

Chairman's Speech

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the IAPS annual conference, I hope you will enjoy the warm hospitality of the island of Jersey, appreciate the comfort and facilities of the Hotel de France and derive stimulation and insights from the our conference programme.

For me, it is an honour and a pleasure to address you as Chairman and I would like to reinforce my commitment to IAPS and to our sector. I have gained much from membership of our wonderful association and I am pleased to have this special privilege to serve as Chairman. However, I shall move on swiftly as I believe we have a debt to acknowledge.

I am very glad to have this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Diana Watkins. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to work closely with Diana. Last year was a busy and demanding year for IAPS and its members; throughout Diana provided calm and wise leadership. I know that she worked indefatigably on behalf of our association and achieved a great deal whilst, as the Chairman must, continuing to lead her own school. Please join me, Ladies and Gentlemen, in thanking and applauding Diana for a job extremely well done.

Sadly, not even Diana's splendid efforts could prevent me from assuming the Chairmanship with plenty of concerns and thorny issues ahead. I believe our conference theme of 'Leadership in challenging times' reflects the situation that confronts us all, individually and collectively. Despite the tentative 'green shoots' of recovery pored over so avidly by ministers and the media like so many horticulturalists whose heating broke down in their greenhouses and now can't believe their eyes, we still have to face the reality of the here and now. The reality of an economy that is still in intensive care, of a government that is at best indifferent and, as exemplified by regulatory bodies, sometimes hostile to our sector; the reality of agencies and quangos that seem determined to frustrate and hinder (pause) and sadly the reality of a society and culture which are often profoundly at odds with the values and standards that we and the parents we work with rightly seek to promote for the children entrusted to us.

I will return to some of the key issues and challenges a little later, and I will also give you a report on the very positive results from the recent survey of members but first I would like to comment on leadership and its importance in the prevailing circumstances. I will dwell on this for a few moments because in times of difficulty and uncertainty, it is the nature and quality of leadership that will most profoundly influence the success or failure of any grouping or organisation; from small businesses to huge corporations and from families to schools. We, as Heads, bear a tremendous responsibility at any time but particularly when the prevailing conditions are more difficult and we should pause to reflect on key aspects of our leadership. Before I am accused of stating the obvious I will say this, that I believe I am typical of many prep school Heads in that I spend the vast majority of each long working day putting leadership into practice; teaching, managing and supporting colleagues, holding meetings, discussing issue with parents, changing photocopy cartridges etcetera – as you know well, ladies and gentlemen, that list is about as long as the roll-call of titles held by Lord Mandleson. What it adds up to for me, and I suggest many of you, is a very busy life as a leader with little time to spare for reflecting on leadership.

Our schools vary enormously and so, inevitably, will the styles of leadership. Governors and proprietors have wide discretion in appointing Heads and it is no coincidence that we are drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds. Understandably, those of us who trained as teachers predominate, although even then some will have gained experience away from education. In my own case I have worked in the financial sector and for the government. Our members include heads who have commercial and technical backgrounds, those who trained in other professions such as law and accountancy and some who are ex-military or were ordained as priests. This diversity of training and experience is a major strength of our sector, equipping many heads with a breadth of life and work that helps to explain why so many discerning parents continue to opt for our schools. There is no formula or prescription that fits the 'typical' prep school head despite the media's lazy characterisation of tweeds and brogues (but I hasten to reassure Mark Dunning that he always looks very smart).

I believe that the qualities we have in common will help us to define prep school leadership and to explain why our schools are so outstandingly successful: 'world class' as our CEO rightly likes to say.

Let me start with a major feature because I believe that we are great communicators. As Heads we must address a variety of audiences in different circumstances, from Speech Day addresses to informal chats at the touchline. On these occasions and at all points in between, we have to be able to charm like Blair and inspire with oratorical flair like Obama. Or to put it another way, if our communication skills were on a par with Bush or Brown, there would be very few prep schools open today! At district meetings, conferences and in committees I have heard many of our members speaking; I have also read a variety of reports, articles and documents penned by IAPS heads.

What characterises these examples of communication is eloquence, fluency, style and the ability to reach different audiences. Informative, persuasive and often witty, our members possess excellent communication skills and these will continue to prove invaluable in the future.

Our leadership also depends heavily on our integrity, a quality that is encapsulated in the phrase 'say what you mean, and mean what you say'. We win and maintain the confidence of our pupils, colleagues and parents when they trust us. It cannot be a blind trust based on exalted position or perceived infallibility; we must leave that to certain public school heads. Instead, we must earn trust through engagement, through teaching, leading assemblies, directing plays, coaching games, chairing meetings, leading trips and the many other types of interaction that typify the life of a prep school head. The high profile we have in our schools requires us to exemplify dependability and trustworthiness, like Mr Chips we must be constant in terms of honesty and reliability; that is the route to deserving loyalty and trust within our schools and the wider community.

As leaders we must also be able to inspire our schools with vision and confidence, helping our governors, colleagues, parents and pupils to understand how much can be achieved in the future. The importance of vision, of anticipating targets and success is underlined by the work of leading sports psychologists. Working with individual athletes and sportsmen and women as well as teams, their work has shown that the performances of those at the top in sport can be significantly enhanced when they think clearly and deliberately about success, creating mental images of coming first or scoring more points or goals. I believe it is very important for us to step away regularly from the immediate pressures and demands of our school life and, together with colleagues, governors any other key groups, to articulate those goals and aspirations that will inspire us to find energy and enthusiasm, even when the journey or task is hard.

Several years ago when I read Nelson Mandela's autobiography, 'Long Walk to Freedom' I was struck by his insistence on keeping the vision of a free and democratic South Africa at the forefront of his thinking despite three decades of imprisonment. Just as we seek to inspire pupils, let us remember to inspire ourselves with visions of how we can make our great schools even better.

This links closely with confidence, for there has to be that belief in the potential for achievement before the vision can be anything other than a pipe-dream. Confidence is, of course, developed more slowly. The nervous young child who is struggling to learn to read must develop the confidence to sound out letters and words through patient encouragement and the parents who are contemplating a significant investment in fees need to have confidence based on a school's strong reputation for high quality education and care.

Our leadership must be both rooted in confidence and able to inspire it in others. I hope our conference programme will help to reinforce your personal confidence and give you encouragement to believe that dedication, pragmatism and determination will not only see you through challenging times but ensure that your school thrives.

The last quality of leadership that I wish to highlight is endurance, to use another well known phrase, 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going'. I was reflecting on this just before term started when half-way around the 26 mile Three Peaks circuit in Yorkshire. It was typically cold, wet and windy. Suffice to say that I was tempted, briefly, to 'do a Harlequins', you know – to sprain my ankle or twist my knee. What stopped me? Well, it might sound very noble if I said that I had made a commitment or others were depending on me but, to be honest, it was the inspiration of a colleague. One of the teaching assistants in my school suffers from painful and debilitating arthritis, she struggles with stairs and cannot hold a pair of scissors yet you could not wish to meet a more cheerful and generous person. She does not complain, she just gets on with her job with tremendous endurance. I know that is a quality we can all possess and it is one that will, I believe, be crucial in the coming months and years. Many of our school will face challenges and quite possibly, at times, they may seem overwhelming. We must draw on our determination and resolve because I am convinced that I will endure, that you will endure and that our schools will endure.

Any wise and experienced leader, particularly a military one (and we shall hear from a very distinguished General a little later), would stress the importance of understanding your enemy, of knowing how his forces are deployed and what they are likely to do. With that in mind, let me in less combative tones I hope, outline some of the issues that lie ahead.

Let us not ignore the elephant in the room, we must face up to the challenges of the recession. The results from the survey confirm that overwhelmingly our schools are proving amazingly resilient and while that comes as no surprise to me, it will certainly confound the many media sceptics. As head of a small, free-standing school, I am well aware of the challenges created by the recession and yet I am optimistic because our members and their governors are remarkably entrepreneurial, willing to take tough decisions and focussed on delivering what parents want. Equally, we can see that many of our parents are making tough choices but they clearly value tremendously what we are doing and will continue to make huge sacrifices to achieve the finest education and care for their children. The fact that our schools, supported by IAPS, have coped so well with the recession to date, allows us to face up to the doomsayers and proclaim that we will thrive because we will hold true on to our core values and maintain our confidence.

I believe we can also see that the state system will soon face problems. With Ed Balls proposing to reduce Labour's mantra of 'Education, education, education', to 'Educ', and both Conservatives and Lib Dems talking of cuts, a decade of increased spending which has brought little except a narrow curriculum, devalued national exams and Academies of dubious quality, that decade is about to end. Those parents who initially approach our schools out of concerns about the state sector may well have even more to worry about in the future.

If the recession is the elephant in the room then the Charity Commission must be the hippopotamus! For many of us, its recent pronouncements are a cause for concern but should not, as our CEO advises, prompt us to make hasty decisions. I have no doubt that the commission's decisions are partial and probably ill-founded. The possibility of a legal challenge remains open and I can assure you that IAPS will continue to be a resolute voice of reason with this issue. In the interim, our association will work closely with ISC and the other associations to ensure that the very best advice is available to all our schools. St Anselm's deserves our wholehearted support and I believe it is quite likely that through patient dialogue and reasoning, the issues of charitable status and public benefit will ultimately be less of a problem than we perceive now.

Although as Chairman I intend to be guided very closely by Council and the CEO, there are two issues that I hope particularly to be able to influence. The first is the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The recent news that two Steiner schools have been successful in dis-applying from aspects of the EYFS may provide a glimmer of hope and I know that our Director of Education is already looking into the details. However, that does not I believe address the core issue. It is fundamentally wrong that the government, or more accurately a collection of pseudo-educationalists and bureaucrats, dictate to us – to independent schools renowned for excellence – what we should be teaching and, in the case of certain over-zealous local authorities, how we should be teaching. We have the experience, the knowledge and the understanding to determine an appropriate curriculum for our pupils and it was a sorry day indeed when we lost that professional freedom. Despite reassurance from Ed Balls that there will be no extension of the 'Nappy Curriculum' into KS1 or KS2, the promises of a here today gone tomorrow politician are as dependable as the Zimbabwe dollar. I am worried that we are looking at the thin end of a very dangerous wedge and, for that reason, I shall use whatever influence and opportunity I have during this year to campaign to reverse the imposition of the EYFS. Our independence is our life-blood and we lose it at our peril.

Secondly, I am concerned that the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is increasingly taking on the role of a regulator rather than that of a critical friend. When I talk to colleagues, many of whom are Team Inspectors like me, there is real concern that Reporting Inspectors are being moulded into fault-finding tick-box Dementors, sucking the individuality and joy out of our schools. ISI3 is now so similar to Ofsted it is almost impossible to tell the difference, like a supermarket copy of a leading brand. I do not believe that an inspection regime designed for the state system is fit for purpose when applied to our sector where there is such diversity, which is why I do not advocate adopting Ofsted. Instead I hope, as an association, we can have an honest debate about what sort of inspection system we need to serve the best interests of our schools. As a recent government report noted,

'Parents and carers who choose to pay for their child to attend a private school exercise a high degree of choice and control. The government believes (that) ... the disciplines of the market place provide sufficient incentive for fee-paying schools to operate in line with the interests of pupils and their parents'.

What an eminently sensible observation and conclusion. It should encourage us to look again at ISI, in co-operation with the other associations and, if appropriate, engage with Ofsted in a discussion about the right sort of inspection for our schools which are, as has been acknowledge, already highly accountable to parents.

As I said earlier, there are some very heartening results to tell you about from the recent survey (IAPS survey 2009). Thank you very much to all those heads who completed the questionnaire and thank you to Simon Shneerson for compiling the results and producing the analysis so swiftly. The headlines are these:

Brief explanation and analysis follows.

Conclusion

There is no doubt Ladies and Gentlemen that a challenging year lies ahead for most of us. Equally, it is clear that, as a sector, we are remarkably robust, we have coped very effectively with the recession so far and we are well prepared for the future. The sort of excellence we provide is not only affordable, it is essential as we are increasingly laying the educational foundations for young people who will have to compete in a truly global environment. The current situation underlines the importance of parents ensuring they provide the best for their children, and there is no better education than that provided by IAPS schools.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your kind attention and I hope you have a great conference.

John Tranmer

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