

ROBERT OWEN ACADEMY

View from the bridge – 01 May 2017

Dear Parents, stakeholders and friends of Robert Owen Academy,

As we start our summer term 2017 we enter an exciting time in terms of our challenging journey which started in September 2013 in a redundant rural primary school, through to our life on the Blackfriars building site and to where we stand today in a purpose built environment in the middle of Hereford City. With effect from 1st May we will be led by our new Executive Principal, Paul Cordey and his recently appointed Senior Leadership Team of three Assistant Principals. Paul has inherited a strong teaching and support team to which he has made exciting additional appointments. There will be more about Paul in other website postings but please note that Paul brings to our Robert Owen Academy community a wealth of experience in running his own business, working in further education as a senior leader as well as working across the country supporting colleges needing improvement. We now have a management and delivery team who will serve the Marches Sub region 14-19 students with quality provision, who will take our much valued Academy to new levels of success and who will build on the strong foundation laid by his predecessor, Andy Hubble.

Any new school opening faces ongoing challenges for at least the first five years of its life. Historically new schools have been run by local authorities with all the support and resources that this brings with it. In sharp contrast Free Schools open in an environment where they are in effect on their own, subject to external judgments at an early and vulnerable stage of their development as well as often operating in a climate where the local authority and other schools can be hostile. We have experienced many, if not most, of these external pressures and the local press and some people on social media have often been keen to broadcast our assumed failures whilst blind siding the problems in other schools. We anticipated that this would happen and we have our theories as to what has driven this. In turn we have been enormously supported and encouraged by the good will from many of our local schools.

We wrote to you in mid-February to outline the situation in respect of the threat of closure facing the Academy. Candidly we have lived with this threat of closure since Day 1 in September 2013. There is a different regime for the management of Free Schools and closure is never far away for Free Schools and University Technical Colleges (UTC's) as many of you will be aware. The then Secretary of State in the last Parliament set up Free Schools to be experimental, to bring about change and to offer additional choice in the system. So there was never going to be for us a cosy existence and we certainly didn't expect one.

Since our letter to you in February we have worked tirelessly to put our case forward not only to the Regional Schools Commissioner but also to the Under Parliamentary Secretary of State for Schools, Lord Nash. We have been strongly supported in these efforts by our MP and long-time supporter Bill Wiggin who has done everything in his power to ensure that the Academy gets a fair and balanced hearing in government and civil service circles.

We are pleased to say that these efforts have not gone unnoticed or indeed unrewarded. We agreed and submitted a solid business plan that demonstrates what we will do over the next two years to build student numbers and continue to improve our unique vocational education model. That plan, we have been assured, is receiving serious consideration. At the same time we continue to challenge the Ofsted inspection both in terms of its fairness to accurately reflect what we have achieved and in its conclusion. However, we recognise the current culture which says the 'referee is always right'

so we haven't been surprised to date to have received less than satisfactory answers from Ofsted as to why we had two full inspections in twelve days of each other with completely contrasting results.

It is fair to say that there is much disquiet nationally about Ofsted so we are not alone in this matter and serious questions are being asked in respect of the issues that we ourselves have faced as a result of the clearly discredited Ofsted approach.

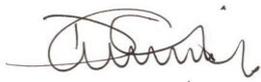
In addition we have received strong words of encouragement from our partner schools and many parents have taken the time to let us know of their support and strong desire to see the Academy grow and flourish as part of the wider schools landscape. This, together with the enormous support from our local business community, has really kept us fired up and moving forward. These are really positive signs, and we should all take encouragement that we are in a strong position and have made a very compelling case with some very high level support for the Academy. The longer we are in business the more our Marches Sub region communities are coming to understand the valuable role that a 14-19 technical and vocational school can provide for students with specific needs and aspirations.

We are frustrated though to have to tell you that, as from day 1, we have not as yet received positive commitments to our future as part of the education and training landscape. Perhaps we will never receive these and living with uncertainty is just part of life in the twenty first century. Our business partners would certainly say that to us. All we can tell you is that we have more cause for optimism than at any time over the past 6 months and we have a belief that the future is now very much in our hands and the support that you give us. The announcement on the 18th April of a snap General Election on 8th June has effectively shut down the government and civil service apparatus and we are not likely to hear anything until the new Government has been formed after the General Election and Ministers have been appointed and so on.

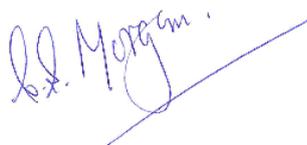
We are confident that we have a strong case and we have cause for optimism about our future. We sincerely hope to bring you the anticipated good news as soon as possible. What we can tell you is that should you sign up your child as a student for September 2017 s/he will have a quality provision and a unique preparation for life which will launch them into the adult world. Over 120 students who have had this experience can testify to this. Meanwhile you have our assurance that we continue with the day to day running of the Academy in the best interests of our present students as they approach an important milestone in the academic curriculum.

Please spread the positive message and help us to recruit a healthy number of students for a September 2017 start. If you would like to help with recruitment and publicity or in any other way please email Paul Cordey (paul.cordey@roacademy.org) or telephone Reception on 01432 513120.

With best wishes



Deborah Gittoes
Chair of Governing Body



Christopher Morgan
Chair of the Robert Owen Academies Trust