



Swindon Academy

The best in everyone™

A member of United Learning Trust

Principal: Ms J Shadick BA MA

Swindon Academy
Headlands Grove
Swindon
SN2 7HS

t 01793 747800

f 01793 747801

e admin@swindon-academy.org
w www.swindon-academy.org

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To whom it may concern

I write in favour of the proposal to expand Swindon Academy to include Penhill Primary and Nursery School.

In supporting the proposal I recognise the hard work and commitment on the part of staff to improve standards but it is my belief that this proposal will overcome the challenges that still lie ahead in raising attainment in a sustainable way.

We have had a good first year at Swindon Academy and are making progress, particularly at Key Stage 2. This progress has been confirmed by external reviews by our Sponsor ULT and by the DCSF through our School Improvement Partner. We are beginning the transformation and would welcome Penhill to be part of this.

If Penhill were to join us they would be joining a school which:

1. has a strong track record of success. In just ten months at KS2 we have made a 14% improvement in Maths, a 22% improvement in Science and a 21% improvement in Reading (we are still awaiting our writing results). We have also continued to make improvements at KS3 with a 12% improvement in English, an 11% improvement in Maths and a 4% improvement in Science.

At KS4 our Average Points Score has increased to the highest it has ever been meaning that more students are gaining more GCSEs at higher grades and 100% of students that we educated on site gained at least one formal qualification – a first. We did have a serious set back in Maths which will inevitably impact on our 5 A*-C including English and Maths performance. This is due to a very specific reason which has been identified and isolated and we are back on course to reach floor targets in 2009. (I would be very happy to talk with members about this issue in detail if desired). Until this 'blip' we had made over 300% improvement in our GCSE results and progress in English and Maths placed us in the top 20% of schools nationally;

2. is very used to, and experienced in, dealing with students who have SEN – this includes students with physical disabilities. There are currently 50% of students identified with a need (500 individuals). They are provided for through an inclusive programme of intervention. We are able to offer far greater resourcing and flexibility for this area. Even our students with SEN are beginning to hit the 'floor targets' and will go beyond them. We have reduced permanent exclusions this year and have been successful in gaining Statements for students with severe need in order to keep them within education.

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Our Year 7 students last year who undertook the DISTAR reading recovery programme (enabling them to access the curriculum) made on average 18 months progress in just 8 months of intervention. Our 21 students from Penhill made an average of 2 years progress in just 8 months. As a 0 – 19 Academy this successful intervention can be made earlier;

3. benefits from being part of a well established education sponsor – the United Learning Trust – which has extensive experience of running schools from 3 – 19. This support, plus the support from our partners Honda and Marlborough College, means that we are now seeing our children and young people gain access to a whole range of activities to supplement the curriculum and raise aspirations;
4. is committed to being in the heart of its community. Community and parental engagement is reflected in our structures. We are already benefiting from the parent and family learning activities that we run and would see this continuing to operate on all sites;
5. has a strong transition programme. Our Year 6 felt very confident about joining the secondary site. They know the teachers and the systems already and their Head of Learning knows them. We are seeing the benefits of this as Year 7 settle into secondary school life. There is a significant difference in the way they have settled this year;
6. has a committed team of senior leaders and staff with expertise across the full age range. We are developing the 0 – 19 teacher as well as the 0 – 19 school. This is making recruitment and retention far easier. There is a misheld view that the senior staff are all secondary trained and that staff do not like ULT contracts. This is not true. 1/3 of the senior staff have specific expertise in the primary phase and we have had no difficulty recruiting good staff for September.

Penhill has a legacy of underachievement which is greater than our other feeder schools. I recognise the improvements that have been made in recent years but it is my belief, as was the case with Headlands School, that in order to achieve the potential that exists in our children a radical change needs to happen. The evidence from our cluster over the past 10 years shows real difficulty in sustaining any improvements in attainment beyond 3 to 5 years unless significant changes are put in place.

When tracking our own Year 7 students on entry and through the year it is evident that those coming from Penhill present particular challenges that others do not on the same scale. On average;

- a. they are already below other schools in terms of KS2 standards, particularly in English and Science;
- b. their CATs scores are below those of students from other primary schools;
- c. their average reading age at 11 is just over 7 years;
- d. within the first 6 months of Year 7 they do not make the same level of progress as other students academically or behaviourally. In fact significant numbers present challenging behaviour during this time as they adjust to secondary school. This was particularly pronounced last year;
- e. a significant number arrive to us with high levels of SEN but without a Statement. We have had to spend a great deal of time applying for these within the first few months. This was the case for 4 students last year. And we successfully gained the support these students needed to access the curriculum.

Our Academy can build on the strengths that Penhill has. We can bring a consistent and coherent approach to teaching and learning which our children need; a specialist delivery to aspects of the curriculum with targeted intervention when needed. The curriculum can be delivered as a coherent framework from 0 – 19, thus raising aspirations and expectations;

I understand the concerns that staff, in particular, have about change. By embracing change it is seen as an acknowledgement that what has gone before is not good enough or needs to improve. This is sometimes difficult to accept but what must drive any change is that it will benefit the students.

As professionals we have a collective responsibility to explore any opportunities which come our way to improve the life chances of our children. I believe that this is one of those opportunities.

It is always disappointing to hear comments made which are based on assumptions with no basis in fact or which have little to do with our children and their opportunities.

I understand that some would like the proposal to be put on hold until other avenues have been explored. We cannot put the education of our students on hold and we cannot allow a change situation to 'hang in the air' creating uncertainty. This benefits no one.

At Swindon Academy our vision is to see every member of our community achieve to their best. We face the challenges of deprivation but will never allow that to be an excuse for under achievement. Time and time again we have seen our students outperform others and themselves to realise their potential. I believe that the same will be true for the children of Penhill if they become part of Swindon Academy.

Yours sincerely

Ms J Shadick
Principal