

# THE SUNDAY TIMES SCHOOLS GUIDE

## Northern Ireland State Secondary School of the Year



### **Strathearn School**

**By Sue Leonard**

Principal David Manning has worked at Strathearn School since 1989 but is still finding his way around the refurbished teaching block. Boasting 23 classrooms and eight science labs, it opened earlier this month, the first phase of a £16m rebuilding programme.

The redevelopment allows the school to bring departments together and provide more modern facilities for the 770 pupils and has come after a 14 year wait. Not that this or 18 months (so far) of construction work has had any detrimental effect on the academic performance of this impressive Belfast voluntary girls' grammar school, one of Northern Ireland's top performers.

Strathearn produced an outstanding performance in our leagues table this year, moving 36 places from 97<sup>th</sup> in the UK in 2011 to 62<sup>st</sup> on the strength of very strong A-level results. This summer the school's best ever exam results saw 81.6% of A-level entries gain A\* - B grades while 63.5% of GCSE papers achieved an A\* or A.

Strathearn School, Our Northern Ireland State Secondary School of the Year, now ranks third in the province behind Lumen Christi College and Friend's School, Lisburn, both previous winners of our award. It was 10<sup>th</sup> last year.

“Schools are more than buildings” says Mr Manning, whose “outstanding leadership” was praised in a glowing report by school inspectors. “It is about the atmosphere in the school. The relationship between the school and pupils is at the heart of the school”.

The quality of teaching, the commitment and dedication of teachers and the friendliness of the place were among the many strengths noted by inspectors on their visit in 2010. Small classes, a very low staff turnover and high expectations are also key to high attainment levels, adds Mr Manning, who took the helm 15 years ago after an eight-year stint as head of maths, becoming only the fifth principal since Strathearn opened in 1929, and the first male to lead the school.

He can, though, personally vouch for the quality of the education. “My three daughters came through here. They loved it”, says Mr Manning, whose wife is also a past pupil. “It is a school that really cares and that brings out the best in everyone. Our pupils are very hard-working and highly motivated. There is a great sense of success”.

Girls are selected on the basis of their results in the entrance test and each year 175 youngsters vie for 110 places in the first year, with the unlucky ones joining a waiting list. University is the next destination for the vast majority of pupils, including Cambridge, the choice for former pupils Lucy Caldwell, the leading Northern Irish novelist and playwright, and Margaret Mountford, best known for her appearances on *The Apprentice*.

But Cambridge or Oxford isn't the be-all and end-all, according to Mr Manning. “It would not be our philosophy to say that is the pinnacle”, he says. “We would say go where is best for you”.

Strathearn is not short of role models, with alumnae such as the television presenter Andrea Catherwood and the swimmer Melanie Nocher, who completed at the Olympic Games in the summer along with current A-level student Sycerika McMahon, a high achiever in and out of the water.

The 17-year-old, who wants to study law, already has six A\* and three As at GCSE and she is predicted to get straight As at A-level. “Girls who do best academically are heavily involved in their sport, music or drama”, says Mr Manning. “We are not an exam factory. That would be abhorrent to us”.

Indeed, there are plenty of opportunities for girls to discover talents outside the classroom, from drama and creative writing to debating, the chamber choir and a wide variety of sports such as hockey, badminton, gymnastics, football and athletics, with pupils representing the school at local, regional, national and international level.

Strathearn, which boasts impressive on-site sports facilities in its 18-acre grounds, including a large sports hall, a fitness suite and three outdoor hockey pitches, will also have a new assembly hall, library and information and communications technology (ICT) suite by 2014.

The multimillion-pound investment in the estate is already making a difference to day-to-day school life, from the new interactive whiteboards in every classroom to the pupils having less need to traipse across the grounds now that the school is more compact.

All this, though, is icing on the cake for Mr Manning. “I recently had a letter from a past pupil who said she did not realise how well known the name of Strathearn was” he says. “It opened up doors for her. That good reputation is something we work hard to maintain. It is the girls who are the advert for the school. It is their success”.