



Kieran McGrane - Headteacher

The Crescent Callerton Lane Ponteland Newcastle upon Tyne NE20 9EG
Tel: 01661 824711 E-mail: phs@ponthigh.org.uk Website: www.ponthigh.org.uk Twitter: @PontHigh

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Dear candidate

On a crisp, sparkling winter's morning, almost three years ago to this very day, I arrived at the reception of Ponteland High School for my interview for Raising Achievement Leader in English. The main school building was a quintessential example of the ubiquitous style of institutionalised functionalism that the 1970s had a lot to answer for, and now almost 50 years after it had been built, it looked decidedly shabby. Nevertheless, despite its slightly unpromising appearance, I was incredibly excited about the prospect of this job. 'Ponteland High School' had always been an important stitch in the fabric of my family's tapestry; in the late 70s my parents, both newly qualified teachers, met whilst working together in the English department. Also, 2019 clearly marked the beginning of exciting times ahead for Ponteland High School; the school was converting to an Academy, entering a Trust with local primary schools and in September would be welcoming for the first time ever, Year 7 and 8 students to become a full secondary school. On top of all of this, in the summer of 2020 the school was joining with Ponteland Primary School and Ponteland Leisure Centre and moving to a brand new, state of the art £43m leisure and learning campus.

It was for all of these reasons that I walked rather nervously into the school's reception, barely daring to hope that I could be part of Ponteland High School at this exciting and transformative time. However, by the end of an exhausting and relentless day of formal interviews, student panel and lesson observations, as I drove home anxiously to await a decision, there was something else that was now fuelling my wish to be a part of this school. 'Relationships', I was to discover later, is at the heart of the teaching model at Ponteland High School and this was something that was evident everywhere I went during that interview day. The cheery welcome of the office staff, the excited bustle and calm purposefulness of the corridors at lesson changeover, the laughter and companionship of the English department at breaktime, the almost visible pride and collegiality of the students I talked to, the integrity of the headteacher's values when he talked about a school being somewhere that children should feel happy, safe and successful. I left Ponteland High School that day intoxicated with the hope that I could work somewhere that so clearly reflected everything I believed was important in education.

36 months, one global pandemic, one move to a new school site and three lockdowns later, I still could not be happier to have been offered a job at Ponteland High School. It certainly has not been the start I anticipated and to say these past two years have been a challenge for the education system is to understate the case considerably. I have felt so proud to work in a profession and at a school where there is seemingly no 'U-turn' too last minute, no revision of national measures too erratic, and no media article too denigrating to undermine the unwavering belief within all school staff that we must always try



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our hardest to ensure that even during the most testing of times, students are happy, safe and successful.

Amidst these challenges, the move to the new school site has been a kind of panacea; the building is so impressive that I let out an audible gasp the first time I went inside and it has been wonderful to see the excitement and pride felt by both staff and students to be working and learning in such a magnificent environment. Furthermore, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to work alongside the Ponteland English Department who immediately made me feel integrated and supported and who have continued to impress me during these difficult years with their unrelenting commitment, unfailing positivity and continued professionalism.

I think it is the role of departmental leaders to monitor the morale of staff and ensure that the pressures of working within a functional and often reductive exam system do not cause them to lose their passion and enthusiasm for the teaching of the subject. The subject of English has the potential to equip young people with crucial life skills and, as teachers, we want to encourage students to question, to challenge, to be critical yet empathetic, to see reading as an integral part of life and writing cogently as an expression of self. A crucial part of the role of Raising Achievement Coordinator, would be to ensure the well-being and enthusiasm of staff and students alike by reinforcing the idea that English is a 'live' entity; moral, life-changing and life-enhancing, a means through which human beings express powerful sentiments and not just an exercise that has to be undertaken to fulfil examination strictures.

Rachel Clarke
Raising Achievement Leader (English)