

## **Speech Day Address, 24 October 2008**

Mr Mayor, Mr Chairman, Honoured Guest Professor Barnett, Members of our Board of Governors, distinguished guests, colleagues and, most importantly students and parents, good afternoon and welcome.

I stand here in front of you, our students, to celebrate your individual and collective successes, in awe of your achievements and very proud of you all. To your parents too, a sincere word of gratitude and congratulations.

A very special welcome to Professor Barnett, I am delighted you were able to accept our invitation to join us in celebrating the successes, academic and extra-curricular of our college community. Your role as Vice-Chancellor of The University of Ulster which many of our former students attend, or, from which are graduates, is a pivotal one in this changing educational landscape with more emphasis on raising standards, personalised learning and vocational qualifications.

At times, it can appear that Government policy and Departmental policy is disjointed and does not take into account the important transition from Sixth Form to Undergraduate level. Your presence here today, your approachability, your personal qualities and your academic and business credentials have created a strong and ever strengthening bridge from our school to your University.

Mr Mehaffey, Mr Gillespie, Mr McCarthy, Mr Canning, Mr Creber, colleagues from local post primary schools, to you I extend the warmest of welcomes.

At this juncture I should like to spend a few moments focused on my colleagues who, each day, put our young people at the core of College life, who embody our shared values of nurturing the individual, serving our local and global community and encouraging lifelong learning. You are at the very heart of the successes of our young people; you facilitate, inspire, encourage, motivate, enthuse and empower – you help define who and what we are as a College – namely a caring community and a centre of excellence.

Let us all now show our appreciation for the enthusiasm, loyalty, dedication and expertise of an exceptional team of colleagues with a warm round of applause.

Portadown College is a beacon of academic excellence, I want the celebration today to reverberate for weeks, months and years to follow – all our young people should be proud not just today of what this day means but in future years as you look back on your educational journey.

Our Senior Prefects will, in a few moments, outline for you our extra curricular programme of 2007-2008. But at this stage I should like to focus unashamedly on our academic achievements of 2007-2008. We as a College are proud of these results and proud of our academic ethos, our status as a Grammar School which is progressive, self reflective, improving and has moral purpose. 2007-2008 was another outstanding year for student achievement in public examinations.

At 'A' Level our students excelled and reached standards beyond even our high expectations. 55 students achieved 3 or more A grades and Joanne Weekes achieved an outstanding 5 A Grades. Jacqueline Adair was placed 1<sup>st</sup> in CEA A level Mathematics, Clare Irwin was placed 3<sup>rd</sup> in CEA A'Level Music and Rachel Turkington 3<sup>rd</sup> in CEA A'Level Home Economics.

In an educational landscape presented to parents, the press and politicians by our Education Minister Caitriona Ruane as one in which we are failing our students, one in which only the very able excel, I am proud to celebrate here today the success of all our students; at 'A' Level that success translated as a very high 93% of A, B and C grades.

Just over 99% of the grades at A'Level were A, B, C or D; irrefutable proof that we are serving well the needs of our students through the high quality of learning and teaching and curricular provision here in Portadown College.

130 of the 153 students in last year's Upper sixth are now in 1<sup>st</sup> year at University. The most popular courses were Medically Related Science, Business, Engineering, ICT and Computing and English.

This academic excellence is mirrored in AS and GCSE results. At AS level over 40% of the grades achieved were A grades. Mathew Greenaway achieved a commendable 4 A grades and 1 B; a further 19 students achieved 4 A grades and 12 students were delighted by 3 A grades and 1 B. If 3 A grades is taken as a points total of 405 then about 50% of our students in last year's L6 achieved the equivalent of, or more than, 3 A grades. This is a very impressive benchmark on which to improve further as these young people progress from AS to A2 level this year; no pressure Upper Sixth but we expect even better results than last year's Upper Sixth – you can do it!

Our GCSE results too were outstanding. 210 students sat a total of 1876 examinations and achieved an impressive 1141 A or A\* grades. Rachel Calvin and Rachel Johnston both achieved 10A\* and 25 students were rewarded with 9 or more A or A\* grades. Graeme McCullough was placed joint third in CEA GCSE Additional Mathematics and Anita Boyd first in CEA GCSE Home Economics.

With Government interest so squarely and justifiably focused on literacy and numeracy I am delighted to report that with a school % of A\*-C at 96% both Mathematics and English Language and Literature pass rates are above this already high school average. That means that, on average, students at GCSE, in this school, perform as well as or better in English and Maths than they do in their other subjects.

But how do these results compare with those of other students in NI and in other parts of the UK? At A2 level the % of A grades in NI was, on average, 35% and in England 18%.

Portadown College's was 51%. When A, B, C and D grades are taken together the average in England was 83%, for NI it was an impressive 95% and for Portadown College 99%.

NI results outperform those in England at GCSE too. The average cumulative percentage of A\*, A, B, and C grades together at this level in England was 66%, in NI it was 75% and in Portadown College it was 96%.

Interestingly, when the results from Craigavon Senior High School are added to our own and the average calculated, then once again this year it is noteworthy that as two schools, transferring the young people from our Junior High School into 2 distinct educational pathways, their needs are being well met and our average is higher than the NI average. An above average achievement at GCSE is a clear testament to the success of the 2 tier system.

But let me be very clear, success is not achieved purely in the 2 years at GCSE and the 2 which follow at A Level. Success, motivation, the foundations of learning are built in the local Primary Schools and then fostered, developed and allowed to flourish in Clounagh Junior High School, Killicomaine Junior High School and Tandragee Junior High School. To my colleagues in the Controlled Two Tier system in Portadown here today please accept my personal thanks for your support of my leadership through your generous open and consultative leadership which inspires me. Please bring back to your colleagues, our recognition of the pivotal role they play in the successes of these students today.

I should ask you now to recognise and celebrate, in your applause, the pivotal role played by our Junior High Schools.

Today, as I mentioned before, is about celebrating the achievement of every student, all of whom are not capable of achieving straight A grades but who set themselves realistic but aspirational targets, focus on the future careers and achieve these goals. Nearly all our Year 12 students achieved our minimum requirements to return to L6, some chose to pursue other educational avenues, others decided to begin their journey in the world of work. We wish them well in their new adventure.

With a L6 year group this year of over 200 students the clear pathway from GCSE to A Level within the College is evident. We have welcomed 15 new students from Craigavon Senior High School, Portadown Independent Christian School and Markethill High School into our Sixth Form and are delighted to have them in our College community.

I should like to, on behalf of everyone in the College, recognise how we value highly these young people and the important contribution they make in their 2 years with us to study A Levels. Once again, like the young people who transfer from our Junior High Schools, we are respectful and cognisant of the excellent learning experiences provided for them in the schools in which they have enjoyed such success at GCSE.

We recognise the responsibility and potential with which we, as a growing Sixth Form, are entrusted. We are never complacent, instead we are self reflective; we strive continually to improve on our previous best.

An entitlement framework with an aspirational target of 24 GCSE and 27 A Level subjects becomes statutory in 2013. I am proud to say that we have been proactive in broadening our

provision at GCSE and A Level to meet the needs, aptitudes and interests of our students and to match the Government's identified Skills Priority Areas.

Last year saw the second year of students studying Journalism and Astronomy at GCSE, at A level we have introduced Health & Social Care, Moving Image Arts as well as this year Travel & Tourism, Business Studies and Music Technology. The leadership of this College recognises the need to offer students a relevant, modern, progressive fit-for-purpose curriculum based, not on governmental targets, but instead on the interests and aspirations of our students and the needs of the local and global economy.

The world is becoming ever more accessible thanks to technological advances and although restrained by a budget much inferior to our colleagues in England where the Academies enjoy funding almost much greater per capita than here. We continued last year to invest in our wireless system of laptop lending libraries to support young people in growing the skills of independent research. Last year too we began to explore how virtual learning areas, podcasts and video conferencing may support the learning of our students and prepare them for life beyond our gates. I should add that most of this exploration is done in collaboration with our students as one way in which the student voice is making a strategic difference to the College.

Our traditional-looking exterior belies an innovative, forward thinking ethos and I have nothing but admiration for the way in which my colleagues adapt to change. They are some of the most dedicated, proactive, talented and flexible teachers any young person could ever wish to have.

The success of Portadown College continues to be built on the foundations of excellent relationships.

The world is changing at an incredible rate, with 2.3 million Chinese graduating from China's Universities each year, qualifications, progressive thinking and finding our place in the global economy has never been so crucial. China is building the equivalent of the National Electricity Grid every 10 weeks; China is building capacity in all areas. Government here must prioritise spending on education, allow successful schools more autonomy, ring fence less money and allow leadership teams of schools in Northern Ireland to set their own priorities.

By all means audit what we do and hold us accountable, but, in an attempt to make the education system more efficient, Government must not put at risk our effectiveness. So, as the Department of Education begins a consultation with schools on how they should be funded, given the expected establishment of parts of the Education and Skills Authority from April 2009, this is a golden opportunity for our departmental colleagues to listen to schools and put money where it is needed, directly into the schools' budget from where students can benefit immediately and we can create the foundations on which real capacity can be built allowing NI to play an important role in the global economy.

2007-2008 saw the completion of a recent Inspectorate cycle in Portadown College. The reporting Inspector was our new District Inspector Mrs Cheryl Stafford and she was joined by her predecessor Mr John Murray in visiting classes, interviewing teachers and compiling a report. The conclusions are very pleasing and the following areas highlighted as pivotal in the success of the school:

1. the way in which the staff of the College engage and are consulted meaningfully in planning for the future;
2. our rigorous self-evaluation as we strive to improve on our previous best;
3. the expansion of our Personal Social and Health Education programme; and
4. the effective leadership of the College.

The leadership of this College is not singular, every teacher has a part to play, our non-teaching colleagues have an important role and our Board of Governors who support and help us as a College navigate the journey. I'd like, at this stage, to mention, in particular, the role of Mr Wallace, our Chairman of the Board of Governors in his unwavering support, expert advice and personal support.

Our new Senior Teaching Team structure created last year to include Mrs Hammond, Mr Smyth and Miss Gibb provides a more inclusive and highly experienced team to complement the excellent work of our Departmental and Pastoral Teams. Our College should be rightly proud of this Inspection Report which finished with the following statement:

“The educational and pastoral needs of the learners are well met. The parents and the broader community can have confidence in the effectiveness of the school’s response to the findings of the inspection and its capacity for sustained self-improvement”. I am very proud of these conclusions and would wish to recognise the professional and supportive way in which our Inspectors worked with us to come to these pleasing conclusions. Last year it was an added bonus to have our success celebrated too by our Inspectors.

With change all around us, consultations last year on new GCSE and A Level specifications now complete, new specifications imminent, the establishment of area learning communities, the drive for collaboration, an Executive at Stormont which has ground to a halt, the following

quotation from author Mark Victor Hansen reflects the student centred thinking of my colleagues: "Don't wait until everything is just right. It will never be perfect. There will always be challenges, obstacles and less than perfect conditions. So what? Get started now. With each step you take, you will grow stronger and stronger, more and more skilled, more and more self-confident and more and more successful".

Those less than perfect conditions were evident in a slow year as far as the planned rebuild of Portadown College was concerned. The Department of Education has been cautious in sanctioning our request for a new Technology Block and a new Sports Hall but given the age of both buildings coupled with the fact that, to be retained, they will need to be renovated and extended, let's hope common sense as well as concern for the public purse will prevail. This area of the school site will free up much needed space to allow for a turning circle for parents reducing the current severe traffic problems on the Killicomaine Road. At this stage I feel it appropriate to recognise the sterling work of our Design Team which included members of the Southern Education & Library Board and our Board of Governors. Latest predictions place a start date for the new build in May 2010 with a brand new school in September 2013.

Last year also saw forward planning among local Principals taking centre stage with the publication of the Report of a Study of the Controlled Sector of the Craigavon Two Tier System, initiated by Mrs Helen McClenaghan, Chief Executive of the Southern Education & Library Board. Dr Wilfred Mulryne, the retired Headmaster of Methodist College Belfast, was invited to facilitate discussions and chaired the meetings of the Principals, producing a final report. From this recently published report come very useful conclusions and recommendations including that the current system of schools should continue to work together in ever closer collaboration in a type of federation; that pupil profiles be considered

as one item from the menu of information used to inform transfer at age 14 and that the Specialist Schools model should transform itself to make it a viable model in Craigavon. This is an honest, uncomplicated piece of research with salient, practical advice. It will provide a useful blueprint for future planning and must not be left without action to follow.

The challenge of future planning, the need to protect our Two Tier System given the landscape of unprecedented change in which we find ourselves could be given no sharper a focus than by celebrating and recognising its strengths. The academic strengths speak for themselves but the extra-curricular work of our students is truly impressive both in its quality and range. At recent Assemblies our students shared with the student body their summer work which improved the lives of others. Many of our students are involved in Xpression which aims to support the local community and inspire others to share in the love of God. Jason Calvin, Simon Caddell, Seth Mathers, Adam McKeown and Jonathan Mawhinney were accepted onto a tour to South Africa organised by Ambassadors in Sport, which is a Christian based Charity working to bring hope through football to the disadvantaged and marginalised around the world. Year after year, the students of Portadown College recognise just how fortunate they are in opportunities and support available to them by selflessly focusing on the needs of others in a range of compassionate Christian based activities ably supported and challenged by local church leaders, youth workers and volunteers.

Our extra-curricular programme last year saw some academically focused work too. Our students, ever keen to be stretched and challenged intellectually, took part in some very high level competitions. Talented Biologists Joanne Weekes and Kristofer McCann entered the British Biology Olympiad, Kris receiving a commendation and Joanne a Bronze Medal. Our inquisitive Mathematicians in Years 13 and 14 entered the Senior Maths Challenge and were

rewarded for their efforts with 3 Gold, 7 Silver and 6 Bronze medals. David Cox continued to the Olympiad round. The Years 11 and 12 also excelled in the intermediate competition winning 8 Silver and 11 Bronze medals.

Last year also saw the establishment of our Parent Teacher Association through which Mrs Sandra Biscomb, as President, coordinated a very successful range of evenings bringing parents and friends of the college together under one roof whilst raising funds to add to the educational experience of our young people.

To Mrs Biscomb and her committee a sincere word of gratitude, the money raised last year went towards the refurbishment of the Library and the installation of a multi media facility in the Lecture Theatre; a now much used and cherished teaching resource.

Last year too we had some staffing change, Mr Jim Wright our long serving Building Supervisor retired and we wish him a long and enjoyable retirement. Mrs McDowell will leave us after Hallo'een to take up her position as Head of English in Lurgan College. It is with a mixture of sadness and shared delight that we say goodbye to such a valued colleague. Miss Suzanne Gowing is her permanent replacement and she is joined by Mrs Tammie Qua a new teacher of Music and Music Technology and Mrs Judith Baird a new teacher of Health and Social care and Home Economics.

Portadown College remains an exciting place to be.

I shall now hand over to our Senior Prefects Head Boy Andrew Spence, Head Girl Hannah Nevin and Deputies Catherine Spence, Laura Briggs, Ben Shepherd, Mathew Greenaway and Mark Synott to share with you and celebrate the breadth and quality of the extra curricular programme 2007-8.