



Head of Foundation: Mr Jason Slack, BSc (Hons), MA (Ed)

## HEAD OF FOUNDATION'S SPEECH PRIZE-GIVING EVENING SEPTEMBER 2020

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

It's a pleasure to be able to talk to you all at my first Prize-Giving and can I offer my own welcome to King's School.

It's a fear among many Heads - the first Prize-Giving speech. You've been in post a matter of days and yet here you are, having to speak knowledgeably about a school that you barely know. What are you supposed to speak about?

This year, of course, it's an entirely different story. The difficulty is where to start. All schools have been through so much in the last 12 months. King's School has been through more than most.

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.

A remarkable 61% of all grades at A Level were a grade A\* or a grade A this last summer. 89% were at grade B and above with 100% of all grades at C and above.

These results were a record for the school and thoroughly deserved by a year group who worked hard over a period of two years. They were secured, as you will be aware, without pupils taking exams. The coronavirus pandemic led to a decision by the Government to abolish exams and create a system of estimating grades that pupils might have achieved. This is not something that any of us would have wanted and I've been disappointed by areas of the media that have questioned grade inflation and credibility. First and foremost, we should congratulate our Year 13 pupils on their achievements as just reward for their efforts. Of significance is the success that these pupils had in securing a place at university. 85% of those going on to university gained their first choice. And, of these, more than  $\frac{4}{5}$  went on to Russell Group universities. Just five pupils went onto their second-choice university and eight pupils gained a place through clearing. These are impressive figures, irrespective of the environment in which pupils found themselves. In a year when many university applicants faced a week of uncertainty with calculated grades not being high enough, only to be replaced by Centre Assessed Grades a few days later, mercifully few of our Year 13 pupils suffered as the grades that they achieved were strong enough under both systems. Although this didn't spare one of our three successful Cambridge applicants who did have to wait an agonising few days whilst Centre Assessed Grades were awarded and the place was confirmed ... but all turned out well in the end.

Similarly, at GCSE level, 70% of all exams were at grades 7-9 - a school record. Again, last year's Year 11 warrant a huge amount of congratulation for the hard work that they have made over the duration of the course.

These young people did not choose to abolish exams. In fact, they deserved the right to succeed, or fail at their A Levels and GCSEs - the same right that all other young people have had; myself

included and all of you out there. They should have had their own fate in their own hands and I am sorry that this wasn't the case. Even worse, they certainly didn't merit the craziness and chaos that was the uncertainty over which grades they would receive; Centre Assessed Grades decided by teachers, or grades decided by previous pupils and the mysterious algorithm - details of which still remain hidden! And then back to Centre Assessed Grades.

Assessing the attainment of young people is not easy - to suggest that an algorithm could do it was, and remains, quite ludicrous. Many of you may know that I am a proud Yorkshireman and I was reminded of the Yorkshire-born poet and educationalist, Gervase Phinn who recalls visiting a Yorkshire schoolroom where he came across a piece of writing scrawled in small print onto a page by a student. Phinn asked the little boy if he had any help with his work but the boy shook his head. Phinn considered the work to be quite the small masterpiece and read out the words:

Yesterday, yesterday, yesterday  
Sorrow, sorrow, sorrow  
Today, today, today  
Hope, hope, hope  
Tomorrow. Tomorrow, tomorrow  
Love, love, love

'What a wonderful little poem', Phinn told the boy, before the boy thought for a while, stared back at Phinn with large, sad eyes and announced, 'They are my spelling corrections, sir.'

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 2020 and gaining grades in the midst of Covid and being the Covid Generation, will not label these pupils adversely but, instead, bring them the respect they have earned for having come through this crucial time in their academic lives with resilience, understanding and the tolerance for not being fully in charge of their own destiny.

Of course, the lockdown affected all pupils, not just those in Years 13 and 11. What I know about King's would suggest that the teachers at this school value an individualised approach to learning. Teachers get to know the pupils well as individuals, supporting their specific needs, often through an approach that requires 1:1 support at lunchtime, after school, after the lesson, etc. All of this is admirable and a real strength of the school, but incredibly difficult to recreate in a lockdown environment. Yet in a matter of weeks, if not days, teachers had set up a new online provision using software and methods that had rarely been used before, using innovation and imagination. Scientific equipment was substituted for whatever you could find in the kitchen cupboards. Demonstrations were recorded or found on YouTube instead of live. Gardens became important teaching resources. Teachers had to develop new skills, such as TV presenting or chat show hosting. Our young people adapted so easily, and surely have re-set the bar on our expectations of them moving forward. Teachers worked incredibly hard reinventing their practice and entire schemes of work within days to better enable the students to progress. I would humbly suggest that the children at King's are now well placed to demonstrate these holistic skills which will separate them from others elsewhere who have not made similar progress during lockdown.

With the future of next year's exams still uncertain, it's crucial that the current pupils in Years 11 and 13 start this year as they mean to go on - giving us all of the evidence that we need, should it be required, to justify strong grades.

Another change for the school within the Senior Division has been the move towards co-education - a source of anxiety for some, I realise. Early signs are encouraging as we seek to allow the best qualities of each gender to positively influence the actions of their opposites. I have had the experience of both single sex and co-ed systems in previous schools. I have to say that had I not known that co-education was a new development for the school, I'm not sure that I would have known from wandering around the school in the last few weeks. Again, this is testament to the skills of patience and tolerance that our young people have, and to the school in preparing the ground so well. In fact, the only dissatisfaction that I have had reported to me has been within Year 11 who have been questioning why they had to remain in single-sex classes when the rest of the Division has changed.

Another change for the school has been the appointment of a new Head. And I wanted to take this opportunity to thank everyone for making me feel so welcome over the summer and in the last couple of weeks since the start of term. Starting a new school can be daunting for new pupils but also new Heads too. We all have our insecurities to hide. The first day of the new term, of course, eventually arrived and it was with a certain level of trepidation I put on my jacket and left the office to patrol the front of school trying to look mean but not too mean, friendly, but not too friendly, purposeful but also calm - you get the idea. I got out into the playground and started composing myself by adopting the correct facial expression and demeanour to walk up the boulevard at the front of school with authority when a student came straight towards me, 'Hi, sir, how are you getting on - has it been ok so far? It must be difficult for you starting a new school with all that's happening'. This exchange totally disarmed me but is typical of the friendly welcome that I've had from the school in general. On one occasion, I was having lunch in the refectory. It was the end of lunch, so fairly quiet, and bubbles were on their way back outside. I was taking a moment just to collect my thoughts before going back to the office when a girl approached me saying, 'You seem very relaxed, sir. Shouldn't you be a bit more stressed? I always thought heads should be more stressed'. All of these anecdotes are indicative of a school that is at ease with itself in a friendly environment with a strong sense of community.

When you're considering whether or not to 'throw your hat in the ring' and apply for a new Headship, one of the things that you consult are the aims of the school that you might join. One of the quoted aims at King's is to 'challenge the pupils to aspire, work hard and achieve'. And this struck a chord with me for several reasons - firstly, because hard work is mentioned before achievement and that's important and consistent with my own values - rewarding effort and celebrating achievement. But, also, there is an emphasis on aspiration and there can be no better example of aspiration than the journey that King's has taken to build a brand new school. The collective character of the school is such that I am here, delivering this speech from the Jackson Hall in our new school at the start of a new academic year. We opened on time, on budget, despite the best efforts of a global pandemic jeopardising the whole project... and the results are simply stunning. I am so sorry that we haven't been able to show off our new facilities as much as we would like but please be reassured that we are desperate to do so... and we will do as soon as restrictions ease.

I challenged pupils in the first assembly of the term to collect themselves, understand the significance and take a deep breath before crossing the threshold and entering their new school. Just to take a second to consider the enormity of what they were doing and the community they were joining - this hugely ambitious project has been for their benefit. They must use it to become inspired about their own future, as their teachers and you, their parents, have been inspired about the future of this school.

I don't underestimate the faith that was needed by parents to have confidence in the school to deliver on their promises for the future back when announcements were first made. You have my gratitude for that!

Here we are. Pupils must use this new beginning as inspiration to work hard and become the best versions of themselves as possible. If this environment can't inspire young people to better their performance, then I'm not sure what can.

I realise that our Chair has already thanked my predecessor, Dr Simon Hyde, and our Finance Director, Mr Jonathan Spencer Pickup, for the central role that they have played in delivering this project to a conclusion against all of the odds. They have both gone above and beyond and have been nothing short of heroic in my eyes.

A further aim of the school is 'to foster a friendly, polite and caring community' and it was this emphasis on community that also drew me to King's. And the welcome that I have received so far has only reinforced this position. In the case of staff, this welcome has often been from behind a forest of plastic crates. Staff have worked tirelessly to unpack an entire school in such a short space of time and get it ready for the start of the academic year.

This sense of community was also typified for me in the first few days of term when we experienced some challenges with parking - parents may be aware! What was most significant to me on that occasion was the response of the school community. Word spread that help was needed and, all of a sudden, an army of school staff found a high visibility jacket from somewhere, and proceeded to the front of school to help. Before I could blink, teachers, secretaries, caretakers, all areas of school staff were out helping to ease the problem and get traffic moving and children into school. That sense of community was heartening for a new Head to see and indicative, I believe, of a fundamental value of what being part of the King's community is all about.

This aim of the school, which mentions community, goes on to say that we should support parents in raising ambitious and well rounded individuals. I see this as a balance between the incredible expertise of what school knows about education with what parents know about their own children and, of course, the increasing control that children demand over their own decisions as they start to mature and become independent young adults. This three-way partnership of school, parents and the child is crucial to success.

I was speaking to a Head recently who had also gone through the process of occupying a new school and the excitement that accompanies such a momentous occasion. I was discussing with him the potential that a school can sit back after completing such a huge task - thinking that the job is done. I was reassured that with good leadership (and that's what I intend to provide), it can be used as a spring board, the inspiration that I have been describing to the children, to maintain momentum and create something truly exceptional.

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 - collaborating to achieve those aims that attracted me (and you) to this school in the first place.

And, you know what, word is spreading of this amazing environment. Word is spreading that we've got something incredible here and people are sitting up and taking notice. As our Chair has mentioned, numbers are up and interest is high, as more families seek to be a part of something that they believe to be special.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in short, this school is in a uniquely strong position. It is a school that thrives on its sense of community 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 consistent 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 but 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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