

July

11

Case Study: St Luke's Church of England School, London

Overview

St Luke's Church of England School will be one of the first Free Schools to open in September 2011. It will be a small primary school in Camden (London) where there is a severe shortage of primary school places. The school will make use of a redeveloped church hall and garden, and will have a Christian ethos, but admission to the school will be based on how far children live from the school rather than whether or not a child attends Church. The school will open with 15 pupils in Reception in September 2011, and will eventually grow to 105 pupils (15 pupils per year, two year groups per class from Year 1 to Year 6).

Background

The vision for St Luke's School was initially drawn together by Penny Roberts - a local parent and teacher who knew how difficult it was for parents in Camden to get a primary school place for their children (let alone a place in their first choice school). When the Free Schools policy was launched, she realised that this was an opportunity to address this local issue. According to Penny, the proposed Free School was ***"an obvious thing for the church to do."*** St Luke's Church had always had a significant presence in the local community, and had run a number of after school youth and children's clubs (not restricted to parishioners). The opportunity to serve the community with a school was something that the Church had previously contemplated, and the launch of the new Free Schools policy provided the opportunity that they had been waiting for. Consequently, the plans for this particular Free School came about very quickly. Penny was aware of the space available in St Luke's Church halls, and from the day that the Parochial Church Council (PCC) agreed to support Penny's idea it took a mere two weeks to prepare and submit the initial proposal (under the first Free School application process).

The fundamentals of the vision for the school have not changed drastically since the first proposal was prepared, although having a headteacher on board in recent months has helped to develop that vision. It is a school that will serve the local community (which means that there are church members who were instrumental in preparing the original proposal who are now not able to get places for their own children in the school), and although it is a Christian foundation school it will be ***"accessible to any child in the community whose parent wants their child to be educated in a Church of England school, regardless of their background."***

The Group

The St Luke's School group has been led by Penny who has a background as a teacher and educational psychologist, but who had been taking a career break while her children are in primary school. This has given her the time to dedicate to this project which is fortunate since she has been working 60 to 70 hours a week on the proposed school since last July.

"Even my summer holiday was spent by the pool in France with journalists ringing me!"

She has been supported by Rob Hannan - a project manager from the London Diocesan Board for Schools (LDBS). LDBS became co-proposers for the school and have provided fantastic assistance throughout the process. Penny has had access to the board's services including legal, financial, and curriculum advice. They have experience of opening and running schools, and Rob in particular has been involved in the opening of five Academies. ***"I can't even begin to think how we would have done it without him and the LDBS."*** The LDBS will continue to help run the school once it is open and will be represented on the St Luke's Governing Body.

Members of the St Luke's community and the wider local community (including parents, residents, businesses, and parishioners) have been supportive and have helped in various ways, but the project has really been driven by a Penny and Rob (with access to the expertise of the LDBS). ***"I feel that the speed of the project and the sheer number of decisions to be made has needed very efficient management. With a small team we have been able to keep on top of things, make decisions and progress the project effectively. A big team may have become bogged down in the detail."*** Penny has frequently turned to the larger team of supporters for things like the consultation on school uniform.

Premises

St Luke's School will be based in the redeveloped Grade II* halls and garden of the local church. St Luke's Church supported the school proposal and was prepared to offer the halls and garden to the school on a cost-neutral basis. Penny is confident that these clear arrangements for a school site helped ensure that her proposal was approved by the DfE. While the outside space at the school will not be extensive, it is comparable to other local schools in this densely populated area.

The first phase of the conversion of the space (Reception class, toilets, school office, and part of the playground) will be handed over in September, with the remainder of the conversion due to be completed by the October half-term. The team were pleased when the competition for the refurbishment works contract was won by a local architect and builder. Penny feels that the appointment of contractors whose size matched the relatively small scale of the project was instrumental in the site being ready on time and ensuring attention to detail.

Application

The application for St Luke's School was submitted under the original Free School application system (proposal, followed by business case). The initial proposal was submitted in July 2010, and Penny was expecting a response from the Department within a couple of weeks. In the end, the DfE held back on making a decision about the proposal to allow them to make a big announcement about a number of schools in September. They were then invited to prepare a business case which Penny and Rob wrote together, with some support from the DfE (including a useful meeting with an education adviser who advised on curriculum) and a great deal of support from people within the Diocesan Board and in the local community. The business case was submitted at the beginning of November and approved in January.

Relationships

The St Luke's School group has raised interest in the school largely as a result of the role that the church already plays within the community. Penny has also been working hard to develop a relationship with the Camden Local Authority which she considers was time well invested.

“We are really pleased that Camden has welcomed us and supported us as a school. We think that families of schools are really important, and being part of the wider Camden family of schools is something we think will be in the best interests of the children.”

St Luke's School has developed relationships with groups and companies in the local community including a local restaurant that helped the school to design their kitchen and put their menu together, and Friends of Fortune Green with whom they have been discussing the possibility of developing use of the green. Through the LDBS, the network of Church of England headteachers has provided advice and support, and St Luke's School has also benefited from the support and help of a nearby independent school. We have also employed the independent school's bursar for three hours per week, and the two schools are considering the possibility of working together in other ways.

In general the response from other local schools has been positive and a number have assisted in various ways. Penny wanted other schools to have an opportunity to voice their concerns during the consultation period. As well as inviting written comments, she decided to organise an open afternoon for governors and headteachers to provide an opportunity for any concerns to be raised, but in the event ***“no one came, which was excellent, because it presumably meant that there were no significant concerns.”***

The St Luke's School project did access some support from NSN, and Penny attended some of the conferences and seminars. However, she is in a unique situation as a Church of England school.

“Because we have been in such safe hands with the diocese, we have needed less support. We would have needed more if we hadn't had that link.”

Media

The first Free Schools have been the subject of a great deal of media interest, but St Luke's School has chosen to turn down a lot of these approaches. In the early stages the media coverage was useful as a way of raising the profile of the proposed school, and Penny did initially engage with the media. Once the application had been accepted, she did not feel that it was in the best interests of either the school or her sanity to spend a great deal of time on media coverage and interviews.

“The people we want to work with are our immediate neighbours. We felt that inviting them in for open days was a better way to engage with our community than using the national media.”

Education

The educational plan for St Luke's School has been developed using the expertise of the Diocesan Board and their advisory teachers. It is modelled on other Church of England schools with a similar arrangement of classes. The school will offer a broad arts curriculum, and pupils will learn a modern foreign language from the age of 5. While the education on offer will be consistent with the best practice in other Church of England schools, Penny is keen that the school adopt a probing approach to education - ***“Why is something considered to be best practice? Is it because that is what has always been done? Or is it actually what is best for the pupils?”*** She expects that the education may change or evolve over the next five years.

Recruitment

Recruiting the right headteacher was essential, but not straightforward. The school will be very small at the start, and yet ***“for the set-up of a new school we didn't want an inexperienced head with a lot of ideas - we wanted a safe pair of hands.”*** St Luke's School appointed an interim head, with a background as a successful headteacher, who started in May and will work for them, on a part-time basis, for four terms. Penny hails this appointment as a ***“fantastic result!”***

Other appointments include the bursar (borrowed from a local independent school) who will work three hours per week from the end of July. An administrator is working for the school part-time. In addition to the part-time head there will also be a part-time teaching deputy who will share the teaching of Reception with a main grade teacher (there were more than 20 applicants for this post). The deputy head will also act as SENCO. The school will, in due course, have a teacher and a TA for each of the four classes, and it is expected that all teaching staff will have QTS.

Pupil enrolment

With an initial cohort of only 15 pupils, St Luke's School quickly found that they were significantly over-subscribed for the first year. There were 52 applications for 15 places, and there are still more children on the waiting list than there are places in the school. ***“Even if every child pulled out for September we still wouldn't have room for everyone on the waiting list.”*** In addition to using the church network, the St Luke's School team have worked hard to generate interest in the local community using open evenings, notices in libraries, distributing flyers to nursery schools, as well as distributing consultation leaflets door to door.

Reflections

The biggest challenge of the process so far for Penny has been a personal one. While she loves the variety of the project, and has enjoyed the experience, it has involved a huge time commitment from her. ***“The hardest part of the process so far has been persuading my husband that this is time well spent!”*** She is grateful for the support from the London Diocesan Board for Schools and is quick to identify them as the organisation that has, without question, provided the most help for St Luke's School to date.

Penny's view about the importance of families of schools has only been strengthened through this process - particularly if the school is being started by a group of parents whose motivation is the education of their own children. ***“What do you do when your first group of parents moves on?”*** St Luke's School is fortunate to have the support of many in the local community whose motive is not the education of their own children, as well as the Diocesan Board to keep the school accountable and to serve as a safety net. Penny looks forward to seeing the school in five years time when she hopes that it will be a successful and popular Christian school for the whole community.

The advice that Penny would now offer to groups considering a Free School application is:

“develop a small local team, work hard with the community, don't fall out with anybody, and never forgot your vision.”

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