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**Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by The Rochester Grammar School for the purpose of re-accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.**

**Evidence base**

The criteria for re-accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School starts from the assumption that all the criteria for the first level of accreditation by Thinking Schools@Exeter continue to be met within the ongoing practices of the community. The second level of evaluation further assumes that the original criteria for recognition as a 'Thinking School' have now become so embedded that staff and students have developed a deeper understanding of the principles of cognitive education and its impact on both their individual learning and its potential contribution to society. Much of the evidence referenced in this report reflects the significant and sustained progress the school has made in its on-going journey as a thinking and learning community and follows on from the previous accreditations as a level 1 and level 2 Thinking School.

The focus for this second level of evaluation turns towards the presentation of evidence as to how the school has moved forward in seeking to achieve those aims. Evidence has been sought on teaching (and support) staff's developing skills as practitioners; their impact on the overall development of the students beyond their technical skills in the use of the tools; and their continuing impact on the community of the whole school and beyond. Five key areas for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School have been assessed: Dissemination of Practice; Evaluative Research; Professional Development; Differentiation; and Whole School Assessment.

The University of Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School from The Rochester Grammar School (RGS) in the form of a Reflective Proforma with evidence links, extensively illustrating the continuing work the school is undertaking as a level 1 Thinking School together with how it has continued to move forward as a level 2 Thinking School. School evidence includes students' work, examples of displays and posters, relevant sections of the school improvement plan, Principal reports, photographs, newsletters, project plans, video evidence, Drive Team documentation (Adult and Student Drive Teams), action plans, meetings minutes, learning walks observations, other data. From the evidence provided, it is clear that the school exceeds the Level 1 Thinking School criteria, and the focus of this report will be on continued development of the school on the basis of the level 2 criteria.

### **Starting point: the school context**

RGS is a popular and successful average sized secondary school, and a lead part of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT).

The school has a long history of Thinking School development and accreditation and has been at the core of the Thinking School movement for many years.<sup>1</sup> The school has sustained its Thinking School development superbly and has gone from strength to strength by continually refreshing its focus and building progressively on its initiatives. RGS is a school where every individual is encouraged to achieve excellence and this is captured well in its ethos statements: 'Excellence for All', 'Raising Aspirations', 'Delivering Excellence', and 'Transforming Life Chances'. The inclusive focus on the English and International Baccalaureate together with additional accolades such as the 'Rights Respecting School' award has secured an educational provision that serves the wider needs of all students. RGS is rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted and is clearly a school that prides itself in achieving and maintaining the highest educational standards. In addition, the school has an excellent reputation for supporting students through its inclusive pastoral system together with an outstanding extra-curricular offering. These achievements reflect the school's drive for

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<sup>1</sup> School's website

sustained holistic development, together with an unwavering commitment to lifelong learning for all.<sup>2</sup>

The school's cognitive education development journey has moved forward unswervingly since its previous accreditation. Subsequently, a clear thread of training has been in place capturing the seven TSAT Principles of Teaching and Learning: Subject Knowledge, Explanations Questioning, Feedback to Feedforward, Modelling, Metacognition and Metamemory. These elements have a firm foundation in robust research findings. Within this, Thinking Hats, Thinking Maps, Habits of Mind, CoRT Tools and Thinker's Keys are used to further operationalise the school's Thinking School vision.<sup>3</sup>

The school's aims and ethos have a clear focus on excellence for all students. What sets RGS aside from many schools, is its emphasis on *how* this is achieved. With reference to this, the school seeks to make learning active by developing children as creative, adaptable, and resilient thinkers so that they become committed lifelong learners.<sup>4</sup> RGS has embedded thinking and meta-cognitive approaches in all aspects of school life in order to ensure that its aims and ethos are a reality.<sup>5</sup>

### **Dissemination of practice**

For this area of accreditation, we assess the way in which the school can demonstrate evidence of sharing their Thinking Schools practice and experiences across subject areas with others. There is extensive evidence of sharing practice within the school, across subjects and teams, with all sections of staff participating in formal and informal staff training events and programmes. Of particular note is the full inclusion of support staff in training activities. Using the TSAT Thinking Pathways model as a framework, there is ample evidence of effective dissemination of tools, but also a focus on differentiation. The Thinking School Lead coordinates a wealth of training and support. Cross Trust CPD has involved the Drive Team delivering training sessions on Thinking Tools and metacognitive strategies. The innovative

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Digital evidence

<sup>4</sup> School's website and digital evidence

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

Parents Forum has had a significant impact in terms of engaging parents in the Thinking School developments and has added much to the excellent collaborative approach of RGS. Events such as the annual 'World Thinking Day' further extend the reach of RGS's influence and elements such as developing new Thinking Tools illustrate the commitment of the school to drive and extend beyond established practice. All new staff receive training in theory, pedagogy, and practical approaches relating to Thinking. There is an extensive and innovative range of resources and structures to further support the dissemination of Thinking School approaches and students are pivotal to disseminating best practice, particularly the Student Thinking Team. The 'Zoom in Zoom Out' approach is of particular note as a mechanism for enabling the scaffolding of new principles with existing ones.

More widely, there is evidence of innovative approaches being disseminated to local cluster and feeder schools and more widely. This has enabled many schools to navigate their way through the Thinking Schools journey. RGS has fully embraced the use of technology and social media as a key element in the continued focus on sharing practice. The emphasis placed on 'Professional Growth' has influenced the school's dissemination direction. Regionally, RGS takes the lead in delivering workshops to include Digital Training, Equality and Diversity, Metamemory, Modelling, securing the Curriculum, Stretch and Challenge, and Use of Analogies. Further, Curriculum Leader Trust Teams provide a mechanism for ideas and resources to be shared on a large scale.

Nationally, RGS has reached out to support schools outside the locality such as in Devon. The increasing use of Microsoft Teams has allowed RGS to extend this national influence. Internationally, RGS hosts regular visits from colleagues in other countries and as such has strong connections with international schools. The Kobe High School in Japan is a good example of this.

The school has also been involved in conference presentations such as the TSAT National Conference and publication contributions include academic forums, TES, and other media. There is a clear and effective programme of dissemination across the whole multi-academy

trust, the Thinking Schools network, regionally, nationally, and internationally which includes contributions to conferences and publications.<sup>6</sup>

### **Evaluative research**

This area of evaluation is particularly concerned with the ways in which staff are seeking evidence of the positive impact and outcomes of the Thinking Schools approach and how this evidence is used to drive whole school learning and improvement. Based on the evidence of Level 1 and level 2 criteria, there is a continuing and wide-ranging programme of evaluation within the school. This includes specific consideration of the process and impact of initiatives on the learning and development of students. RGS utilises a range of data collection tools. The proactive involvement of the Student Voice in this respect ensures that research has an inductive as well as deductive dimension. MALS and PASS inventories are used formatively to inform and evaluate the impact of research-based interventions. The school has moved away from performance management towards a model of Professional Growth. This ethos has encouraged staff to engage with research as a fundamental basis for teaching. This has given rise to a range of Action Research projects both formal (accredited) and informal ('in-house'). Research programmes include NPQML, NPQSL, NPQH, C-Teach, Masters and the highly innovative Trust designed 'Think Ahead' programme.

Research at RGS has clear, succinct parameters outlining what is being studied, who is being studied, together with associated timeframe. This is an excellent example of the school's commitment to delivering practitioner research excellence. Of particular note is the way the school promotes the engagement of staff in reading educational publications. The 'Reading Club' led by the Thinking Team is an excellent example of this. Evidence of the school's 'Research in Action' can be found in high profile publications such as the TES. Findings from research have directly influenced the work of the RGS Drive Team and staff across the school, and the cycle of Lesson Study feeds into the process well. The inclusion of high-quality qualitative elements is particularly innovative. Again, the student voice is pivotal and the innovative 'Be Your Best Self' (BYBS) Journal is a good example of this. Evidence is presented that demonstrates the ongoing collection of data related to Thinking Skills across the school,

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<sup>6</sup> Reflective proforma and digital evidence

in particular with respect to how well Thinking Skills are embedded within the school system and what the impact is on students and staff. It is clear that there are effective strategies in place across subject areas that encourage and support evaluation and reflective practice of learning and teaching approaches and impact.<sup>7</sup>

The Adult Thinking Drive Team and Student Thinking Drive Team provide a skilful and rich representation of expertise from across the school so that new ideas for teaching and learning are explored, researched and, if successful, fed back to the wider staff body. Furthermore, Thinking Skills and dispositional development are part of ongoing evaluations of student progress, providing further evidence of the ongoing evaluation of Thinking Skills approaches throughout the school. It is important to note in this respect, that students are routinely consulted about what the Thinking Tools mean to them. Another important factor within the continuous evaluation of the outcomes of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking, is the evidence of the development of student resilience and self-reflection, as well as a sense of shared responsibility towards one another, as demonstrated through the BYBS Journals which forms an intrinsic part of the school's dispositional development strand. The focus on the development of the whole child is a particularly strong aspect of school life at RGS.<sup>8</sup>

### **Professional development**

Evidence of professional development concerns two key issues: technical, in the practical application of a range of thinking tools; and qualitative demonstrated by the quality of staff as mediators.

In terms of technical development, it is clear from the school development planning that new members of staff are routinely training in Thinking Skills. CPD has been effectively re-framed as 'Professional Growth' and the drive for application in lessons has a clear set of parameters. There is an excellent Trust Induction programme in place and ensures that professional development opportunities are consistent and well embedded in the culture of the entire trust. Examples of foci at RGS include a common language for learning, questioning and the

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<sup>7</sup> Reflective Proforma and digital evidence

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

development of thinking time. The introduction in 2019 of the Trust's Seven Principles of Teaching has been highly influential due to its clear and concise elements. These include:

- Subject Knowledge
- Explanations, Questioning and Responding
- Feedback too Feedforward
- Modelling
- Metacognition
- Meta-memory

Since 2019 this has evolved into a reactive process model based on contextual need and application. This is evidence of the school's commitment and appreciation of the need to consider the specific setting for educational developments. RGS is expert in the application of digital learning. The RGS Teaching and Learning Toolkit has a digital format providing models of best practice so that the quality of teaching and learning is optimised throughout the school. Retrieval Practice development has seen excellent impact and development and is embedded in practice across the school.

There is a highly effective lesson study cycle. The recent focus has been on Cornell notetaking. This has a research and impact emphasis so that practice is informed by robust evidence. Collaboration is firmly embedded throughout the school and 'Deep Dives' inform curricular developments with the Staff Voice and Student Voice driving this process. Judicious ongoing evaluative research builds individual strengths and areas for development into whole school planning and actions. The Drive Team has regular focussed meetings with clear development action points that further feed into CPD linked to priorities. RGS provides a range of innovative bespoke resources for staff in order to operationalise the priorities. These excellent resources are supplemented by modelled examples so staff can actually see how they might apply what they have learned in their own classrooms. Student feedback plays an intrinsic part on development planning and is used to triangulate reflections, plans and actions. Mentoring and Coaching are integral to the Professional Growth of all staff. The focus is on developing teachers as mediators of learning and CPD is clearly aligned to this by developing the skill and

craft of every teacher. This has allowed the school to focus not so much on the use of specific Thinking Tools, but to provide a strong background and rationale for Thinking across subject areas, which demonstrates an excellent understanding and awareness of Thinking as a pedagogic strategy throughout the school.

There is strong evidence of the continued focus of staff on the development of their own knowledge and understanding of Thinking and Thinking Skills approaches in general. Thinking Skills approaches are continually evaluated throughout the school and staff are routinely asked to reflect on their use of Thinking Tools. RGS supports the University of Kent's Masters Programme via input relating to their Thinking module. This again provides strong evidence that the use of Thinking Skills and the language around Thinking is strongly embedded within the school, the teaching practice and its overall Ethos, such that the school's developmental influence is far reaching. It is clear, from the evidence provided relating to staff induction, that new staff are immediately made aware of this ethos and practice. Importantly, staff are given the time and resources to train and to work with colleagues through cycles of lesson observations.<sup>9</sup>

### **Differentiation**

This area of accreditation includes the value of thinking tools in the education of specific individuals and groups. This includes a sensitivity to the individual needs of all the children in lessons, and a focus on developing autonomy and individuality in students' approaches to problem-solving. Through thorough and on-going dialogue with students, teachers are able to mediate learning such that learning is geared towards the needs of all students at an individual level, regardless of starting point or specific barriers to learning. As such, RGS has developed a unique culture of personalisation that goes beyond a 'broad-brush' approach to learning and teaching. The innovative development of project-based work has contributed greatly to this. Cross curricular projects in Key Stage 3 do much to develop key skills. In addition, the Thinking Projects extend this due to a focus on contextualised, personalised, and independent work. A variety of Thinking Tools are used adaptively, to suit the abilities of different students, for instance, through the engagement of pupils in taking responsibility for

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid

their own development as lifelong learners, skilfully achieved through mediated teaching. Progression is clearly mapped via The 7 Principles of Teaching and Learning and all students are encouraged to develop individuality and autonomy. Student support is also highly personalised and adds significant value to the educational provision at RGS. Resources are carefully differentiated in order to enable all children to access tasks and displays are used actively to promote discussion related to the identification of thinking processes. This means that Thinking Strategies underpin the personal learning targets and behavioural goals of all students. The Student Voice is a strong part of the learning culture of the school and means that teachers can identify what works best, for whom, under what circumstances, how and why.<sup>10</sup>

### **Whole School assessment**

This aspect of the accreditation relates to students' and teachers' reflections upon their own and others' performance via assessment procedures, as well as critical reflection on Thinking Tools. Peer and self-assessment are embedded in the culture of the school such that these qualities are nurtured and flourish. The formative use of MALS and PASS together with the BYBS Journal are illustrative of this particular element. These mechanisms are used very effectively and analysis of sub-groups is undertaken. Overall, this data indicates that students have a high level of satisfaction with school and also have high levels of confidence in learning. Where scores fall short, mentoring and interventions are implemented to secure the very best learning for all children. Curriculum developments such as Feedback to Feedforward are embedded in the work of the school and a range of assessment tools are used effectively. Self-assessment is highly developed, and students routinely reflect upon their own learning and progress. Mastery Journals support students effectively and the high-quality project-based work adds extra value to this due to the innovative focus on CAS (Creativity, Activity, Service). The BYBS Journal is again a valuable part of the self-reflection process. Other self-evaluative processes compliment MALS and PASS well and include a range of meta-cognitive surveys. Thinking tools such as Thinking Maps and Thinking Hats are also used effectively for assessment and evaluation purposes.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

Evidence is sought for the reflective processes of staff through the emphasis of developing as a researching professional. Staff approach curriculum developments via action research projects that focus on key questions relating to taking thinking approach in this respect. Students are encouraged to find meaning in a variety of thinking approaches such that they see the relevance and point of developing them. The assessment and evaluative information are shared school-wide in order to strengthen the consistency of effective teaching and learning strategies. A clear line of student feedback via the Student Voice has been highly effective in identifying learning needs from the children's perspective. This goes beyond using assessment as a summative indicator towards using it as a formative tool to support and enhance student's learning. At each juncture the aim of the school is to secure full and effective learning for all students. Staff are encouraged to reflect on the use of Thinking Tools and strategies and evidence demonstrates continuous reflection on the implementations, use, and impact of Thinking Tools.

Overall, it is clear that there are continuous formal and informal critical evaluations of Thinking Skills, Approaches and Tools taking place throughout RGS, which include a wide variety of stakeholders. This is a clear indicator of the way in which a culture of thinking is fully embedded within the school.<sup>11</sup>

### **Points for further consideration**

RGS has responded well to the points for further consideration suggested in the previous accreditation report. The developments relating to evaluative research is a good example of this and action research is an intrinsic part of professional growth. I conclude my evaluation with some suggestions as to how the school could continue to develop as a Thinking School and possibly inform a development workshop to further aid action planning. This might include:

- Further integrate thinking processes with questioning, visual tools, dispositional development, thinking routines, assessment of process, assessment of product, evaluation of process and evaluation of product. This would benefit from an overview

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<sup>11</sup> Reflective proforma and digital evidence

for how these elements are integrated and could build on the RGS's models already in place and act as a means of providing a concise overview. Thinking Schools@Exeter is well placed to support this via a bespoke workshop.

- Add the internal use of effect sizes at an individual teacher, team, and whole school level to further strengthen the quantitative robustness of data in order to supplement high quality qualitative data. This will allow impact comparisons of meta-cognitive strategies and feedback with the work of The Sutton Trust and John Hattie.
- Further develop evaluative research and align action research to the SPARE model. The SPARE model of evaluative action research is a useful framework through which to apply evaluative research at all levels of leadership and classroom practice and could easily be applied to the Intent, Implementation and Impact approach to curriculum development given the alignment of PAR to Intent, Implementation, and Impact. The addition of the Setting (S) and Evaluation (E) would enhance current practice without having to re-invent it.
- Continue to use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of RGS. In particular, the extension of practitioner research through wider dissemination of the SPARE model of illuminative evaluation may provide a vehicle for further contextualising cognitive approaches to find out what works best, for whom, under what circumstances, how and why.

## **Outcome**

The substantive evidence provided by RGS creates a very clear picture of a Thinking School in which Thinking Skills are at the heart of school life. RGS is undoubtedly a flagship school in terms of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. The school is an exemplary learning community with explicit and shared core values. The whole learning community thinks deeply about how to holistically develop every student and the levels of collaboration are exceptional. RGS places research at the heart of its pedagogy and is not only informed by external projects but is also research engaged in its own right. This is a unique position and is testimony to the long-lasting commitment to being a top-flight thinking organisation. High achievement is evident as a result of this. However, this does not compromise the wellbeing of students and staff. People throughout RGS interact such that

positive wellbeing flourishes. RGS is an exceptional school and stands as a model of metacognitive excellence for others to emulate.

In conclusion, the application has provided compelling and comprehensive evidence for accreditation, and I therefore recommend that re-accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School be awarded until October 2025. Congratulations to The Rochester Grammar School for an exceptional achievement!



**Dr Dave Walters**

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**On behalf of Dr Judith Kleine-Staarman, Director of Thinking Schools @Exeter**

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