

# ABINGDON SCHOOL'S PIONEERING FIRST LADY

With a head for business and a passion for education, Felicity Lusk has defied 750 years of tradition to become the first female head of Abingdon School - indeed the first female head of any boys' public boarding school. Erica Conlan finds out more about the charismatic Miss Lusk, her vision for the school and her take on her ground breaking appointment.

Back in November 2009, Felicity Lusk was creating quite a storm, attracting a frenzy of press interest due to the view that she had taken on a male dominated establishment and emerged victorious, to secure her appointment as head of one of the most respected boys' schools in Oxfordshire. Taking up the reins in September 2010, B4 wondered how she was settling in.

"Well, I think it has gone very well. I've settled in very quickly but then I've had a fantastic amount of support. This is a very affectionate community. It's predominantly male but I find it's very straightforward. I love working with all my male colleagues and we have a good number of women, so I don't see it as a male/female situation at all."

Whilst Miss Lusk may not see it as a 'male/female situation,' she is probably in the minority. Featuring on Woman's Hour and with headlines in the national newspapers, her achievements should not be underestimated.

A feisty New Zealander, Miss Lusk moved to this country over 20 years ago, joining Hasmore High School, London, initially as Director of Music before becoming Deputy Headteacher. In 1997 she was appointed Head of Oxford High School and in her 13 years as Head gained an enviable reputation for advancing the cause of academic excellence whilst encouraging each pupil in their personal development.

So there is little doubt that the governors of Abingdon School were more than impressed with her credentials when they made their ground breaking appointment. 'But should they have been worried that her previous experience had been in co-ed and girls' schools?

"I am very committed to single sex education for both boys and girls. I don't go around saying 'you must educate your child in a single sex school,' because it doesn't work for everybody. You've got to get each child into the right place for them. It's about getting the match right between school and child. It's a chemistry; it's a really important relationship and not all the children in one family will come to the same school.

"I have ruled out the co-ed route for the time being. I carried out a big consultation when I arrived here and I was thrilled with the return. Something like 600 boys wrote to me as well as a huge numbers of parents and staff and it was very clear to me that there was just no desire to go co-ed at all. It's a school that is very comfortable with itself."

Comfortable but not complacent. Felicity Lusk has great plans for the school's future. "I am driven by what I've always been driven by, which is the drive for excellence. That's always been my hallmark and that hasn't changed at all. So in terms of where I am taking the school now, this is a fantastically good school. We have just had a glowing school inspection but it doesn't mean we can just sit back. I'm using it very much as a platform to go on to what is coming next.

"The first thing we've done is restructure the week. It may seem that we have come to that very quickly but it is the end of a consultation lasting some years. Saturday lessons have gone as a natural consequence. We've started with the best structure for the Abingdon week, which I think is very exciting; 55 minute lessons, which are a good length and with room for a balance between academic studies and what we call 'the other half,' with an extended lunchtime allowing for more exercise. It's a long school day - we finish at 5:20pm - but with a good division of work. I think

standards will rise even further as a direct result."

We are also looking towards a very exciting building programme although it's early days. Science, as a hugely popular subject, ever expands and I'd like to see colleagues, senior staff and reception at the heart of the School, with easy access to the boys.

The need to be physically positioned at the centre of the school accords with Felicity Lusk's belief that, at the heart of her work, are "the casual communications you have, the little conversations just catching up with somebody, whether it's a colleague or a student. You can have dozens of those a day if you're in the central part of the school."

Perhaps here is a flavour of the unique feminine touch Felicity brings to the post. "I think, because I am a mother, I find that I enjoy communicating with all young people and hearing what they have got to say. I appreciate their wit and I have an innate understanding of the difficulties of adolescence. I often feel this is a generation under stress, facing a demanding exam system that often seems to test the ability to sit a huge number of exams! I see education as a much wider holistic process. Then there's the whole body image thing, whether you are a boy or a girl. There's a fantastic anxiety about how a young person looks or how they fit into a peer group."

So, on taking up her new role, has Felicity Lusk listened to the advice of her son to try to 'get alongside the boys'? Her efforts to understand their needs and to open up the lines of communication certainly seem to be working. And has she managed to follow his other bit of advice - to try not to embarrass herself? "I think I've probably done that several times..."

[www.abingdon.org.uk](http://www.abingdon.org.uk)



"I am driven by what I've always been driven by, which is **the drive for excellence. That's always been my hallmark and that hasn't changed at all**"

