

BEING PART OF THE TRUST

Our Chairs of Governors Mark George (Echelford), Wendy Sedgwick (Saxon) and Laura Ellis Philip (Riverbridge) recently got together to talk candidly about their experience of being part of the Lumen Learning Trust. Lisa Cosgrave, our Communications Manager, put several questions to them to gain their insights....

Prior to converting to an academy what worried you the most about the process?

MG: Prior to Echelford becoming an academy, Lumen didn't exist, so there was a natural 'fear of the unknown'. There was no Lumen history, the only reference point we had as parents was that we were undertaking the same journey from 'special measures' to 'good' that Saxon Primary had been on. The schools are different sizes, and have different demographics and personalities within their communities. These differences led to anxiety amongst the parent community as to whether the success experienced at Saxon could be replicated.

WS: Saxon had recently experienced great improvements as a maintained school and the standard of teaching was excellent. For me, the biggest question was whether being an academy would change the standard of teaching for the worse rather than to continue to improve it. I think this was 'the fear of the unknown' as Mark said and was in fact groundless because actually the reality was, and is, that teaching improved and continues to do so.

LE-P: I think the main concern for the governing body at Riverbridge, which is a common one for any school considering this route, was the possible loss of local control in decision making which is something that I must say has not been borne out in reality. In the end, it's all worked out brilliantly. The governing body

are settled into their new status, we have a new Headteacher who is flourishing and we are reaping a lot of benefits. The school is stable, the children are safe and happy, and the learning has increased manifold. The data is speaking for itself.

MG: I too am proud of the way the governing body embraced the change of status despite it being a new experience for us all. I think what helped was that throughout early 2013, Mary Ellen led a complete overhaul of teaching practice, leadership and the implementation of the raft of changes that our journey to a future good Ofsted rating would require, which we did achieve in November 2016, just three years after becoming an academy, something the old mainstream Echelford had never achieved in the previous 20 years!

What worried you the most as a Mum or Dad of a child at one of the Trust schools?

WS: As a Mum I was worried about whether it would have a detrimental effect on my child's school life but it hasn't. The children at Saxon are still very much part of their own school community but also now they have the opportunity to participate in group activities with the other academy schools. My daughter loved meeting other pupils from Echelford and Riverbridge at the Lumen Learning Summer Camp for instance.

MG: For me, I was worried about the

amount of change that was required in such a short space of time. My daughter was in Year 2 in 2013 and had a newly qualified teacher. As a parent I was worried whether this new teacher would be a success and would my daughter be happy and do well? As it was, the school leadership team mentored and coached the new teacher well which in turn enabled my daughter to learn lots, be happy in school and to reach the expected level for her end of KS1 SATs. Incidentally, 5 years later, this teacher is now a subject leader and a member of the Echelford Senior Leadership Team.

LE-P: As a Mum I was more worried about what would happen if we didn't join the Trust. I seem to remember at one point discussing at home that we might move the children if the conversion didn't go ahead and we lost the leadership provided by the Trust. I felt my children would gain from having a strong senior leadership team and from the stability that strength would bring. I felt that by staying as Local Authority school we were putting off the inevitable and that this was an opportunity to join an academy fully focused on primary education. I don't remember having concerns about joining the LLT. I might have felt differently about another academy mind you....

We have all heard stories of academy trusts coming in and drastically changing a local school's identity. How do you think the Lumen Learning Trust handled this issue?

MG: From the very first conversation about becoming an academy in 2012 I saw that Saxon were determined to keep their identity and high standards, and after the hard work they had gone through, there was, quite rightly, no way they would compromise. And they didn't either. Saxon remained 'Saxon'.

WS: I understand this could be concerning but I personally believe the Lumen

Learning Trust is different and as Mark says Saxon remained 'Saxon'. The Trust has purposefully retained the names of every school and each one retains its own culture. When you read about academies in the news, all you hear is that they are like big businesses and they have a very negative reputation. I'm delighted to say that the Lumen Learning Trust is not like that at all. That's because they always put the needs of the children first in every decision they make and part of that is ensuring they have school identity.

MG: Yes, the Echelford community around Ashford also has a strong identity; many of our current parents have been children at the school. Over the past five years the school has worked across the community with the support of the Trust, immersing our children in different opportunities to rebuild and strengthen the Echelford reputation and identity.

LE-P: I agree, the Trust works hard to ensure each school maintains its identity. There are changes, but these happen over time. The children are barely aware. The biggest change for them was having new caterers and they love them! The offering is a big improvement on before. They now have choice. The children also enjoy the inter-school competitions and events which help them to feel part of the wider Trust while being able to show off their individual school personality and uniqueness.

From what you are all saying it was important that you could understand what value the Trust could bring to your school when you were deciding whether to join the Trust. What did you realise you could achieve with the Trust that you wouldn't be able to do alone?

LE-P: The clearest and strongest advantage of being part of the Trust is the joined up work between the teachers at each school. They get together, share ideas, do cross-moderation and pool the

creativity. The first negative people think of with an Academy is that you lose great staff but actually retention is much better – they have development opportunities that weren't there before. This is a big deal in the current climate of teacher shortage.

WS: For me it was being able to have more tools at our disposal to drive progress in our desire to become 'Outstanding'. As a governor I have seen the effect the Trust has had on the quality and standard of teaching. Peer reviews, sharing in successes and joint scrutiny all help drive progress across all the schools. We are no longer working in isolation and we benefit from having an open culture that is so evident on my regular visits to the Saxon.

MG: After going into special measures in 2012, what Echelford desperately needed was strong leadership and direction. In Mary Ellen and Sarah (Vernon, Vice Principal of the Trust and Head at Echelford) we discovered two professionals who were relentless in their pursuit of excellence for our children. They could call on their own experience and the expertise of their team at Saxon to coach and mentor Echelford staff, instilling greater determination and tenacity and additional professional skills. As Wendy describes, as the Trust has grown we are able to call on more and more expertise across all our schools where all the teachers work to the same high expectations using common initiatives and systems. Staff can now seamlessly teach across the entire Trust developing their own teaching skills as well as sharing best practice. Quite simply, the more outstanding teachers we can put in front of our children the better the learning experience will be.

WS: As a governor within a multi academy trust I have enjoyed meeting other governors from Echelford and Riverbridge. We are united by a similar ethos and it's great to share the challenges we face and to celebrate our schools' achievements

too.

LE-P: Yes, I agree with Wendy. I also like being part of the wider picture, and as Chair I find the Education Committee a source of real support. The local governing body duties are much more focused on monitoring visits, and I really feel we add value in this respect.

Following conversion what were you most happy to see?

WS: For me it was seeing parents and children didn't really notice anything changing when the school became part of the Trust. In other words we still had the Saxon look and feel.

MG: As a parent, to see both my daughters enjoying school and doing well both personally and academically was a joy. It's as simple as that.

LE-P: I echo both Wendy and Mark. The children remained settled throughout the process and could continue to identify themselves as Riverbridge pupils.

MG: Thinking from a governor perspective, whenever I come into school I always find the children are polite and friendly, they are well behaved and engaged in their learning. The classrooms are bright, colourful and full of displays of the children's work. The overall environment is very positive and the 'buzz' of learning around the school is infectious. When I see this, I know the school is doing everything it can to promote positive outcomes for our children and that makes me very happy to see.

Local community primary schools come in all shapes and sizes. What does the Lumen Learning Trust enable your schools to do?

WS: Yes, local community primary schools come in all shapes and sizes and the Trust enables us to be the school we want to be with strong support from the Lumen family.

MG: We can be part of the community, celebrate our individuality and give our children the best possible start in their learning journey. Echelford is one of the largest primary school sites in Spelthorne – our site was originally designed as a secondary school. We have space to use, explore and develop. As a trust we can innovate in the space around us. For example, in the last year alone we have planted our ‘Echelwood forest’ in the corner of our field using 100+ trees. This not only attracts wildlife but promotes environmental awareness. We have designed a classroom called ‘The Lighthouse’ which is about as far removed from a traditional classroom as you can imagine. Recently an outdoor sensory garden has been planted with a storyteller’s area that the children will discover over the coming months. If we were not part of the Lumen Learning Trust these ideas would never have been realised.

LE-P: I completely agree with Mark. In the last 12 months we have been able to introduce dynamic and stimulating learning environments such as the themed library areas. Interactive book bags and tactile surroundings tailored to key stages have been hugely positive for the children. The Trust also allows us to bring together a large team of dedicated teachers and support staff to provide all our local children with good learning opportunities and to develop their aspirations.

What would you say is the best part of belonging to the Trust?

LE-P: That’s simple to answer. Knowing that the children belong to a Trust that is led by a team who really care about all children is by far the best part of being part of the Lumen Learning Trust.

WS: For me it’s knowing you are not alone. Schools cannot exist in isolation anymore. We need to be connected and to learn and grow from each other if we are to keep pace with the rapidly changing world in

which we live. That way we can better equip our children for the future.

MG: The best part or parts?! Knowing that my children are safe, happy and being involved in fantastic learning every day. That the teachers and school leaders want the very best for every child regardless of their background or abilities. As a parent you want your child to have better than you had yourself and thanks to the Trusts’ relentless drive towards enriching our children’s lives, even at this young age, they have learned so much that will stand them in good stead for the future.

Finally, if you knew then what you know now what would you tell yourself?

LE-P: We would do it all over again...or joined three years earlier!

MG: That we had nothing to fear about becoming an academy and that it would give us the freedom to be innovative and break the constraints of being a mainstream school. The Trust leaders and the teams of school leaders and teaching staff are outstanding professionals. No challenge has gone unanswered and excellence has been pursued relentlessly. Echelford is undoubtedly now reaching the potential it was always capable of and we have no intention of stopping anytime soon!

WS: Well said Laura and Mark, I agree with the both of you. If I could travel back to the birth of the Trust I would tell myself and my fellow governors simply to “go for it”.