

## The Good Schools Guide 2011 Review of Rainbow School for Children with Autism (Secondary), London, SW18 2SL

### Our View

At Rainbow, difficulties aren't problems they are issues that require solutions; so school focus their energies on what works best for the child. There have been a fair few hot potatoes thrown Rainbow's way over the years, and the latest government proposals might not do them any favours, but to see a rainbow in all its glory requires both sun and rain. Rainbow children have suffered the storm, they now deserve the sun that this great school lavishes on its learners. Wonderfully summarised by a parent, 'my child's needs are the school's number one priority – he is well-known, well-loved and well-cared for; what more could I ask?'

### Head

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Since 2010, Mrs Sally Palmer MA BEd BPhil (HI) BPhil (VI) (fifties). Joined in 2006 as head of primary provision, now works across both schools. Enormously experienced, 30+ years in SEN education. Capable, focused, with unfalteringly high expectations of staff and students alike, she says the biggest change is that she now spends less time on curriculum and more with prospective parents who don't know where to turn for help. Her approach is clearly appreciated, parental praise is universal - 'Sally is hands-on and open; there are no airs and graces, she is always supremely calm, even when I'm emotional or upset'.

We feel no review of Rainbow would be complete without a mention of proprietor, Karen Sorab - a visionary dynamo, whose determination and drive have improved the lives, not just of the kids at Rainbow, but of their families too. Not one to rest on her laurels, she enthused about her exciting and innovative plans for the near future – and she will make them happen!

### Academic Matters

Spanking new, specialist, well-equipped rooms house science, DT, food and music. Classrooms have interactive white-boards, plenty of space and emergent, attractive displays. This is a school where a real achievement is a child able to articulate, as one did, 'sweetcorn makes me sad'. The busy curriculum is focused on getting the children to adapt to their environment not the other way round; speech and art therapist input. The most able work towards level 2 of the National Curriculum, the least able, unlikely to move beyond p-levels. We saw a maths lesson with two of the abler children working together on multiplication. One was out-performing his peer so, at times, had to wait but, whereas waiting might be criticised in a mainstream school, here, turn-taking is a target - a very natural way to develop such important social skills. Some participate in visits to mainstream and other special schools but these are absolutely not about ticking bureaucratic boxes. For a trip to be sanctioned, the child must be included and involved, which means inclusion opportunities dwindle with age as intellectual, social and emotional gaps widen significantly at the teen stage.

The predominantly young, female staff have energy, enthusiasm and pots of patience; ably backed up by experience, expertise and a desire to keep getting it right. Say 'kids are the most fun and the biggest challenge, in equal measures!' Majority of pupils are male and a few more men on the staff would be welcome (not through lack of trying, say school). Staff understand the children, look intricately at needs and preferred learning styles and know where they are academically and where their targets say they should be heading, then develop learning accordingly. Parents full of praise - 'learning and progress are tangible, not the same as children without autism but beyond our hopes.' Another, 'They progress academically, socially, emotionally and behaviourally – if we didn't have Rainbow I think we'd have a very difficult child. They really have made a difference in all sorts of ways - we cope because Rainbow enables us to.' Indeed, unanimous praise for the home-school communication and feedback as to what kind of a day their child has had but some feel curriculum feed-back is lacking - 'If my child is working on "half-past the hour" at school I'd like to reinforce this at home.' Another added, 'my child was

hopping and performing strange moves; I thought he was developing odd behaviours till I saw the school assembly and realised it was a dance!

We observed part of a weekly 'project day' themed to make learning integrated, functional and meaningful. In the teacher-led session, each youngster worked on naming the various parts of a plant. We were impressed by the levels of concentration and the very positive way the children participated and responded (one child had a food reward – though aim is to reduce edible rewards and move towards verbal praise). All studied the same task but, within that, some worked on word recognition, some gluing and sticking the words onto a sketch of the plant with help. Others worked unaided, the most able writing and spelling the words – no glue required. When one boy screwed up his word, we asked if he could show 'good-sticking'. He responded perfectly; smoothed out his word, found the right part of the plant and carefully stuck it in place. If he felt good (and we certainly praised his efforts) we felt even better but we can't take the credit – it is the painstaking work that staff do to encourage the children to respond so positively to strangers and to changes in routine, as well as to work on improving their own learning and behaviour that makes the difference. To be honest, trainee teachers would be well advised to skip the lectures on differentiation (the buzz word for adapting school work/tasks to a child's individual needs) and see it, as here, in action, for real and working!

## **Games, Options, the Arts**

Some music sessions – lots of singing, 'My son finds the songs on the computer and sings them to us; it is great to share in his school work in this way'. Biggest change with age is the youngsters are more likely to play together than alongside. Sport a marathon rather than a sprint; utilise playground and nearby common and occasional swimming sessions at a nearby school (issues with logistics of getting there and lack of male staff). Aim to have fun, burn-off excess energy, practise turn-taking and develop spatial awareness, motor and social skills. Parents would like more swimming and improved sport – with gym sessions and regular PE. Some would like a longer school day, others greater holiday care and summer camps – watch this space. Whole gamut of trips out - from walks to local shops through to adventures further afield for culture days. A recent jaunt to Legoland, with patron Mark Owen of 'Take That' fame, was such a hit that Hello magazine 'papped' the Rainbow revellers.

## **Background and Atmosphere**

Parents say it is a very personal, small, caring community that they feel lucky to be a part of. One of only a handful of ABA schools and virtually unique in offering the verbal behaviour (VB) programme. We were struck by the air of calm and order; this is a truly sunny school - yes we visited on a glorious spring day but the whole interior is light, airy, super-chic and very thoughtfully remodelled. 'The reception is like a hotel', chirped one well-travelled youngster, and the stairs 'like a harp' we thought – which apparently is very much the idea. Originally a grandiose, double-fronted, Victorian detached house, overlooking Wandsworth Common it was unsympathetically extended in the '60s. Now it once again sits serenely, amid its honey-bricked neighbours. Thanks to the vision of Rainbow the ugly duckling is of the past; a beautiful, eco-friendly swan has emerged. And in a way that is very much the Rainbow way; it doesn't matter what you look like, or how the years have treated you, they are adept at scraping away the unseemly, to reveal real promise and potential. The loving care that has gone into painstakingly developing the building is just a hint of what goes into looking after the youngsters.

## **Pastoral Care and Discipline**

Uniform practical and under-review; currently a choice of white, grey or navy polo shirt and dark trousers. PSHE programs are a work in progress; the spotlight firmly on the need to embrace puberty pangs and adolescent angst. 'We will dip into expertise of partner schools, take the very best of good practice and train staff accordingly' - doubtless they will! Employment opportunities for youngsters another work in progress; hope to expand horizons, not limit to horticulture – watch-out Lord Sugar!

Frequent assemblies provide the perfect setting for whole school, group interaction, celebration and praise - all sing and sign. We watched as 'Star of the Week' was presented and enthusiastically applauded by all. With an eye on Mother's Day, all the children participated in matching 'mummies and their babies' using Disney characters. Finding age appropriate material that the youngsters not only understand but that inspires them and encourages learning will be an increasing challenge as the teen years loom. Home-school books form part of the daily routine but support isn't just lip-service; school will spend time with families at home if they need support. 'It's a real leap of faith to hand your child over to the care of a school but I have the utmost, unfaltering confidence in Rainbow,' said one. Another added, 'it makes such a difference that my child can communicate his feelings, join in and we can share his humour too.'

## **Pupils and Parents**

Mix of ethnicities from across the social spectrum and from a range of LAs including Westminster, Ealing, Kensington and Chelsea, Richmond, Sutton and Kingston. As always, postcode lottery means variable levels of LA support from very supportive, to downright belligerent. Parents have to fight hard for a place; it takes letters to MPs, tribunals (repeated), appeals, energy and a strong suit of armour – but the prize is simply too good to pass up. Parents a real mixed bag, range from hands-off to wholly involved. Parent body meets in school, sometimes inviting external speakers; some would like a little more involvement but acknowledge school 'getting better' in this respect.

## **Entrance**

As of September 2011, applications accepted from any child up to and including year 9 (aged 13 extending to age 14 from 2012) with a primary diagnosis of moderate/severe autism. All statemented and LA funded; this is the only school offering ABA/ VB in SW London. All require 1-1 but are taught individually, or in small groups within classes of 6 or 7 children. Will take those who require 2-1 and /or have associated needs, if the child will eventually cope with 1-1. Most arrive either via the school's junior department or from home-school programmes. The consensus is very much that school continues to make a real difference and adds significant value, 'he was progressing on home school programme but since going to Rainbow his progress has been exponential,' said one. Another, 'going to school has meant we can relax at home again, do the fun things; I am free to be mum again, not teacher. It's had such a positive impact on the whole family'. Fortunately, following recent expansion, there is a crop of places for those able to secure funding.

## **Exit**

Fledgling senior school; no leavers yet.

## **Money Matters**

Rich in so many ways, alas! the school does not have groaning coffers. Any corporate, city slicker or other mere-mortal could do worse than donate and, as it's not just cash that charities such as Rainbow depend on, there's never been a better time to calibrate your conscience or roll-up your shirt sleeves.