

Headmaster's Speech 2008:

It gives me great pleasure to welcome our Guest of Honour, Hilary Robinson. Hilary has achieved a great deal in her career as a children's author, radio producer and feature writer. She has written over 30 books, including "The Princess's Secret Letters" series, and won two prestigious awards for broadcasting. Hilary is currently producing BBC Radio 2's "Good Morning Sunday". She has also written features for 3 national papers and a range of other publications including "Practical Parenting". Thank you, Hilary, for agreeing to speak to us today.

The Chairman of Governors has spoken about the principal focus of the day, namely celebrating the achievements of our pupils. We have heard reports outlining the successes of all three departments, and we will shortly present prizes to many members of our community.

Before I proceed to my main theme for the day, I must express my thanks to all who have made this success possible – namely the Staff, the Governors and the Friends of the school. I would ask all pupils and parents to join me in showing our appreciation in the traditional manner with a round of applause.

Today I will consider a simple question and what that means for us all. Having done that, I will conclude my speech with an appeal. The question underpins everything we do but is a very simple one:

What is a school?

It's not a building, not a place, not an employer, not a set of rules. The answer is equally simple:

A school is a team with a shared future.

The governors, the staff, the parents and the pupils are all mutually dependent and all mutually supportive.

History shows us that this has not always been the accepted perspective. Many schools used to see themselves as institutions for "training" pupils, shaping them into a particular "type" – schools would mould pupils according to the school's aims and the school's needs.

There are fascinating papers held by the Bursar's Association from the War years that show how far this perspective went. A particular well-known school was trying to persuade the War Office that it should not lose its ornate metal fences and gates to the war effort. They made a legal challenge to the possession order:

On farms, fences needed for keeping livestock in were exempt from seizure. The school argued that its pupils were livestock and that the fences should stay. They failed - the courts ruled that pupils were not livestock and the fences became tanks.

I am pleased to say that that view, in which schools delivered on their own terms and in which pupils were seen as vessels to be filled, is long dead. Nowadays, at schools such as Trinity, it is accepted that we must deliver what pupils need in order to develop their own abilities. Sometimes the approach must be caring and accepting, sometimes challenging and setting boundaries. The end point must always be, however, to produce confident, considerate and compassionate people

Trinity certainly produces confidence – I will give an example. David Milnes has mentioned the Year 9 Enterprise team charging me interest. The full story was enlightening.

Having left my cash in the office, I cheekily asked the boy on one of the stalls for credit. His eyes lit up.

“Of course sir. Normal price £1 - but we have to insulate our risk, sir, so £1.60 to you.”

Impressed, I agreed. I returned later with £2 which I proffered to the boy. He looked forlornly into the tin of change and feigning distress said,

“I’m sorry sir, we only have pound coins. We can’t give you the change. It’ll have to be £2.”

Half impressed and half gob-smacked I congratulated him through gritted teeth on his business acumen. He replied:

“Well you should expect that sir, my dad’s a lawyer.”

As with the relationship between school and pupils, the home to school relationship has transformed in the last twenty years. The attitude was very much that schools delivered and parents just accepted. The huge benefit of proper liaison between parents and teachers is now, however, well understood. I am delighted, therefore, that the updated report system in Trinity, with its system of target setting and parental feedback, is better than any system that I have seen elsewhere.

This remit of working closely with our families is growing ever wider. Current concerns about the economy are forcing schools to examine very carefully the balance of benefit provided by an independent education as against the cost of

the fees from the parents' perspective. This is a major concern to many in the Independent Sector.

Having said that, there is a silver lining to this challenge - times of economic stress produce better schools. We all ask fundamental questions about our operation. The net result for the average parent is better provision – focussed, efficient, cost-effective schools that deliver more for less. My aim is to ensure that Trinity is one of the schools that responds most energetically to this process and that, as a consequence, you and your children end up benefiting despite any wider economic concerns.

The idea of the school as an integrated team is clearly logical and, as you can see from some of the examples quoted, Trinity has very much embraced this as a central part of its ethos. But there is more that can be done. Keeping the school team properly unified requires one key ingredient: Openness. For some this is a dangerous word. The truth is that it is critical to the success of any school.

When I was at Portsmouth Grammar school I was responsible for the Pastoral System. In two years we took that system from being an inspection weakness to being an example of national best practice, now featured in a current Headteachers' guide on how to run your school. The key ingredient in its success was not a person, not a system, but the concept of openness – changing the culture such that problems were proactively sought out and defused, rather than being shied away from and therefore multiplying.

I am not saying that the school should jump at every request or pander to those with the loudest voices. I am instead saying that those who set the priorities for the school, namely the Governing Body and the Leadership Team can only do so successfully if they are getting proper feedback from the whole team.

This term I have sought extensive feedback and received a massive amount of useful information, for which I am grateful. Already, we have put in place a number of carefully considered responses as a consequence. All of them will benefit your children and Trinity's future.

This leads to my appeal:

If in doubt tell us. Don't fight shy of writing the awkward email or making that phone call to raise a query. For me, every email, call or letter is an opportunity: an opportunity to make what we do better, an opportunity to explain what we do more clearly, an opportunity for members of this team to understand one another properly. Having given me such useful feedback over the past few weeks, please do your bit to keep that information flow going in the coming years.

This is already a very special school. All of us here have helped make it so and I thank you for that. But I am confident that, good as things have been so far,

Trinity's best is yet to come and I very much look forward to sharing that future with you.

I am honoured to have been able to celebrate this academic year with you. I bid farewell to those who are leaving us and wish them the very best as they make their way in the world. And, finally, I thank you for your kindness in listening to me this morning. Thank you.

Mr Tim Waters,

Headmaster