

# Pupils question and Heads answer

*Insight* invited the pupils at two schools – **Merchiston Castle School and Wimbledon High School** – to pose the questions they would like Heads to answer. Here four HMC Members explain the rewards and challenges of leading a school before choosing a further question to answer.



**Kathy Crewe-Read**  
(Wolverhampton  
Grammar School)



**Sarah Kerr-Dineen**  
(Oundle School)



**John Hind**  
(Dame Allan's)



**Charles Fillingham**  
(Francis Holland School,  
Regent's Park)

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### What is both the most rewarding and challenging aspect of being a Head?

**KCR:** There is nothing more rewarding than seeing something wonderful happen in school – from a great lesson to pupil achievement or a simple act of kindness. That shows you your school and its approach to education is making a difference... which is what being a Head is all about.

With that responsibility, though, comes an unrelenting workload. Being a Head is a 24/7, 365 days a year role. When your employment is such a large part of your life, it's really important to love it, which I absolutely do.

### What do you do when you don't know what to do?

**KCR:** A good leader, no matter what the environment, should always know when to ask for help or the advice of colleagues. As a Head you cannot run a school on your own; you have to collaborate and you are always part of a team. Your senior leadership team, the Governors, and the Heads' associations (HMC and ASCL) are all there to assist, so use their expertise.

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### What is both the most rewarding and challenging aspect of being a Head?

**SKD:** The most rewarding part is also its most challenging: it is ultimately the Head's responsibility to do everything possible to ensure that every single pupil makes the very most of the education provided in order to lay secure foundations for a happy and fulfilling life.

### What more could your school do to provide its learners with transferable skills for life and for the workplace – or does pressure to focus on exam results make this impossible?

**SKD:** I think the answer lies in establishing and promoting a vision of education in your school which is broader than simply examination results. In the end it is your character and attitudes which will give you the confidence and versatility to prosper as an adult, and that should be emphasised in all aspects of school life.

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**JH:** The rewards: as a deputy head I sensed that I was answerable for everything but responsible for nothing; as a Head one has that sense of responsibility for the health and wellbeing of the school. But more important is seeing the pupils do well – be that in the classroom or in the wide range of extra-curricular activities the school offers to them. The greatest challenges are posed by any members of the community – staff, parents, pupils – who do not share that sense of family and whose behaviour is out of line with it. Fortunately these are few and far between!

### What gives a school its identity, and what is your school's most distinctive characteristic?

**JH:** A school's identity is a mixture of many things. It derives from those who are part of the immediate school community – the current pupils, staff, parents and governors – but it also draws heavily on the past, whether that be the attitudes and actions of former pupils and staff or, more intangibly, the reputation a school has established over the years. Where a school is newly founded – or, indeed, the product of a merger – then that sense of "newness" is a central part of its identity.

The heart of my school's identity lies in our structure. A diamond school, we educate boys and girls together in our junior school, separately in Years 7-11 and together again in the Sixth Form. We are able to focus pastoral care on the differing needs of the different elements. It also allows us to achieve excellent examination results without the gender stereotyping in subject choice that can occur in orthodox co-educational schools.

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### What is both the most rewarding and challenging aspect of being a Head?

**CF:** The best thing about being a Head is the shaking hands – I meet new people all the time and I greet the pupils every day. Shaking hands allows just enough time to look someone straight in the eye, to enquire after their wellbeing, to ask about their learning, to pose a difficult question. The only downside can be that shaking a hand also invites the other person to do the same to you!

### My friends and I feel disappointed that a focus on exams inhibits teachers from feeling free to teach around the curriculum and explore the subject deeper. How can this problem be remedied?

**CF:** You are right to raise this point. Please go and speak to your own school Head and share your concerns with them, because no one wants schools to become exam factories. Let's be clear though; a great teacher will always prepare you thoroughly for the exam, of course she will, but she must also share with you why she loves the subject. The gold medal in schools is when her lessons lead to both exam success and a genuine enthusiasm amongst the pupils. ■