, the Downs View population bore the dreadful description 'Educationally Subnormal (Severe)', that in fact is the main subject I studied.

My first teaching job was at Hillside and then at their Further Education Unit. I was an advisory teacher in special schools for a couple of years and then became deputy at Grove Park (SLD) School Crowborough in 1991. I became a head for the first time in 1994 in Kent and returned to what I guess is my educational and spiritual home at Downs View as head in 2004.

So, that is the potted history. Whichever way I analyse my career I will always be indebted to Stuart and to my parents. I'm special education and special needs through and through and I have loved every minute of it.

It has been a challenging last few years, not least with the SEND review process and outcomes. Becoming an executive head was frustrating in that it took me further away from the children and young people I had wanted to work with and be amongst.

I am immensely proud that after many years of campaigning I was able to persuade Brighton & Hove to let me develop and then open our wonderful Life Skills College, to give continued high quality education to learners who previously left the system at the age of 19.

This has gone from strength to strength and is now a Charity in its own right.

Ongoing work and frustration.....

I need to stress that what I have set out below is about how this LA functions overall, it is not about individuals past or present, but these are key issues that Vanessa and the Governors/Trustees need to continue to fight for alongside PaCC and Amaze.

- Special school budgets have been fixed for 12 years but costs escalate year on year which impacts on class sizes, staffing levels and resources for teaching.
- The SEND review promises were not matched when the hubs came into being. There has been a failure to deliver on the grand plan in that there is no clear funding to develop extended services for pupils and families.
- In relation to the review there are significant building issues. Though the building has been extended the promised wholesale refurbishment was abandoned. The new building when complete will not have the specialist rooms that a generic school should have (science, art, technology for example).
- There are not enough places overall in the system and we need urgent action as our temporary move of some school pupils to the Link College is for one year only.



- Residential provision – I have argued for it over all these years consistently and was even asked to explore opening it a few years ago but the city has baulked at it. We need a good in-house service for children... without it we constantly have the situation where children need to live at Drove Road and Tudor House which limits the respite that can be offered.
- School transport – the authority should have listened and implemented the ideas given by heads and families, the chaos last year could and should have been avoided.

It is appallingly sad that I am still raising the same things 16 years on.

Thankfully the LA listened after years of campaigning to let me open the Life Skills College. Had they done it earlier, more learners would have had better education for longer and they would have saved considerable amounts of money.

And finally.....

A heartfelt thank you to all the wonderful staff I have worked with over the years: leaders, teachers, teaching assistants, midday supervisors, admin and site teams. Brilliant Governors and Trustees, as well as the incredible Friends of Downs View.

To them and to you I say this:

- You will never know how much this career has truly meant to me.
- You will never know what this role at Downs View has truly meant to me

I have made jokes about the Life Skills College as a post 19 college being “my baby” which it is, but in truth, Downs View overall is.

It has been an absolute privilege to be Downs View’s leader for this past 16 years and to have created an organisation which is outstanding, not just in an Ofsted sense but because of what we do for our pupils AND our families. Downs View is a real community, it is not just a school or college for pupils. For that I thank the innovative and experienced professional leaders, teachers and staff current and past that I have worked with over the years.

I am proud of the ethos I have created, supported and led – there is a “DV way” as Ofsted commented and that must be sustained as it is such a strength. It is what our families cherish and benefit from, it is also what sustains and retains our teaching staff, inspiring them to be innovative and proactive.

We would never have achieved outstanding in February had it not been for the quality of what we have collectively built over my 16 years at Downs View. I take great pride in that. Every site played their part. Thank you.

My life with my brother absolutely influenced my understanding of what a school like Downs View should be like in respect of education and care.

It is this lived experience that has also created the stress for me in leading Downs View through the pandemic, having necessarily to deny families access to the organisation they find so supportive.

I am immensely sad that I cannot hand over Downs View in the outstanding state we continually achieved over time and which was present when Ofsted came in February prior to the pandemic. The ‘normal’ outstanding Downs View where every child, student and learner was happily engaged in their learning.



I have challenged officers and members of the council throughout my career because if I did not fight for our pupils and our families for a better SEND world, few others would. We are and will sadly always be an afterthought and an add-on in the educational landscape both nationally and to a degree locally. This pandemic has proved that again... every piece of advice, guidance or offer had SEND (especially SLD) an afterthought or not even a thought at all.

I guess that has been a critical part of my job that I will miss too, ploughing the right path for Downs View and its families through an inhospitable landscape to produce the best outcomes for all in the absence of any sensible or supportive framework from the authorities.

It has been a privilege to work with you as families and to have been trusted with your child(ren) over the years. I will miss working with you and talking with you.

Thank you for all your support over the years.

Good luck and my very best wishes for your future. I honestly hope that some of the longstanding issues I've mentioned above that affect the lives of families with children with SEND in the city do improve over time.

Being at Downs View with all of you and your children has been an absolute honour.

Take care and stay well.



Adrian Carver
Executive Headteacher

