

Methodist College Junior School Prize Giving

23 June 2015

*** PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ***

Introduction & Congratulate Children & Young People

Good afternoon. This is my first prize giving and so I asked for some advice. I have been warned not be boring and to remember that you haven't come to see me.

I am delighted to be here to celebrate your achievements with you. I know that this is one of the most important events in the school year - a time when parents, teachers and the community come together to recognise what young people and the whole school have accomplished, rewarding you for the time and commitment you have displayed throughout the school year. Although coming on the back of last week's success with Annie it is clear that this is just at the end of a long line of successes for your college this year.

As Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People or NICCY for short, my job is described as:

Promoting and safeguarding the rights and best interests of children and young people to help them challenge and change the world in which they live.

And that's all children and young people up to 18 in Northern Ireland unless they have a disability or are in care when it goes to 21.

I have to take account of the UNCRC which makes a clear statement that children matter, what happens to you matters and what you have to say matters a lot.

So it is my job to challenge government and our politicians to value young people for the important contribution that you make to society. I hear people so often say 'children are the future' but I believe, like the founders of this school that you are the present and should be recognised now for the achievements that they make to for yourselves, your family, community and society.

You should be extremely proud of the high standards that you have set and achieved not only for yourselves but also for others who will follow. Today is not just about celebrating you (the young people), although you do get the biggest cheer but also all the teachers and the staff at the school and your parents and brothers and sisters because make no mistake none of this would be possible without them. Behind every high achieving child there is an exhausted and very proud group of adults.

Children's rights are not some pie in the sky or fluffy ideas but a reality that you should live every day in this school. They are a set of the promises that we as adults make to you and you make to each other. When preparing for today I found the language of rights all over the College's website which talks about placing a:

“great emphasis on the moral and social welfare of its pupils in addition to their intellectual, physical and cultural development.”

Since 1865 I may add!

Article 28 of the UNCRC talks about the child’s rights to free and accessible education but it is article 29 that expands on what that should look like. It says that education should be aimed at:

“developing the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to the fullest extent. Education [it says] shall prepare the child for an active adult life in a free society and foster respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values and for the culture background and values of others.”

Methody achieves this through it’s value of the importance of developing (and I quote) *“intellectual curiosity, critical debate, active and independent learning, and the pursuit of excellence.”* And then again the School believes in celebrating children’s different talent and strengths through the pursuit of curricular and extra-curricular activities.

So it is important that every day you and every young person in the school is experiencing the protection and promotion of your rights. It is not me that ensures this but your teachers and most importantly your parents who are your best advocates.

Before I finish I just want you to think about what you want for yourselves and the world around you it can be big or it can be little and whatever that goal is you will need to have the right tools, a load of confidence, a bunch of support, some determination and a smidge of luck. Look around you and hopefully you will find it in the school and your families. It's when you don't that people like NICCY become important.

I have a hero and that is Malala Yousafzai who as you know is a campaigner for the rights of the 70 million children around the world who are being denied an education. She says ...

"Let us make our future now, and let us make our dreams tomorrow's reality."

So school and childhood generally is about enjoying and achieving today as well as preparing for tomorrow.

But whatever that is keep the eye on the prize. Congratulations to each of you and thank you for listening.