

4 March 2016

Dear Parents/Carers

As you will be aware, we intend to introduce a new system of tutoring to the school in September, which is known as 'vertical tutoring' (VT). The key focus of VT is to develop high-quality learning relationships that bring out the best in all who are engaged in the learning process. This includes all students, all parents/carers, and all staff.

We have received professional advice and spoken to schools that have adopted VT. We are now informing and providing more detail to all the key stakeholders. 230 staff, teaching and support staff, were trained on Friday 12 February and I delivered assemblies to Years 7 – 11 last week. There will be further training for staff and older students in the summer term.

Moving to a VT system is a significant change and is not without its challenges. We want parents/carers to feel informed and have an opportunity to comment. To this end, an information evening for parents/carers will be held on Wednesday 13 April at 7pm. If you plan to attend, would you please use the Parents'/Carers' Evening Booking system to sign up. This will allow us to monitor interest and put on more than one session if the demand is high.

In the pages attached, I set out what a change to VT will mean and the reasons for this change. This is arranged under three headings:

**So, what is Vertical Tutoring?**

**Why change?**

**How will parent partnership be improved?**

It is our intention to be advised by research, to seek out best practice, and to build the supportive learning community that the students deserve and need. This is one that all of us can be proud of and one to which all of us, including our students and yourselves, can make a real contribution.

We are beginning to populate a Vertical Tutoring section on the website which will give information in a variety of formats. The PowerPoint used in all the assemblies last week has been placed there for your information.

All change is difficult and the best change is sometimes counter-intuitive. Hearts and minds have to be won; courage is needed to be different. However, without substantive change to the way we manage our school, it can never become the place of intrinsic learning that our students need it to be, and we can never be the people that you and our students expect and want us to be. Most of us came into teaching to teach the subject we love and to make a difference to the lives of the students you allow us to guide. We believe that VT will enable us to do this better.

I hope you will be willing to learn more about VT and support the school in this important matter. Feel free to contact me. Your views and support are always important to us.

Yours faithfully

Mrs R Kelly  
Deputy Headteacher

## So, what is Vertical Tutoring?

The change to VT will see a significant reduction in the size of our tutor groups, which means that a large number of staff employed by the school in a professional capacity, teachers and support staff, will be involved in tutoring. In turn, the new tutor groups will have two tutors, one of whom will take the lead, which is a significant investment in higher-quality learning relationships.

The key change, however, involves the composition of the tutor groups. Each new tutor group will be populated by students from Years 7 -11, creating a balance of age, gender, ability, ethnicity, and behaviour so that all groups share a similar profile. Tutor groups will be smaller, on average four students from each year group, so tutor groups of 20. The idea is to form balanced groups and balanced houses. Twelve tutor groups in each house. Friendship is not a first consideration, therefore, as this is not social time. Each tutor group would then be allocated to one of five houses, thus creating schools within schools. This is sometimes called a *nested system*, and will help to ensure that every child is known and valued as an individual even better than they are now.

## Why change?

No matter how tutor time is arranged and organised, and no matter how skilled the tutor, the current tutor arrangements fall short of what is needed to support the key areas on which successful learning and teaching depend. Despite our best intentions, there are too many 'invisible' children, many of whom go through the system doing the right things day in and day out and not having at least one adult in the school who knows them well. Learning relationships between people (student, parents/carers and tutors) are the basis for teaching and learning capability and successful outcomes. Tutors are the key to learning **as a whole school process**. The teacher and the learner depend on the tutor as the key to learning.

I have been overwhelmed by the positive feedback from the training day, despite a great deal of scepticism about 'change for change sake' (at the start of the day). Of the 230 staff who attended, 83% believe that VT is right for Notley High School & Braintree Sixth Form at this time (with 17% unsure). Our research shows that a VT culture meets a number of critical learning needs that are not only of benefit to all, but are ones that same-age systems can only aspire to.

In particular, the introduction of VT will enable our school to:

1. Significantly improve parent partnership and parent involvement in the learning process.
2. Provide better opportunities for all students to develop as leaders and mentors.
3. Establish stronger, lasting, and more substantive learning relationships between students, yourselves and the school.
4. Intervene rapidly and effectively when things go wrong or when there are concerns.
5. Develop better learning dispositions and attitudes that research advises and we all know, are critical to increasing learning intelligence.
6. Ensure a significant reduction in bullying through the new mentoring and in-group loyalty structures.
7. Keep aspirations high by working more closely with students and parents/carers to improve individual and group support.
8. Change the way assessment for learning works so that it better supports learning and teaching.
9. Improve information flow between home and school - so vital to learning and to successful outcomes.

Our research shows that VT is the best and most cost-effective means of ensuring that we deliver on our promises as a school; it will enable us to do our best for all students and to deliver the values we hold dear. VT will also provide a better means of ensuring that every student is recognised, known, and supported. Personal tutors will not only see every child every day, but care passionately about them as young people and as learners. We are aiming to build a new and better communications, assessment, and support system around this key learning relationship.

But this is not the only learning relationship that VT enhances. It is also important to us that parents/carers benefit by having a personal but enhanced contact with tutors who not only know each child well, but who can listen to your concerns and ideas. VT will ensure that our partnership with you works effectively.

Students will be in tutor time for about 20 minutes each day; there will not be formal teaching in this time. The rest of the school day, evenings, weekends, and social networking time is more than sufficient for students to maintain their current friendships. The intention is that having students of different ages trained in leadership and mentoring and who are able to assist, guide, and support others through the example they set and the empathy they show, will provide benefits for all students.

We expect the change to VT to make a significant impact on every child's self-esteem, confidence, to the quality of teaching and learning and support that the school offers. We want all children to be the kind of leaders that the school needs them to be, that we know they can be, and that they know they have to be in the world beyond school.

Tutors will play a vital role in this process. They will be there to support mixed-age tutoring and mentoring in ways that benefit all students. They will also act as your child's personal mentor, guide, and advocate throughout each student's career at school.

### **How will parent/carer partnership be improved?**

Despite the increased complexity of education today, we feel that current arrangements for meeting parents/carers and communicating with you are not sufficient to develop working relationships or to enable effective support of all students' learning. We will be using the VT system to build systematic parent/carer partnership, the school's working relationship with you.

We are aware that research shows that families and peer groups exert a powerful influence on student outcomes. This is why as a school we need to work more closely with you than has ever been the case and why we must ensure that students are in groups designed to bring out the best in them. A vertical system with its mixed-age tutor groups, will allow us to develop and enhance the many learning relationships on which achievement depends and character best develops.

The key to this change rests in a number of areas but especially with the role of the tutors and their impact in working with their new mixed-age tutor groups. We are placing the tutor at the heart of the school and all staff will be expected to play their part, which will include members of the senior leadership team being tutors.

Information home will also change. The progress updates prior to the academic tutorial will be enhanced to include written strategies for improvement that all parties can understand, use, and discuss. Full reports will also recognise the many other talents each child has and which are deserving of attention.

It is our further intention that full reports on students and other data will be issued at critical times in the student's learning cycle. At these critical learning times, parents/carers and students will be invited by their child's personal tutors to take part in an in-depth *academic tutorial*. These occasions will enable a more complete overview and assessment to be made with regard to progress in learning besides providing a means of identifying any further support needed. It is envisaged that such a key meeting will last for 30 - 40 minutes and because of its importance, will take place within the span of a specific week or two-week period, at a time convenient to both parents/carers and staff. These academic tutorial periods will be identified on the calendar from the start of the year. Subject evenings will remain in addition in Key Stage 4.