

1 February 2010

TO THE PARENTS OF ALL SECOND YEAR BOYS

Dear Parents

PREFERENCE FOR THIRD YEAR SUBJECTS for September 2010

The purpose of this letter is to explain the curriculum which your son will be following in his third year at the school. This curriculum contains both compulsory and optional subjects. On the basis of the information in this letter and discussions with your son, you need to choose your son's preferences for two optional subjects.

All Second Year parents will be emailed with a link to an online form. Please complete this online form by **Tuesday 9th March**. The online form provides room for you to comment if you wish. The Parents' Evening on Monday 1st March will provide an opportunity for you to discuss your son's preferences with his teachers.

If you need advice on your son's choices, please discuss them with his tutor or housemaster, or contact me at the school, or consult your son's teachers at the parents' evening on Monday 1 March. Whilst I hope that each second year pupil will work out his choice seriously at this stage, changes of mind after the examinations in the summer term will be sympathetically considered, provided that parents communicate **directly** with me.

The third year, which your son is about to enter, is important as a foundation year, in terms both of GCSE courses and of wider issues. The curriculum is designed so that the pupils follow a broad range of subjects. At the start of the fourth year, there are further choices to be made, which reduce the number of subjects to be followed to GCSE examinations.

Boys generally continue with their main language of either French or German into the third year. Additionally they have the opportunity to learn another foreign language: Mandarin Chinese, French, German or Spanish. In order to help you ascertain your son's potential in languages such as Latin, Greek, Mandarin Chinese, German, Spanish and French, his language teachers prepare 'linguistic grades'. **The grades for your son are enclosed with this mailing.** We are keen to encourage pupils to study languages. If a boy cannot cope with a second language, this will become obvious before the end of the third year and the boy may alter course. Our experience, however, has been that virtually everyone makes the grade and with sound results.

You may feel that it is rather early for you to commit yourselves over your son's preferences. We should, however, appreciate an early indication of the subjects that your son wants to study because we need to sort out our staffing for next year, and to estimate how many sets we shall need in each subject. If you change your mind about the optional subjects at some point between Tuesday 9th March and September, please let me know of the change of plan. Equally, on our side, I should mention that we have to reserve the right to abandon an optional subject if the numbers choosing it are so low as to make it uneconomic, and that sometimes we have to tell parents that we cannot provide unusual subject combinations. Such cases are rare, but that is why we call these 'preferences' rather than 'choices'. What will be offered must, inevitably, be determined by the overall demand.

I must stress, however, that there are various ways in which the curriculum can be modified to suit individual boys, provided that I am informed early enough about the potential problems. One characteristic of Abingdon is that the choice pattern is far more flexible, and tailored to individual pupils, than in many similar schools.

It is quite possible, and may well be beneficial, for boys, for instance, to choose both classical languages, should they so wish.

To allow you to plot the route of your son through to GCSE, even at this stage, the notes on the following pages indicate how this round of choices might affect the range of GCSE subjects that your son can read in the fourth and fifth years.

In particular, a 30-page booklet on ‘The Middle School Curriculum 2009’ is available from me on request. It is also available at <http://www.abingdonschool.org.uk/curriculum>. Subject descriptions are also available on the department page of the website under the Academic heading. A summary is given below.

When your son reaches the Abingdon fourth year in the autumn of 2011, English, Mathematics, the sciences, a modern foreign language, Religious Studies and Physical Education will all be compulsory. In addition, however, he will be able to choose three or four subjects to GCSE from a wide range, including Geography, History, Art, Design & Technology, a second modern language (Mandarin Chinese, French, German or Spanish) if he began it in the third year, Latin, Classical Civilisation, Ancient Greek, Electronics, Music and Drama. These subjects can be pursued in many combinations.

Our pupils do **not** take the Key Stage three tests at the end of the third year.

In general, we hope that you will appreciate that our whole middle school curriculum is designed to encourage breadth and versatility as well as to provide a suitably rigorous foundation for more advanced work.

COMPULSORY SUBJECTS IN THE THIRD YEAR

English	(4 lessons a week)
Mathematics	(4 lessons a week)
First language: German or French	(4 lessons a week)
Chemistry	(2 lessons a week)
Physics	(2 lessons a week)
Biology	(2 lessons a week)
History	(3 lessons a week)
Geography	(3 lessons a week)
Painting/Graphics/Ceramics	(2 lessons a week of each for a term)
Woodwork/Metalwork/ICT	(2 lessons a week of each for a term)
Music	(1 lesson a week)
Religious Studies	(2 lessons a week)
Physical Education	(2 lessons a week)

OPTIONAL SUBJECTS

In addition to main language French or German, all pupils choose **two** subjects from the following **six** groups of subjects:

- Latin, or Classical Civilisation
- starter Ancient Greek, starter German or starter French
- starter Spanish
- starter Mandarin Chinese
- Music
- Drama

We must reserve the right to abandon a subject if very few pupils opt for it. Similarly we may need to limit the number of boys who may join a course, due to constraints of staffing or facilities.

NOTES ON OPTIONAL SUBJECTS

A pupil may follow optional subjects in the third year with the intention of altering them for GCSE if they are not ideal. However, the GCSE courses in optional Mandarin Chinese, German, Greek, Spanish and French begin in the third year. At the end of the third year your son could elect to give up any of these subjects, but he will be unable to start any of them from scratch. The other optional subjects offered this year - Classical Civilisation, Music, and Drama - can be entered in the fourth year by those who did not pursue them in the third year. In the case of some subjects, however, boys who have not already demonstrated some talent in these areas will be discouraged.

CLASSICS

Classical languages are valuable subjects to study in the Middle School, since they are held in high regard as superb intellectual disciplines. Many of those who study Classics in the Sixth Form go on to read other subjects – law, theology, politics, sciences – at university, for all of which the Classics make excellent preparation. Many choose to study Classics at Oxford, Cambridge or elsewhere, finding themselves subsequently in demand from employers in many fields (law and finance, for example) who recognise and value the range of skills possessed by Classicists.

Two Classical languages are offered in the Middle School, as well as Classical Civilisation.

Latin

A GCSE in Latin is a useful and respected qualification that complements a wide range of subjects, be they arts or sciences. The Middle School Latin course is demanding but progressive, requiring clarity of thought and an understanding of how languages operate. Latin is an inflected language (its meaning is conveyed by variations in word endings), and thus those who take their modern languages seriously often find Latin immensely helpful.

In the third year we use the best features of the recently modernised Cambridge Latin Course, as well as adding in our own material and using methods familiar to those taught their Latin at preparatory schools. The basic grammar is thoroughly explained and learned throughout the year.

The emphasis at GCSE and A level is on reading and appreciating original literature, and the Third Year course aims to prepare pupils for this. The literature is studied in its historical context, with emphasis on Roman cultural and social material.

Greek

Much of what has been said about Latin applies equally to Greek, except that Greek, as the rarer qualification, is even more respected than Latin.

Greek, the language of some of the greatest literature ever written (including the New Testament), is of profound importance in appreciating modern philosophy and literature. Many words are similar to those of Latin, and have found their way into English, but the most obvious point of divergence is that Classical Greek uses a different alphabet.

We find that pupils rapidly get to grips with the new alphabet, and that this does not prove a major stumbling block. We use the new JACT Greek textbook. We supplement this with our own material where necessary, particularly, on the culture and society of ancient Greece, which we consider it important for the pupils to learn alongside the language.

Pupils are welcome to choose Greek for the third year to see whether they like it; there is no compulsion to carry it on into the Fourth Year, but even a year of Greek can enrich the rest of your life.

Classical Civilisation

“Class. Civ.” involves the study of Greek and Roman culture and literature (in translation). The Third Year course is based around material omitted from the GCSE course proper, and provides an interesting and varied exposure to the ancient world. No knowledge of Greek or Latin is assumed or required, but an interest in the ancient world and a preparedness to do some serious thinking about timeless issues of importance are expected.

CB

MODERN LANGUAGES

Starter courses in MANDARIN CHINESE, GERMAN, SPANISH and FRENCH

The ability to understand, speak and write foreign languages is a skill valued by universities and employers alike, and there are an increasing number of university courses containing a modern language module. Further, the study of a modern language provides a rigorous, academic training for the specialist and non-specialist linguist alike.

We therefore encourage boys to extend their linguistic skills by opting for a second and possibly third modern language. They can choose one or two languages from Mandarin Chinese, French, German and Spanish. No previous knowledge is assumed and all can lead to GCSE at the end of the fifth year. This pattern of learning a second language in three years has been followed for several years and results have always been good.

All boys in the second year will already have received some exposure to the option languages on offer, to help them in their choice. Experience shows that learning a second language is supported by the skills already acquired through learning the first.

We attach great importance to ensuring that the boys learn to communicate in the language, as well as encouraging them to understand its grammatical structure. Each course also offers insights into the culture of the countries where it is spoken, and there is a well-established programme of exchanges to France, Germany and Spain and an annual trip to China.

A large number of boys continue with their option language in the fourth and fifth years and many continue successfully to A level and beyond. However, opting for additional languages now does not commit a boy to a GCSE course. At the end of one year he will have been given a glimpse of another culture and language, which he may well wish to return to in later life.

Further questions about Modern Languages may be addressed to the Head of Modern Languages, Mrs Jayne Jennings (01235 849086), jayne.jennings@abingdon.org.uk

JJ

MUSIC

This course is designed to provide opportunities for boys to study music in greater depth, both from a theoretical and a practical standpoint. All boys who take this option will be practising musicians of a minimum grade 3 standard on one instrument. The GCSE course will begin in the fourth year, but the third year course will provide useful background experience.

The course will include listening to a wide range of music and subsequent discussion, some useful work on music theory, and a grounding in compositional techniques, together with a practical performing element in the classroom, particularly in ensemble work.

Good GCSE candidates will not be disadvantaged by entering the subject in the fourth year. Exceptionally strong musicians have sometimes entered the course in the fifth year, having taken a GCSE in one of the other optional subjects in the fourth year.

MAS

DRAMA

This one-year course acts as an introduction to Drama and Theatre Studies for some, or as an extension of the work begun in the Lower School for others. It combines practical and analytical work, and serves as a useful, but not compulsory, introduction to the two-year GCSE course in the fourth and fifth years. Boys taught in three sets, each receiving four periods of tuition a week. The third year course shadows many aspects of AQA's Performing Arts GCSE course in which the aim is to combine series of workshops on specific performing skills (for example, effective use of the voice; expressive movement and choreography; acting; use of lighting and sound equipment; devising a piece of theatre etc) with a number of performance briefs, in which students work together to create short presentations for a range of audiences and contexts (for example, a campaigning piece about climate change for an Open Day audience of parents in the drama studio). At all stages, students learn to evaluate their own and others' work, and to assess their skill levels more objectively. The course also involves on average one visit each term to a live theatre production, usually during the evening.

A fundamental requirement is a willingness to take part in practical and group work, which demands co-operation, tolerance and a readiness to share in the expression and shaping of ideas. As most of the work involves performing to others in class, it may not suit those with a particularly retiring nature.

By the end of the course, boys will have gained insights into the ways language, gesture, vocal expression and movement combine to create meaning and communicate it to others. In so doing, we hope they will have become more confident, and developed a better understanding of themselves and others.

JHT

Yours sincerely,

Dr Peter Willis – Director of Studies

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