Headmaster’s Speech for Rishworth School Prize Giving at Halifax Minster, 22 October 2015

Mayor, Ms Stephens, Distinguished Guests, Chairman, Governors, Parents, Colleagues and Pupils

Ambition is not a dirty word. In fact it’s a good word because it’s drizzled with ‘challenge’ and aspiration, movement and progression. Ambition is having high standards and wanting to achieve. ‘Ambition’ is our vision for Rishworth School.

What is the purpose of a school if it is not to have the children who are growing up and learning within it at its very heart? It’s not just another employment option where paper can be pushed around in between employees neatly arriving to work with their sandwiches at 9.0 and leaving at 5.0. For the children who attend our schools, this is their moment. They get to be 11 once and during that year of being 11 every second should count. Every lesson should be outstanding. Every opportunity should be seized. And then they get to be 12 and 11 has gone – what did they do? What did they achieve? Did they grab every moment or did the sands of time run through their fingers never to be retrieved.

Some people ask me what I want to achieve as Headmaster of Rishworth School and my answer is simple. I want to build a community where young people can come to school and learn and grow up in a safe and stimulating environment. That community will exist because of the energetic and talented adults who operate within it and who teach and inspire the young people every day. Staff and pupils will have the opportunity to do all sorts of things that they might otherwise only have been able to dream of and at the end of every week and term they should be able to look back with some satisfaction that they have achieved something and that they have developed and learned new things.

We say this in our Statement of Purpose and Aims. We are interested in educating the ‘whole person’. We want every child to achieve their very best academically and we can rightly be proud of the achievements of our students, most of who aspire to and go on to study at the top universities. But we want them to do this having developed the various skills that they need to more than simply manage in the big wide world. I was reading an article on the BBC website a week or so ago. It recorded a debate that is going on at the moment about how independent school children and boarders in particular have an advantage when they apply to university or enter into employment because they are so good at what the article described as ‘the soft skills’.
The Human Ecology Education Study published in June 2015 states, “The Sutton Trust recently found in studies in 2013 and 2014 that despite improvements in academic outcomes from the state sector and, notably, from academies, former boarding school pupils continue to dominate elite roles in society, politics and business. This suggests that previously unmeasured factors might be contributing to their success when compared with children who have not been to boarding school, in both the state and independent sectors, and these factors were identified and measured in the Human Ecology Education study.”

Rather than the ‘privilege’ and the ‘unfair advantage’ card it would be more productive to ask why this might be the case and what these ‘unmeasured factors’ might be?

A starting point might be to look at the difference between schools like Rishworth and others and look at what they set out their stalls to achieve. If schools are only driven by League Table positions then there is a danger that they will forget the real-life people that sit behind every single one of those statistics that make up that League Table position. The children will become a statistic that is lost in an overall picture.

Oh, and that D grade that the local newspaper has derided a school for, and which represents a huge achievement for an individual child who, according to baseline data should not have been expected to achieve more than an F grade will be dishonoured and devalued.

Now, don’t get me wrong, it is extremely important that we measure ‘output’ and it is the case that results matter. But League tables don’t. What does it show you if academically selective schools dominate the league tables? That they have an effective selection programme? We constantly measure our children in statistical terms and output and we say, “that school must be better than that one because ...”

But what about input? These nameless, faceless children, these young people that are reduced to bald statistics are the most precious things that we, as parents have. We entrust our children, I entrust my children, to any school that they are taught in. I remember the first day that my child went to infant school many years ago. I remember how hard that was for me as a person because I knew that from that day on so many other people would be instructing my child and tipping their world view, their values, and their experiences into his life. For me that was a huge deal and I have no doubt that it is for you too.

I needed to be sure that the environment that my child was growing up in would be wholesome and that it would place great store on values and personal as well as academic development. Of course I was interested in what sort of results the school achieved, but I was more interested in what the
school would put into my son because that is the bit that will define him for a lifetime. And this brings us back to our statement of purpose and aims:

In nurturing pupils’ personal, physical, mental, spiritual, social, cultural and moral growth, we seek to:

- help them make the most of their strengths and address their shortcomings
- find areas in which they can truly excel
- be confident, balanced, considerate and well-mannered
- further their own, and other people’s development
- seize the present and prepare for the next stage in their lives
- contribute to society at large

To this end, we ensure that pupils develop:

- a life-long love of learning and a sense of academic curiosity and engagement
- a thirst for excellence and the will to succeed
- a sense of responsibility, self-discipline, purpose, fulfilment and ambition
- a capacity for both self-reliance and co-operation
- the development of the values of a global citizen and an appreciation of the diversity of people, language and culture
- an appreciation of personal virtues and spiritual values, such as honesty, dependability, perseverance, commitment, humility and respect for others

We are ambitious for our pupils. I want each and every one of our students to achieve their full potential and I want to create an environment where permission is automatically granted to think the unthinkable and to do the undoable. And we can do this because our students have dreams too.

In this vein, eight pupils from Year 10 and 11 took the opportunity that they were offered to travel with me to Nepal, to trek for 5 days in the Himalayas, take a flight around Everest, go on an elephant safari, and experience the sights, sounds and smells of Kathmandu. They came face to face with extreme poverty and deprivation and they spent a week in a school in the small village of Bungamati teaching Nepalese children. As many of you know, Bungamati was levelled by the earthquake that hit Nepal only days after our departure but it is already rising from the ashes and I am pleased to tell you that as a result of money raised both at Rishworth and Birkdale School in Sheffield, a new school is already shaping up and the lives of the children that we met getting back on track.

Others have travelled to Iceland and experienced the rugged beauty of that island. More were involved in a Sports Tour to Canada and the USA where they experienced yet another, very different
culture, and had the opportunity to play competitive sport with different schools and clubs on a different continent.

A number of students entered the annual London Research Project competition which has the simple aim of giving any pupil in Year 10 or above the opportunity to go to London, take in a west end show and stay in a good hotel for two or three days. They then use the resources available to them in London to research an issue, topic or question that they have posed themselves, all at the School’s expense. This year Katie surveyed the development of the Theatre from Shakespeare to the Modern Age, Benson and Liam researched the issue of air pollution and how it might be managed making a comparison between London and Beijing, and Eleanor, Eloise and Charlotte looked at how sustainable internet vlogging will be into the future.

In the last week Mr McGarry and Mr Bell have launched Rishworth’s first Space Project and have been busy recruiting for flight officers and all sorts of technical roles. Now, just in case you nodded off a few minutes ago and woke up thinking that I just said ‘Space Project’, you didn’t mishear. Rishworth School is going to space!

The idea is that we will put a weather balloon as far up into the atmosphere as possible and load it with technology and cameras. From there we will have all sorts of data to look at alongside some stunning video material.

A couple of lads came along to see me this week to ask if they could enter the ‘F1 in Schools’ competition. They need to design and manufacture a miniature Formula 1 racing car that will be powered by a compressed gas canister. What a wonderful introduction to engineering and they have my full support.

We have in our community a young man who holds an unbeatable world record for being the youngest person to have ever achieved a pilot licence to captain both a single-engine plane and a helicopter. He has now achieved his Dive Master qualification which allows him to lead a dive and teach basic SCUBA diving in a swimming pool. He will soon be able to do this in open water and then work on his professional qualifications. On top of all this, he has been offered an unconditional place at Oxford University to study Aviation. Being the person he is, he’s ‘considering it’ but is quite keen to pursue his interest in marine or ocean science.

You look around Rishworth School every day and you see so many good things going on.

- This week we had the pleasure of listening to yet more EPQ presentations. The Extended Project Qualification exists to give students an opportunity to create a project on virtually
anything that interests them and present their findings to an audience. It’s worth half an A level and packs significant punch in terms of stretch and challenge.

- In sport there has been another packed programme of fixtures for boys and girls
  1. We have seen success in tournaments and victories over big schools such as Manchester Grammar.
  2. There have been individual successes with pupils being selected to represent at all sorts of levels
  3. And of course we have also had the chance to celebrate the achievements of Old Rishworthian George Ford in the Rugby World Cup. England may have been knocked out, but many a pundit believes the story would have been different had George been in from the start in the Wales and Australia games.

- Musical performances on Tuesday mornings have included, this term, a number of pupils performing individually on violin, guitar and piano, and most recently, there has been a sublime performance of ‘Libertango’ by the Big Band. Music at Rishworth is truly fantastic as you have no doubt seen and will continue to see throughout this ceremony and I am really pleased to tell you that Rishworth and the Minster are joining forces to try and further this with the introduction of a Choral Scholarship scheme.

- In drama, there is currently a huge amount of industry as pupils work on the upcoming production of the ‘Snow Queen’.

- We have had a really wonderful set of Open Events where, once again I have been blown away by the amazing compliments about the ‘wonderful’, ‘polite’, ‘confident’ pupils who showed visitors around the School and the ‘inspirational’ and ‘obviously deeply committed’ staff in subject areas.

And behind all of this, making it all happen, there is a committed and dedicated army of support staff who quietly make the school hum and run so well without any fuss. That tired classroom or lab that looks so jaded at the end of every day, spruced up and cleaned in time for each new day. That dayroom or kitchen that needed redecorating and updating and that new floor that needs laying, all done without a fuss.

That message from a parent given to a pupil without a fuss. And the food! We have some wonderful food at Rishworth. Everything done quietly, efficiently. Thank you.

Rishworth School is about input. It is important that we measure outcomes and it is essential that we strain every muscle to ensure that the pupils in our care achieve the very best that they can academically. But it is even more important to consider what we put in.
WB Yeats once said that, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Filling a bucket is easy but when all is said and done, you have just filled another bucket. You still have a filled bucket. But lighting a fire? Who can predict where a fire will go and what it will burn? Who can control a blaze when it has taken a grip? Education should be about lighting a fire. Our students should be inspired and given the opportunity to think the unthinkable and do the undoable.

Ambition. It’s not a dirty word.