

Principal's Address Prize Day 18th September 2009

Madam Chairman, Honoured Guests, ladies and gentlemen, and pupils of Limavady Grammar School.

It is with considerable personal humility but an immense sense of professional pride that I present the Principal's Report for 2008-2009.

Within days of last year's prize distribution, the Headmaster, Dr Mc Guinness advised Staff that earlier, he had informed The Board of Governors of his intention to retire in January 2009. This date soon arrived and brought to a close a period of over eleven years when Dr Mc Guinness was Principal, and ended a period of 38 years' direct association with Limavady Grammar School.

Sadly, Dr Mc Guinness cannot be with us today but I wish to thank him for all his efforts on behalf of this school. His vision and commitment have certainly provided me with an excellent foundation and I would assure him that, with the support of the Staff, I will continue to build on the work he did in order to make this great school and even better school.

The pending retirement of Dr Mc Guinness necessarily placed a significant additional burden on the Board of Governors as they managed the appointment of a replacement. It came therefore as a great shock and a real disappointment to governors when the Board's Chairman, Dr Heaney, was forced to resign through ill health. Sadly Dr Heaney is unable to join us today but I join with Mrs Craig in acknowledging, with appreciation, the very significant commitment that he has made to this school and I take this opportunity to wish him continued good health.

The current period of office of this Board of Governors is coming to a close soon. Since January, the Board has met, either as committee or as full board on 25 occasions. These meetings have sometimes been long and challenging as members have wrestled with issues that they might not ever have been expecting. At all times they have acted in the best interests of the whole school community and indeed in the interests of the wider educational and social environments in which we find ourselves. I would today record my personal thanks for the support, encouragement and wisdom shown to me by the Board of Governors as I have come to terms with my new role and to acknowledge in particular Mrs Craig, Chairman, for her calm, controlled and collected approach to all aspects of school governance.

Seamus Heaney, the renowned Co Derry poet wrote these lines in his poem The Cure at Troy

**History says; don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.**

Quoted by Mary Robinson when she was appointed President of the Republic of Ireland, in reference to the uncertain political climate facing the whole island, they come alive again, this time in the context of education here in Northern Ireland. I said earlier that our Board our Governors has had to wrestle with issues and challenges that it might not ever have been expecting. Sadly as we enter a new school year we find ourselves in a situation of unregulation in relation to transfer from primary to

post primary education. The Board of Governors would have preferred this issue to have been resolved at government level in a way which would have allowed pupils to transfer to schools best suited to them and which did not require the dismantling of the many excellent schools, grammar and non grammar, in Northern Ireland which produce tremendous pupil achievements such as those we will recognize shortly.

It is our view that the retention of a measure of academic selection is essential if we are to continue to provide the best education possible for those young people. Adequate resourcing of all schools to ensure that those perceived as failing are capable of meeting the needs of their pupils, and an acceptance that no one type of school is better than another, but rather is more suited to some children than others are essential for the future of post primary education in this province.

The Education Minister talks repeatedly about the wishes of parents and the wishes of pupils. It is clear to all that, with the closing date for application to take unregulated tests this year being today and the numbers involved in making application to schools offering the AQE entrance assessment exceeding 6000, the wish of parents and pupils in P7 is that the comprehensive education that would result from the minister's proposals should not be allowed to proceed.

This school takes a principled and pragmatic stance: we strongly support efforts to ensure that the basis and mechanism of selection should be explored. To dismantle a structure, however and not to have any acceptable structure in place is, to say the least unwise and a recipe for chaos.

In almost a year, The Northern Ireland Executive has not discussed educational issues of consequence. The hope that, by ignoring such an important issue it might go away is naïve and clearly an indicator of bad governance. In the absence of decision making at government level, our Board of Governors has had to, and has confidently, taken a leading role, at a time when Area Planning, the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority, the continued roll out of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum and the Entitlement Framework and implementation of the Every School A Good School Improvement Policy are all live issues. Limavady Grammar School will continue to consider its place in a much more complex and fluid educational environment. Our partnership with the other Roe Valley Schools, our close links with the other Controlled Grammar Schools in the province, and our participation in a number of programmes, including Building Leadership Capacity, will enable us to anticipate, and adapt to meet, 21st century realities.

Heaney continued his poem with these words:

**So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
and cures and healing wells.**

Limavady Grammar School's Mission Statement is Learning, Caring Preparing for Life.

While examination outcomes alone are not the sole benchmark for learning, I am pleased to report that the release of public examination results last month brought very pleasing outcomes. In most instances the efforts made were reflected in the grades received.

27 pupils attained 3 or more A levels at Grade A; 10 of these obtained 4 A grades. 77% of all candidates achieved 3 A levels at Grades A-C, up 11% on last year.

The results at AS level were again commendable; two thirds of all candidates were awarded 3+ grades A-C and almost two thirds of all grades were A or B.

Our GCSE students were not to be outdone and 48% of all grades were A*A. Particular success was recorded in the following subject areas: Spanish 77% A*, and Chemistry 61% A*. Louise Bonham, Emma Crawford, Naomi Given, Patrick Jack, Rachel Mc Sparron, Carl Mulholland, Catherine Mullan, and Daniel Simpson achieved an amazing nine or more A*s. For the Staff, however, our challenge is to ensure that every child reaches his or her potential; unfortunately for a small number of pupils their lack of motivation meant that this did not happen.

There are, however many other aspects to learning which, though more difficult to quantify, are none the less important.

Our Modern Languages Department continues to provide an excellent range of activities, including exchange visits last year to and from Germany and France. A European Day of Modern Languages in September gave everyone in school the opportunity to enjoy continental cuisine and participate in Assembly which was conducted in a number of languages.

I was privileged to be able to attend the final of the Alliance Francaise French Debating Competition at Queen's University when Lisa McNeill, Kirsten Wilson, Matthew Hazlett and Chris Donnell fought off stiff competition from Friends' School to bring back the trophy to LGS.

Ciara Robinson, representing the Home Economics Department demonstrated her culinary skills to win The Beef Week 2009 Recipe Competition.

The Mathematics Department continued to enter pupils for the UK Maths Challenge and outcomes were outstanding, 4 pupils receiving Gold Awards.

Our Music Department continues to foster talent in our young people. Over sixty pupils entered Trinity Guildhall or Associated Board examinations, with eleven successes being recorded at Grades 7 and 8. It is worth noting that all grades from Grade 6 upwards translate directly into UCAS points. Choirs, bands and ensembles were well supported with all participants learning important teamwork as well as performance skills.

The Autumn Term saw the production of Oklahoma, involving large numbers of singers and actors, a great back-stage crew, make up and costumes teams and a stage band. Productions of this nature provide learning opportunities beyond all measure and contribute significantly to the ethos that is ours.

The Spring Concert was a feast of musical talent, but sadly the audience could have been much bigger.

The Summer Term saw a departure from the traditional Junior Drama production with the school staging Limavady's Got Talent. A full house saw many pupils in Years 8- 10 displaying tremendous confidence as they competed for the audience's votes. Michael Slater emerged the victor that night, with his rendition of Broken Strings, though each participant, including the teachers who perhaps should keep their day jobs, was truly a winner.

Continued good use is made of the School Library as a learning resource. This is illustrated by the pupils in the History Department who reviewed the Horrible History series.

The pupils' experiences were widened through our ongoing links with Bishops College in Srilanka and our involvement with European schools through Comenius.

School was delighted when its considerable overseas links were recognized in it being granted International School Status last year.

Sport continues to play an important part of the learning process.

Netball has continued to grow in popularity with the girls and the benefits of the astropitch are beginning to show in the girls' hockey skills with 8 teams regularly playing fixtures.

Swimming is a popular activity and the year concluded with two very successful galas in the local leisure centre. We are fortunate that such provision is so accessible to our school.

Tennis in the summer term was popular with boys and girls.

Rugby Football enjoyed a good season with up to nine teams turning out on a Saturday. Pride of place went to the Medallion XV squad which won the Medallion Trophy. Rogan Bell won Ulster representative honours, turning in three fine performances for his province.

It was fitting and also a real tribute to the staff involved that both the Hockey and Rugby Clubs embarked on successful tours of South America and South Africa respectively.

We were pleased to provide pupils to make up a Roe Valley Cuhillians Hurling Team which took part in a competition in Cookstown involving a number of other Learning Communities from around Northern Ireland. A small number of Sixth Formers took part in Gaelic Football during the common RVLC games programme.

Cricket continued to dominate the Summer Term. Despite some difficult weather conditions the 1st XI had a good season losing out narrowly to RBAI in the semi- final of the Schools' Cup. The U13 XI, however maintained their undefeated run by winning the Slemish Cup in June and went on to retain the status of Ulster champions. Representative Honours were achieved by Stuart Thompson at Ireland U19 level, Simon Olphert U17, Jordan Magee U15 and Ross Allen and Jamie Millar U13. Stuart Thompson scored a century for Ulster Schools against Leinster.

Numerous other skills were developed through extra curricular activities. These included the strategies required to succeed at chess, improving practical and design skills in The Technology and Pottery Clubs and the skill of Alpine skiing through the successful ski trip to Switzerland.

We are a caring school. The Environmental Committee has as its aim to increase the school members' awareness of the need to respect the school environment and to preserve our natural resources.

Recycling is encouraged as is care for our premises. This year we were runners up in the Best Kept Schools' Competition.

Our Charity committee worked very hard again to raise vital funds for a variety of charities including Chest Heart and Stroke Association and World Vision.

The long established link with Kenya continues to permeate all aspects of school life and this year, in preparation for a proposed future visit, the Annual Walk for Schools event in April raised the marvelous sum of £5500.

Clic Sargeant and The Roald Dahl Foundation benefited by over £6000 through the annual Readathon promoted by the English Department and the Swimathon supported the work of Marie Curie.

A volunteering and Community service programme operated for Sixth Formers and a number of community organizations benefited from the commitment of our pupils.

Care for others through training in First Aid in Limavady Grammar School is remarkable. In total 253 pupils plus staff have engaged in some First Aid training and consequently are more prepared than previously to deal with an emergency situation.

The Mentoring System and Achievement Club reflected the best of our interlinked academic and pastoral systems with senior students having the opportunity to support the juniors.

The third strand of our Mission Statement is Preparing for Life and in this regard the pupils of Limavady Grammar School have been afforded many opportunities.

In May a visit from the Education and Training Inspectorate focused on Careers Education and Guidance and the use of Progress Files to inform learning. The feedback was extremely positive, recognizing the excellent support given to our pupils in these areas.

Numerous other activities help to develop the young people in our charge. Work Experience in Lower Sixth saw our students see first hand employment opportunities in a vast range of areas from farming to pharmacy. The School Bank and Book Store were run by pupils in Sixth Form giving them important skills in cash handling, while Young Enterprise developed a keen sense of business among our Sixth Formers. Participation in civic life is an important role for all adults and this year pupils from all the Roe Valley Schools participated in a Lets Talk event, hosted by Mark Carruthers, BBC, to discuss issues relevant to residents of the area.

A team of budding engineers was highly acclaimed in its design, manufacturing and presentation skills by Sentinus in an initiative which saw Limavady Grammar partnered by Wrightbus, Ballymena.

Undoubtedly some of our current pupils will find careers in the legal profession and so the work of the Junior and Senior Law Societies is important in developing understanding in this discipline. The highlight for both groups was participation in the Mock Trial Competition at the Belfast High Court.

The Debating Club is an excellent place to develop confidence in speaking publicly and was well supported this year.

Scripture Union met weekly for fun and fellowship and many pupils, from all backgrounds continued to deepen their faith as they met together.

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award continues to flourish.

During the year 47 Silver and 13 Gold Awards were gained by our pupils, past and present.

There are many other aspects to school life which I have not time to detail but are documented in Roesian- our impressive and informative School magazine.

Archbishop Oscar Romero once said:

"We can't do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing just that".

It would seem to me that we as a school have almost proved him wrong. A parent commented in the recent parental consultation exercise:

"As a realist I don't expect perfection, but Limavady Grammar School is making an admirable attempt at perfection"

The incredible catalogue of activities and achievements, to which I have not been able to do justice, does not just happen. This school has a wonderful combination. Hardworking and enthusiastic pupils, committed parents and willing helpers from beyond the school and an exceptionally devoted and diligent Staff who give freely of their time to support the pupils in our charge all contribute to make our school what it is today. I would ask all the pupils here this afternoon to acknowledge the Staff of this school, both teaching and Support together with our volunteer helpers for the exceptional commitment, compassion and loyalty which they show to you. You are a privileged group to have the Staff who help develop your skills, talents and interests.

At this stage I would extend my appreciation to my colleagues also. The Senior Leadership Team consisting of Mr. Bogle, Mr. Handforth, Mr. Calwell, Mr. Mawhinney and Mrs. Henry has demonstrated loyalty and patience as I have continued to find out about the unique features of this school.

The Heads of Year and Department have shown clear strategic leadership in many areas and all the teaching Staff have shown dedication and support as we have made progress in areas like self evaluation, target setting and action planning.

The Technical Staff provide superb support which ensures that teaching and learning is effective and the Building Supervisors and Cleaning Staff guarantee a pleasant working environment.

The Office Staff are the initial public face of our school and carry out their duties with efficiency and rigour. Mrs. Mullan, my Secretary, now finds herself working for her third, and no doubt most challenging Headmaster, and has demonstrated total loyalty and commitment, going way beyond the call of duty to ensure that my job is made as easy as possible.

The Officers of The Western Education and Library Board have been supportive and I would extend in particular my thanks to Mr Mulholland, Chief Executive and to Mrs Mack, Governance Adviser and Mrs. Clement from CASS for their professional support.

When the school works together with parents and pupils success is guaranteed. I have found the parents of this school to be loyal and committed and in particular I would acknowledge the hardworking band in our Parents' Association. Their hard endeavours last year ensured that we were able to purchase a new minibus which is an invaluable asset to our extra curricular activity programme.

Of course there would be no school if it were not for the pupils. There have undoubtedly been moments when I would have wished that some individuals would have adopted a different attitude, but I would commend publicly the exemplary behaviour and positive work ethic demonstrated by the vast majority of our school community. It is you the school is for and it is a delight to see so many excel, meeting and exceeding personal targets. Well done to you all and a special word of thanks to Matthew Beattie and Naomi Canning, last year's Head Boy and Head Girl who supported and advised me in many ways during my first sixth months in post.

Madam Chairman, this concludes my first Principal's Report.