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Dear Parent

Important Announcement

As you are aware, the Board of Governors of Belfast Royal Academy has taken the unprecedented decision not to use academic criteria as part of the admissions process for Year 8 pupils in the 21/22 academic year. The decision was taken within the context of the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic and in the interests of the health and wellbeing of everyone. The decision was communicated to parents on 8 January 2021 and as part of our communication, the School reiterated its long-standing commitment to the principle of academic selection. The School remains of the view that academic selection is the fairest way of allocating places to children who apply to the school and it is a source of regret that it has not proved possible to proceed with the Common Entrance Assessment this year.

Given this decision, the Board of Governors of Belfast Royal Academy had no alternative but to seek to develop an alternative set of admissions criteria for use in the current year. The Board of Governors did not undertake this task lightly and sought at all times to develop a set of criteria that would be as fair, as equitable and as transparent as possible. The Board of Governors acted in good faith and had due regard for the relevant guidance issued by the Department of Education. Subsequently, the alternative admissions criteria were published on 11 January 2021.

However, in light of detailed advice received recently from Senior Counsel, the Board of Governors has decided to amend the alternative admissions criteria as published, and to submit the amended criteria to the Department of Education for approval. The formal approval of the Department of Education is required before the amended admissions criteria can be published on the school website. The Board of Governors understand the distress that this ongoing uncertainty may cause for families and assure you that the amended criteria will be published as soon as we are in a position to do so.

Finally, the Board of Governors would like to offer some reflections on the recent coverage that Belfast Royal Academy has received in the press and media. For legal reasons, the School has not been able to respond to this coverage until now.

As anyone associated with the school community knows, and indeed as anyone with more than a passing knowledge of education understands, this media coverage says nothing about who we are as a school. For more than 235 years, Belfast Royal Academy has served as a beacon of hope, tolerance, and mutual understanding. We are one of the most diverse school communities in Northern Ireland in terms of religion, gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic background. The facts are clear: for every 10 pupils, 4 come from the Protestant tradition, 3 come from the Catholic tradition, and 3 come from other religious traditions and none; 1 in 6 of our pupils are entitled to free school meals; and 1 in 10 of our pupils have Special Educational Needs. Our school community is integrated and inclusive and the envy of almost every other local post primary school.

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Governors are proud to serve on the Board of such a rich and diverse school community, a school that in the words of the historian Mr Eddie McCamley continues *to embrace religious difference in a society where such an attitude has not always been evident*. At our most recent Open Day, the school Principal echoed the values and sentiments of her predecessors when she stated:

“Belfast Royal Academy cannot be categorised in terms of gender, or religion or economic background. If it would matter to you what the race, religion, community background, ethnicity or political point of view of the person whose shoulder you have your arm around is, then Belfast Royal Academy is not the School for you. If diversity is important to you, there are probably few schools in Northern Ireland who offer a similarly rich experience as here in Belfast Royal Academy.”

Many members of the wider school community will be angered and disappointed by the recent media coverage and Governors share this anger and disappointment. The allegations and insinuations made could not be further from the truth and, if anything, they are also completely misdirected. The record of Belfast Royal Academy in relation to diversity and inclusion is second to none and it would be much better for Northern Ireland as a whole if more schools followed our example.

Yours sincerely

The Board of Governors

Belfast Royal Academy