[EDUCATION]

Top of THE CLASS

We sit down with Helen Stavert, headteacher of Parsons Green Prep School, to find out about the school's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) policy – for which it received an ISA award for Outstanding Provision

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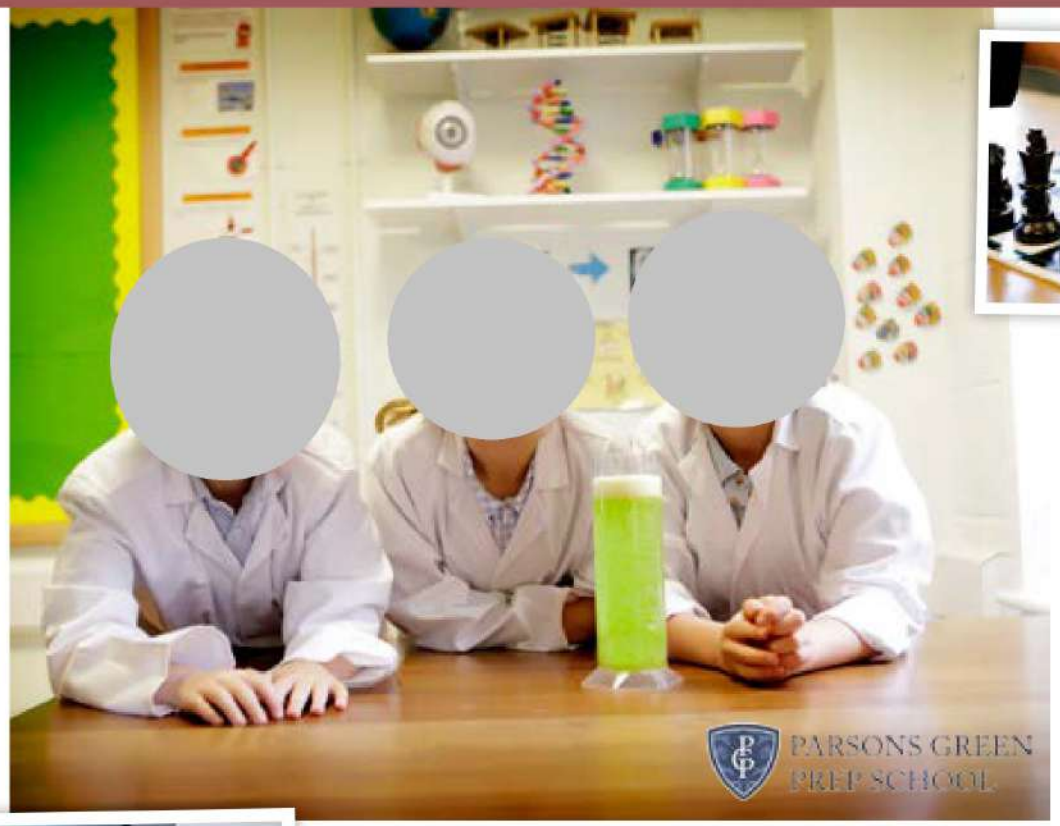







Parsons Green Prep School is celebrating, having won the coveted award for Outstanding Provision in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) in November at the Independent Schools Association's (ISA) annual headteachers' conference and awards dinner.

The feat saw Parsons Green Prep stave off competition from 380 ISA member schools as they were named on a three-school shortlist including Alton Convent School in Hampshire and Hatherop Castle School in Gloucestershire. "We were thrilled to be shortlisted and then win the award," says the school's head Helen Stavert. "STEM was something I brought in as headteacher, it really ensures children are prepared for the wider world, which is an ever-changing technological world. Nowadays, I suppose careers are more focused on those STEM subjects, so it's about making sure the children have a passion for them early on in life."

STEM provision is a key part of the learning and creative process at Parsons Green Prep, with the pupils' Tim Peake Primary Project in particular catching the eye of the ISA judges. The school held a number of different events during the build-up to astronaut Tim Peake's mission to the International Space Station, including the making of rockets out of old camera film cases – these were then launched from the school playground –





and the devising of a special food menu for the mission. "In the hall, we've got tiered seating and a big overhead projector, so the children made good luck banners and we watched Tim go off into space," says Helen. "We were hoping nothing was going to happen," she laughs. "I think all of the teachers were on tenterhooks ready to pull the plug!"

Helen tells me that the school's pupils also partook in a project which involved Tim Peake and his colleagues taking a number of plant seeds into space, before returning the samples to participating schools who had successfully applied to be a part of the scheme, one of which was Parsons Green Prep. "The children had to do really controlled experiments on the rocket seeds which had been up in space, compared to rocket seeds from earth, in order to discover what the differences were. The children were really excited about it and everything had to be really controlled in the experiment, so that was great fun."

Under Helen's stewardship the school have rolled out a series of STEM-related activities and opportunities, including workshops, whole-school activities and an after-school club, with the aim to integrate and promote STEM both across the curriculum and outside of the classroom. "We do STEM after-school clubs and linked in with that we also do Creative Coders which is a coding club," Helen says. "We have invested a lot of money into computing, coding and programming, all children at Key Stage 2 have their own tablet which the school provide. We've got a Mac suite and we've invested in LEGO WeDo."

The school also invite STEM ambassadors to the school to give talks, with past visitors including zoologists, engineers, architects, nuclear physicists and even an Arctic explorer. "Last year, we had a careers fair that was open to Years 5 and 6," Helen tells me. "We arranged for people who had professions in STEM to come in and they spoke to the children in little groups about those. Every term, the children also do the CREST award. They do four projects per year, one per term and then one as a homework project, and then they get an award at the end of the year. It can be on anything – it could be building a structure out of marshmallows and spaghetti."

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What though, is the response from the pupils to the wealth of STEM provision on offer? "They absolutely love it," Helen says emphatically. "I think because it's really practical it does engage all of the children. First of all, it's about cultivating a sense of enjoyment. It's also using elements of maths and science, and those are sometimes subjects, in particular maths, that children don't enjoy, so it's nice that they're doing it in a more creative, practical way."

Despite the ISA award and the affirmation of the school's successful STEM policy that it represents, Helen's keen not to rest on her laurels, with the school recently introducing a separate weekly STEM lesson for all of the pupils. "We're also trying to enter different competitions, I've just had one through from Tech Camp, they've contacted us because they saw that we won an award and the children are going to design their own inventions. In 2018 we're looking to hold a STEM fair, where the children will showcase their own projects and inventions – that's going to be open to the wider community as well." ♦

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