

HEAD OF FOUNDATION'S SPEECH PRIZE-GIVING EVENING SEPTEMBER 2021

To Parents, Prize-winners, Staff, Governors, Chair

It's an absolute pleasure to be able to speak with you directly at this year's Prize-Giving rather than through a camera lens and can I offer my own welcome to King's School.

Isn't it wonderful to be able to meet in the same room, to congregate together and celebrate the achievements of your children? Twelve months ago, Dr Kennerley and myself were lonely figures in this hall, with Mr Leah operating the camera. On that occasion, it was possible to restart our speeches if we got things wrong and Mr Leah expertly edited footage together. Tonight, we have to do it in one take. I'll leave you to speculate on how many it took me to get it right last year and I'm far too professional to let you know whether this was more or less than Dr Kennerley. Tonight, we're back to the thrill of a live event.

I remember saying at last year's Prize-Giving that we'd just had a year like no other - well, we seem to be having a lot of those. Despite the best efforts of the pandemic, there's no shortage of things to report on.

We should start with what is most important in any school; our young people and their achievements - in particular the academic achievements of pupils in Years 13 and 11.

Results were secured, as you will be aware, without pupils taking external exams. That said, all of our pupils had their grades decided by a combination of Key Assessment Tasks and Mock exams that were taken under examination conditions in this hall. We used 'real' exam questions given to us by the exam board, and we applied exam board mark schemes and grade boundaries. The media would do well to remember this before talking about grade inflation. Our pupils had to work hard to secure their grades, and in an environment as close to sitting external exams as we could make it. We recognise that doing so is a crucial developmental opportunity.

At A Level, a remarkable 69% of all grades were a grade A* or a grade A. 90% were at grade B and above.

The results were a record for the school and thoroughly deserved by a year group who worked hard over a period of two years under very difficult circumstances, and against the back drop of significant disruption unlike anything else that we've had to cope with in modern times.

Of significance is the success that King's had in securing places at university. 89% of those going on to university gained their first choice. And 69% of pupils went on to Russell Group universities.

At GCSE level, 71% of all exams were at grades 7-9. No fewer than eight pupils gained a clean sweep of grade 9s in all of their GCSEs. Again - all down to hard work and application. They'll go on to make a very strong Sixth Form year group.

These young people did not choose to cancel external exams. They had to dig deep, work hard and revise for their Key Assessment Tasks and Mock exams. They understood that needs must; they rolled up their sleeves, knuckled down, and did what needed to be done. In short, in a set of circumstances beyond their control, they took control of what they could and their results are a testament to them and their school.

My hope - and I believe this to be the case at King's - is that the life chances of these young people have not been adversely affected through being denied the opportunity to sit the exams. And that going forward, being the Class of 2021 and gaining grades in the midst of Covid and being the Covid generation, will not label these pupils adversely. Instead, it will bring them the respect they have earned for not just surviving this challenging time in their academic lives but doing so with resilience, understanding and tolerance for not being able to study in the normal environment that their predecessors had the privilege of doing.

Of course, a significant part of last academic year saw us learning remotely during a further period of lockdown. We went into the lockdown period with two key aims: to maintain educational development and to give pupils a sense of stability and security through a school routine as close to normal as we could get.

Having last September anticipated a further period of lockdown, we were well prepared. Teachers were issued with new laptops and given training in Teams and other software packages. We recognised the chance to generate new resources and devise creative ways of delivering the curriculum, but, gosh, it's hard. For most lessons, it was like starting from scratch again and having to plan every individual lesson. Years spent developing and refining resources for delivery in the classroom counted for very little and, for a while, everyone felt like they were newly qualified teachers again, back in their first year of teaching. The learning curve was steep. Have you ever tried running a question and answer session or a class discussion with teenagers using Teams? It's not easy! Imagine the scene... You introduce a concept, explained on a touch screen shared with pupils at home using your swanky new stylus... 'So here we have a parallel circuit with two batteries and two bulbs. Does anyone in the class want to explain how bright the bulbs will light?' ... Silence. You're staring at a screen which shows you 24 participants have all logged on and joined the meeting but nothing. Now, in a classroom, you'd be able to sense the mood, see who's smiling, see who looks worried. But you can't see faces, and you're guessing most are still in their pyjamas. You give some more encouragement... 'Come on, this is a nice and easy question, who's going to give it a go?'... Silence. Getting more desperate, you might choose a member of the class you know has more than enough ability to answer the question. ...'Johnny, do you want to give this one a go?'... Silence. 'Come on, you know the answer to this'. After another prolonged silence, the chat function is active. You start to get excited - 'Johnny is typing' ...The message gets displayed ... 'Sir, sorry, but I don't think that my mic is working'. A likely story! You choose another (hopefully) willing individual. 'Jenny, what about you, do you want to give this question a go?' Another prolonged silence and then you get a notification displayed on the screen... 'Jenny has left the meeting!'. Aaarggh! What!?

And then I think most teachers have had the situation where you'll start the lesson and be happily explaining a concept for 5, 10, 15 minutes, monologuing away and then you'll hear the voice of one courageous pupil who will say after 20 long minutes... 'Sir, you're on mute'.

Despite these challenges, our online provision was extremely successful and something that we were incredibly proud of. Thank you to the many parents who voiced their support for us at this difficult time. I'd like to read you one email that we received as I think it sums up what we were

trying to achieve. I'd say it was a direct quote but I'm a teacher and I couldn't resist correcting some of the grammar:

'We cannot fault King's for how the timetable has consistently been able to continue online. A huge well done to all the staff who have made the transition from on-site lessons to online so seamless - this has provided much structure and routine which the students desperately need. So, a big thanks and 'well done' to you all. I can't tell you what a fantastic surprise and how lovely it was for us to receive the call home from your staff. The fact that our son's teachers had recognised how hard he was working and contributing well in lessons made us feel extremely proud of him and it has given him a massive boost too. And then yesterday our son received a postcard from the PE/Games Department again saying how hard he has been working and emailing in his evidence of this. Again, this gave him a real boost to know how much his teachers have recognised his hard work and enthusiasm. Personal gestures like these can make such a big difference to a student. I know it put a massive smile on our son's face!'

The online delivery of lesson content can actually be very efficient. You can get through a lot of material very quickly. Where children have missed out more is with the less tangible development: their confidence, leadership and social awareness. We were keen to continue this area of their education as much as possible during lockdown. Even to a Physics teacher, this is more important than having the knowledge about parallel electrical circuits. It was heartening to receive such emails from parents (as it always is) and if you were a parent that sent in words of encouragement and positivity, then thank you. Staff that work in schools are human as well, and many were going through their own personal challenges during lockdown. Words like this made a huge difference at a difficult time.

I'd like to take this opportunity to publicly thank staff, on behalf of myself and the Governors, for the amazing job that they did during lockdown.

Of course, King's doesn't do things in halves and not content with just having to respond to a pandemic, we've had to cope with moving to our wonderful new site at the same time. But, actually, our new home made this much easier and it continues to be an absolute joy and privilege to teach in a school with nice, wide corridors, excellent ventilation and lots of outdoor space. Our school environment sets us apart from all other schools, including being able to cope with Covid and bubble restrictions

Even with all of the space, pupils found it hard being corralled in their bubble areas and not being able to roam around as they would like. Our pupil survey at the end of last academic year gave some interesting feedback that pupils were understandably frustrated at having their freedoms curtailed. I read some comments with equal amounts of horror and amusement - 'Please can you stop treating us like prisoners'. Well, I'm sure that looking around you tonight at our facilities, ladies and gentlemen, you might question if these children really understand what it's like to be incarcerated. Joking aside, our pupils felt the strains of the restrictions.

In truth, the results of the pupil questionnaire were not just an illuminating journey into the psyche of a trapped teen, they were actually really pleasing and reassuring. The headlines are 88% of pupils enjoy all of their time at school and 11% of pupils sometimes enjoying their time at school. Of course, this does leave 1% of pupils that we still need to reach. It's our job to find ways to positively engage with all children.

82% of pupils find most lessons interesting.

85% of pupils think that staff treat them fairly. Those parents who have been on the receiving end of their own child's adolescent claims of 'that's not fair' will understand how impressive a figure that is. What is most heartening is that 93% of pupils say that they have a friendship group that supports, nurtures, encourages and develops them. Of course, there are still small numbers of children whose school experience is not what we would want it to be. We set our standards high and our pastoral teams are now working hard to improve our provision even further. This pupil survey gives our student body an important voice and it will now become an annual event so that we can track progress.

The free text responses to this pupil questionnaire were predictable in some cases and quite revealing in others, as you might imagine. There were calls for less homework. One pupil wanted a shorter school day and longer weekends. In the unlikely event that this pupil is with us at Prize-giving tonight, I would like to tell them that this is out of my control. One pupil made calls for chocolate milk to be freely available (it's quite reassuring if this is a priority worth mentioning). Rather confusingly, one pupil asked for 'better punishments'. I didn't quite understand what this meant - and can only hope that it wasn't a call for a return to the time when I was a lad where the 'slipper' was commonly used, but perhaps a suggestion for methods of more meaningful atonement with greater emphasis on reflection and penitence.

Our new site continues to mature and, in particular, the growth of the soft landscaping over the summer has had a huge impact on how school looks and feels - our rural location contributes to an atmosphere of calm and well-being. We are still getting to know our new home and it continues to throw up unexpected challenges. A perfect example of this being when a child stood up in the middle of a classroom and shouted 'Cow!'. His teacher, wondering whether it was directed at her, or not, was looking rather confused when the pupil clarified 'No Miss, look!'. The teacher looked out of the window (as did 24 children, whilst dashing across the room to press their faces against the glass) to see a herd of about 30 cows aimlessly wandering down the lovely curved drive coming from the West Entrance. They had broken out of their field and come to explore our school. We can now add cowboy and cowgirl to the job description of PE staff and Estates staff, as they all mustered support to work together and herd the cows back off the site! Who needs John Wayne!

In what I hope parents have noticed as a significant shift towards collaboration and communication, we also undertook a parental survey in the last academic year. Thank you to those parents who took part. 88% of parents would recommend the school with three-quarters feeling completely or very satisfied. 86% felt that their child was happy at school. It was heartening to read the words that parents most frequently used to describe the school as 'welcoming' and 'encouraging'. Pastoral care and leadership were rated very highly. As with all self-reflective organisations, we are looking very carefully at ways that we can develop further. I hope that improvements in our catering provision have already been noticed, both in terms of the quality of food being served but also in our organisation of lunchtimes now that Covid restrictions have been eased. All of the feedback that we have received from parents and pupils is now being considered as the school plots the next stage of its development. We are keen to build on the momentum of the last few years and further our desire to make King's the preeminent school in the North West and beyond. As Dr Kennerley has pointed out, we hope to have news of this in the not too distant future. The school leads its young people and its community by example in being aspiring for success. And please be under no doubt that our profile, nationally, is growing.

Implementing our usual extra-curricular programme in this last year has been a real challenge - being constantly in and out of lockdown, with associated isolations, travel restrictions and the banning of inter-school fixtures. However, hidden within this challenging environment has been

some real gems of success. Our Engineering Education Team, for example, won National recognition for their sports training aid design of an interactive hockey stick that helped correct poor technique. Our dressage team won their qualifier for the National Final and are due to compete in these National Championships next month. Just this last week our U12 cricket team became Cheshire Champions in a delayed final from last year. Our pupil body boasted the co-leader of the National Youth Orchestra at their appearance in the BBC Proms Series. And our past pupils continue to gain success beyond school with Cameron Redpath gaining a Scottish Cap in the Six Nations tournament and Elliot Hanson representing Team GB in Sailing at Tokyo 2020 (where member of staff and King's swimming coach, Lauren Jocelyn, was also on duty coaching the Paralympic Swimming team). One of our former pupils, Stephen Holgate, was knighted in the last New Year's Honours list for services to Medicine.

There have been many highlights in the last academic year. Events and actions that have made us laugh and cry. As we start returning to some sort of normality, many of the stand out moments have come in the last few weeks from what would normally be routine events. The energy that drives our collective endeavour is community. We are a school that thrives on community. We gain strength from our shared endeavour and our combined efforts far outweigh the sum of our individual capacity.

It doesn't feel right that we have had to stay apart from each other and the last few weeks have been a real joy in seeing us reunited. Being able to have 'Welcome Evenings' for parents at the start of the academic year where parents can meet staff, and children can show their parents around school are moments not to be underestimated. Being able to have a full programme of sport on a weekend, where we can enjoy the children competing against each other and be able to talk about it on the sideline. Being able to have this Prize-giving and come together to celebrate the achievements of the pupils.

The combined impact of these events creates the character of a community that values good fellowship and co-operation.

Last Monday, at the start of term, we had our very first assembly for Senior and Sixth Form Divisions. At the old site, this wasn't possible. There wasn't a communal space big enough. And so we had the double impact of returning from Covid, and the never before opportunity of having an assembly with all children aged 11-18. For me, it was not only amazing, it was actually quite moving - to see another piece of the jigsaw fall into place; the vision of having a brand new school with all children on one site. To be able to come together as a community was emotional (even for a Yorkshireman) and a special moment in time for King's School.

One of the quoted aims at King's is to 'challenge the pupils to aspire, work hard, and achieve.'

As amazing as our facilities are, the soul ... the heart of a school beats through the individuals that come together to make up its community - a community collaborating to achieve those aims that attracted me (and you) to this school in the first place.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in short, this school is in a uniquely strong position. It is a school that thrives on its sense of community, a school that creates a positive and supportive atmosphere for all members. This is not a position that we will take for granted, nor do we intend to become complacent. We must stay dynamic and ambitious in our approach and sustain a level of excellence in our teaching and learning and in our emphasis on the broader, holistic education of children. The route forward will inevitably present challenges. However, the last 12 months have taught us

that we are superbly well placed to meet these challenges head on, maintaining our aspiration and fulfilling our aims.

Thank you for listening.

Jason Slack
Head of Foundation
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