

Best of all worlds

This September, Richard Nicholson becomes principal of the Warwick Independent Schools Foundation. He talks about the schools and his ambitions for them in this exclusive interview

Where are you currently head?

Since 2015, I have been the head of King's High, Warwick, a wonderful school that is part of the Warwick Independent Schools Foundation. From September, I will be the first principal of the Foundation; an amazing opportunity to help shape the future of our fantastic schools.

Tell us a little bit about yourself...

My background is as a musician. Having been a chorister at Southwell Minster, I attended Denstone College before taking up the organs scholarship at Pembroke College, Oxford, where I read music. I was only able to join Denstone thanks to a music scholarship and a government assisted place. The opportunities I had were life-changing for me; I want schooling to have that effect for all our pupils. My teaching career has spanned single sex boys' and girls' schools – I have seen at first hand the tremendous power of single sex education and, within our Foundation schools, the exciting opportunities presented by schools working together.

Which schools make up the Warwick Foundation?

The Foundation is a group of schools situated on a magnificent 55 acre campus: King's High and Warwick Preparatory School, Warwick School and Warwick Junior School. Together, we are unique in the Midlands, offering co-education from 3-7 and then single sex from 7-18.

Tell us about recent developments...

A major strategic focus has been 'Project One Campus', bringing together all our pupils for the first time in the Foundation's long history. This has seen facility development for everyone, with a new King's High being opened last September.

The final parts of this programme, including new play space for Warwick Prep, will be completed this summer.

This new physical proximity has meant that areas in which there was long-standing collaboration developed considerably in the months leading up to the Government closure of schools to most pupils. Particular highlights included the sixth form, where we now share a brand new Sixth Form Centre; there is also joint sixth form teaching for small subjects, such as Latin, as there has been for many years. Girls and boys work together closely in areas such as music and drama. However, 'Project One Campus' creates new opportunities for the schools to share the best of themselves, whilst still retaining the unique qualities which makes each so special.

What makes the Warwick Foundation special?

The Foundation is unique in the Midlands, and because of the collaboration across the schools, we believe that we offer not just the 'best of both worlds', but the best of all worlds. Our schools have long been known for their innovative approach to education. Be that the bespoke Diploma at Warwick Juniors, the 'Skills for Life' programme at Warwick Prep, the early adoption of the NCH Philosophy Certificate at Warwick, or the teaching of engineering at King's. As principal, I look forward to continuing to foster the spirit of innovation.

Tell us about any recent highlights...

I am delighted that the excellence at both Warwick School and King's has been recognised, with both schools being shortlisted in the boys and girls categories respectively for 'Independent School of the Year' by Independent School Parent Magazine.



Richard Nicholson will be the first principal of the Warwick Independent Schools Foundation



The Warwick Independent Schools Foundation offers high quality teaching from 3-18

What are your hopes for the pupils in the Foundation?

We want all our pupils to achieve their dreams and ambitions; that too is a whole community endeavour, supported by expert staff and parents.

We also want our pupils to make a difference in the world, and to know how to do so for the benefit of others. We have known for a long time that the workplaces of the future will be very different – the world post the Covid-19 crisis is poised to change again. For this new world, skills often considered ‘soft’, but in fact incredibly hard to develop, such as adaptability, resilience and creativity, have never been more urgent: we must seize opportunities to develop these through innovative programmes inside and outside the classroom.

Tell us about your experience during the closure of schools...

Since March 20, we stayed open for the children of our critical workers, whilst the schools adapted to the new reality of remote teaching and learning. As

part of our educational programme, we wanted to continue to nurture the sense of community across the Foundation, developing a new website, to celebrate the achievements of our pupils, foundationathome.co.uk – you will be inspired by what you read!

As well as capturing individual stories, we also developed a series of community events both school and Foundation wide. These included sports events (with some parents getting involved too!), and music events, including a Foundation Music Festival, and a brand new composition, the ‘Lockdown Symphony’, which saw over 350 contributions. We also took part in the VE Day celebrations, and have developed our links with charities, particularly ‘Kissing it Better’. Charitable work by our community has continued to be a real hallmark of the last few months, as it is in more normal times, with monies being raised for a number of causes, and pupils and families going out of their way to support others less fortunate.

What keeps you busy outside school?

We have a relatively young Airedale terrier, Erasmus, who is gradually learning to be more respectful of Ptolemy, the elder-Airedale-statesman of the household: between them, they keep us well exercised!

What are you reading at the moment?

I have three books on the go: the most recent Donna Leon and Sara Paratskey, and Hilary Mantel’s ‘The mirror and the light’. It’s quite magnificent.

What tips do you have for parents in choosing schools?

Really get under the skin of the ethos of the schools you are looking at. Visiting, meeting the head and key staff, talking with pupils, and sensing the atmosphere of the school is essential. Over the coming months, some of those things may be more complex than usual, so make the most of any ‘virtual’ opportunities. ■

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