

## MR. COOLE'S SPEECH - PRESENTATION OF AWARDS 2020

“Fastyr mie vraane as gheinney sehrey, inneenyn as guillyn. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys.

Madam chairperson, Governors, invited guests, colleagues, students, parents and friends of St. Ninian's High School. Welcome to the St. Ninian's High School Annual Presentation of Awards for the Academic Year 2019/20

This is the third year in the recent history of our school we have held this event at the Villa Marina and I make no excuse for stating yet again how honoured and privileged I feel to be able to speak to all of you here, with most of our Upper and Lower School students in the audience. As you are all aware this annual gathering takes on extra significance for us as we usually spend our working days spread over two contrasting sites. Our split site nature presents its own day to day challenges – but it is also a constant reminder for me that a school is NOT a building or set of buildings, but a learning community of people working together towards a common set of goals. For this afternoon though, we come together under one roof to celebrate and acknowledge the many achievements of our young people and that makes it all the more special.

In the same way that every student you see in here this afternoon is an individual, no cohort of students is ever the same and although from the outside the school calendar may appear very similar from one year to the next, no two years in a school are ever the same. By anyone's measure though this has clearly been a year like no other in so many ways.

The 2019/20 academic year started really positively. The school was coming off the back some excellent examination results in the summer and we had established a clear focus on our core business of improving the experience our students were getting in the classroom to help them learn. There were the usual successful trips that augment the learning in school - our MFL trip to Spain went in September, our Geography GCSE Trip to the Yorkshire Dales, Drama trip to Liverpool and Business Studies trip to the UK in October to name but a few. Little did we know then how privileged we were to be in the position at that time to give our students those experiences. In November we opened our new St. Ninian's Sixth Form Centre based at our Upper School site which re-imagined existing space in the school to create a much improved learning environment for our 250 or so sixth form students that we now accommodate.

Our school became an approved Apple Regional Training Centre - one of only 77 approved regional training centres across Britain and Ireland. And a programme of training sessions for teaching and support staff from across the island's schools commenced which are helping develop skills to unlock the potential of using mobile devices positively in an educational setting . My thanks go to the work of Mrs Smith for spearheading this initiative in her role as our Digital Coordinator.

To help address the growing demand for supporting students with their mental health and wellbeing we were able to establish a Student Wellbeing Room on our upper school site. A recent survey concluded that 3 out of 5 secondary school students have or are experiencing mental health problems or are close to someone who has. Our new facility is set up as a comfortable base for the external agencies we work with to meet and support our students. I must thank the Listening Service, Motiv8, Cruise and IsleListen for the work they do in partnership with our school to support our students. Our Sixth Formers have also established a regular drop-in service in the new room for younger students to come and talk at breaks and lunchtimes. It is clear that this is a growing issue in schools and wider society and there is an increasing need for support in this area, whilst this is fairly modest development it has been most welcomed by many of our students and we will continue to find more ways of addressing issues around mental health in the coming years.

For the first half of the year there was also growing excitement and a buzz around the school as the ongoing rehearsals and preparations for the school production of Annie gained momentum. The final performances took place in March and for those of you lucky enough to get a ticket I am sure you will agree with me in saying what an entertaining, professional and enjoyable performance it was. My thanks go to all staff and students involved in the many hours required to make this such a successful show.

March was also our school's turn to undergo an External Validation by the Department of Education and as Head Teacher I very much welcomed the opportunity to show the external team the work being done in the school. Their conclusions were extremely positive, they concurred the school knows itself well and that we were very effective in a number of key areas and going from strength to strength.

Our school badge depicts a Viking longship under full sail and oars propelling our ship forward with purpose. It is fair to say that at that point in the year, this was exactly where we were. Our crew of staff and our passengers of students were all progressing well, this had been externally validated, and we all knew where we were heading and what we needed to do to get there.

Then COVID-19 came to our island and, like in so many other areas, our St. Ninian's ship had to change course and we had to learn quickly to navigate through a sea no-one had previously been on. Monday 23rd March was our last day in school before our doors were closed to most. Tuesday 24th March was the first day in which the vast majority of our students and staff had to stay at home. The challenges that faced us and all other schools at that time were huge but we were as prepared as we could be and adjusted our sails quickly.

As a hub school our doors were still open to vulnerable children and the children of key workers. Hub areas were set up on our Upper School site where 2 metre distancing was maintained and were staffed on a rota basis. Our site team established enhanced cleaning protocols and our canteen team were tasked with not only providing lunches for those still in school, but in those first few weeks, for providing packed lunches for all those who qualified for free school meals from local primary schools, students from UCM as well as our own students.

The majority of our students and teaching staff continued their work through remote learning from their homes.

All in all there were 41 days of remote learning. Work was available and lessons were up and running from day 1 of this. Over 650 separate Google online classrooms were set up for staff and students to work remotely in. We knew it was important to maintain routines as much as could be during this period so students and teachers were asked to follow their normal timetable as much as was possible with teachers available for students during their timetabled lessons. Over 40,000 of our online e-praise reward points were issued to students for their efforts in this period. 3000 'engagement' grades were recorded by teachers to monitor levels of engagement by students and over 1750 welfare telephone calls were made by pastoral and Progress Zone Staff to students and their families. During this period all of our Year 9 students completed their options choices and commenced their GCSE courses through their remote classrooms.

72 students were accommodated in our hub provision staffed by 60 teachers and 20 support staff on a rota basis. I cannot begin to tell you what a gargantuan effort this was for all of us involved in the school.

The cancellation of all external exams also meant that teachers and schools were asked to provide Centre Assessed Grades for all students in all subjects in which they were entered into exams for. Approximately 2700 individual examination grades were calculated, based on a range of collected assessment evidence and then internally ranked and moderated by subject teachers, Subject leaders and senior leaders - most of this having to be done remotely.

We were also able to appoint 5 new members of staff using online tasks and Zoom to conduct interviews with them.

Whilst our review of this period has understandably identified some things we would do differently in future, as Head Teacher of this school, I can categorically state that our response to the challenges we were presented with was immense, whether it be the teaching and educational support team, our administrative team, our site team or canteen team, they all stood up to be counted and played their part during a time of crisis. I am incredibly proud of their efforts and would like to thank each and every one of them for their contribution over that difficult period.

I would also like to thank all of our students and their families for the way in which they also adapted and coped with the very different ways of working that were required.

These sentiments have been reiterated by other members in our school community too and I would like to share with you the words of one parent who sent me this during that period:-

*"Dear Mr. Coole, I just wanted to send an email to thank you and more so my daughter's fantastic teachers. She has worked incredibly hard during this time and has stuck rigidly to her timetable.*

*Her teachers have always been online for her during lesson times, they have managed to carry on teaching and kept her totally engaged in their subject.*

*They have always helped her when she has got stuck and always given great feedback on the work she has submitted. Their positive and supportive comments have meant so much to her - they have carried on inspiring and supporting her even from a distance and we are very very grateful to all of them. My daughter was so very upset when the schools closed and would have really struggled during this time without them."*

All that said, we would always have preferred to have our students back in school and I am sure all of you will have rejoiced as I did when the decision was made that our schools on the island could reopen which then gave us five weeks back with all of our students in school. All of us were

very aware of how lucky we were, and indeed still are, when we looked across the sea to what was happening in the adjacent islands. I am particularly pleased that having that time back in school meant we could hold most of our transition events in school for our Year 6 students due to join our school community the following September. We were also able say goodbye properly to our outgoing Year 11 and Year 13 students by holding their cancelled Proms and leaving ceremony. We also took the decision to roll up our timetable early, and commence our new timetable which enabled our Year 9 students to continue studying their chosen GCSE subjects they had already started remotely, thus giving them a valuable head start on their studies prior to commencing Year 10.

I will not say too much about the events around the way in which our students examination results were awarded this summer. Needless to say it was another extremely difficult and stressful time for all involved, particularly our students who, not only had to cope with the uncertainty of their examinations initially being cancelled, but many of whom were then initially being presented with results that were lower than predicted and not what they deserved. The English government eventually acknowledged the injustice that had been done and I am really pleased that our students eventually received the Centre Assessed grades their efforts deserved. They should feel proud, not only of the impressive final results they achieved, but also for the fortitude and resilience they and their families have had to endure along the way. This really was a year like no other and our students that were due to sit their external examinations were some of the ones affected the most with the disruptions that the virus brought to all our lives.

Our school motto is 'live to learn, learn to live' which aptly reminds us we are all learning all the time and the experiences of this unprecedented year for our school and our wider community has taught us much.

As a school we have learnt new ways of working that will enhance what we do going forward. We have a much better grasp of how we can deliver remote learning effectively and our staff have developed a wide range of skills in this and other areas.

It has made it clear that our ability to cope with adversity and challenges depends greatly on the mindset we face them with – if we have a growth mindset and see challenges as opportunities to learn and grow from then we are more likely to overcome those challenges, learn and develop as human beings. This period has reinforced the importance of developing resilience in our approach to life and not letting setbacks dictate our way forward. Our staff, students and parents have shown this in spades over the last few months and it should also stand our students in good stead when they are presented with challenges in the future whatever and where-ever they may be.

Thirdly, it has taught us not to take things for granted and the importance of not putting things off that can be done now. We should make the most of every opportunity presented to us and make sure that everything we do and every day we have counts because we never know what is round the corner...

Finally, it has made it plain the power and importance of community, positive relationships and working together, be that our wider island community, our education community or our school community. Nobody can achieve much on their own or if they are in constant conflict with one another, but with clear lines of communication, mutual respect, support and the guidance of family, colleagues, schools and the wider community there really are no limits on what can be achieved by any of us, particularly our students.

The ceremony this afternoon is partly to say thank you to all of you who have supported our school and the young people you see sat in here today, but primarily it is to celebrate them, their endeavours and their achievements in the face of adversity.

I would therefore like to conclude by passing on my own congratulations and utmost respect to those that matter most in this hall, our students. St. Ninian's is your school, this afternoon is all about your achievements and you should be so proud of how you have conducted yourselves through all of this.

Later this afternoon we will all hear from some of our students first hand who will share with you their thoughts and highlights of the 2019/20 year.

I Hope you all enjoy the rest of the ceremony, I would like to hand over to Miss White, one of our Deputy Head Teachers who will introduce our Lower School Awards.

