PRESIDENT’S ADDRESS

TO BE GIVEN BY

CLARISSA WILLIAMS
NATIONAL PRESIDENT

TO THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

OF

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HEAD
TEACHERS

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At 1145 Hrs

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Welcome to all. Colleagues, guests, family and friends.

I am here having completed almost 41 years in education. Becoming president of the NAHT is a great honour and I am both humbled and delighted to be sharing this conference occasion in the fine city of Liverpool with all my family, my partner, close friends, and David Giles, who inspired and encouraged me to become a head, London NAHT delegates, student and staff representatives from my school, schools in Liverpool and the Wirral and, of course, all delegates here today. I am also grateful to the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and the governing body of Tolworth Girls’ School for their generosity of spirit in seconding me to the presidency.

Since 1985 I have headed up a ‘non- bog standard’ secondary modern which I chose to run as a comprehensive school- no labelling of children as 11+ failures but lucky to come to a school in their local community which encouraged them ‘to aim for higher things’ and to ‘let their light so shine’

As a professional association, our core moral purpose centres on supporting leaders in their endeavour to provide the best quality of education across a broad spectrum of educational establishments. We also enjoy close working relationships with our partner associations abroad, something I should like to strengthen in my presidential year. We have similar dragons to fight!

‘Every Child Matters’- reduced conveniently to ‘ECM’, like so much else in our educational lexicon, has a fine ring. The truth is that in our green and pleasant land, there are pockets of
deprivation where financial, social and emotional poverty conspire to prevent young people reaching the basic levels that the psychologist Maslow identified in his hierarchy of needs in 1943.

Society must shoulder its share of responsibility in addressing the negative effects of a stubbornly persistent undertow of disenchantment and failure. Within our society are disenfranchised groups for whom jobs available in a previous era have all but disappeared or are being filled by foreign workers willing to leave home, save up and return home to re-invest in their own country.

Governments have imposed on schools levels of accountability designed to raise the game in order to demonstrate to the tax paying voters that they are in firm control of education and can get schools to deliver on their electoral pledges. Unfortunately they fail to look at the whole picture and it seems to me that we have a ‘painting by numbers’ approach to the way we effect change in our schools.

As we looked in speechless awe at a carpeted hillside of bluebells in Scotland three years ago, my mother remarked “Did you know there are 40 shades of green?”

Yes, this government has allocated a lot of money to raise standards.

One of their most positive steps is the ‘Sure Start’ programme although the jury is still out on its sustained impact on the life chances of our more vulnerable young people.

We sit in numerous cluster meetings, ‘divvying’ up, through complex bureaucratic formulae, money which is available this year but may not be the next. Poverty does not respond to quick fix solutions. Visits to Finland and elsewhere confirm that:

* other nations’ children are happier than ours

* parenting is highly valued
a higher level of taxation enables those enlightened countries to pay for the services—housing, health care and education the poor require to support them as they pull themselves up to that higher plane which facilitates the move from survival to self-actualisation.

I have written twice to our PM, questioning the rationale which relies on a punitive approach to ineffectual parenting. Fining parents who fail to ensure their child goes to school rarely works and simply makes another media story. There is a paradox between the current benefits culture which entraps the vulnerable, whilst insisting that all young mothers should find a job, leaving schools and other agencies to bring up the children.

Why do we feel the need to send children into an educational environment at the age of two? Are parents so distrusted that we want to separate them from their children at the earliest opportunity? Real communication takes place at mealtimes around the table, without the TV and the video games.

In my letters to the PM I suggested a more creative approach to the benefits system; one which provides incentives for changing the deficit model of child-rearing; one based on rewarding parents who spend quality time with their children reading and talking to them and turning up to support their children’s schools. Heads do not want to instigate parenting orders. What does that do to improve home-school relationships?

I read Gordon’s assistants’ rhetorical responses to my letters with ironic resignation and sense of sadness.

Now, hands up if you still remember doing your ‘O’ levels? That ‘golden age’ when we had standards and now we don’t, because children- or their parents- cheat by doing their coursework for them, when the reality is that we swotted chunks of knowledge and regurgitated it back to the examiners and promptly forgot much of what we had learned.
We ensured that only 40% of the school population did those exams with a gateway to a lower proportion progressing to A levels and then degrees. The rest went to secondary moderns or technical schools which worked for those deemed less academic. It was all so neatly stratified in those days. A whole generation of professionals of a certain age went to the grammar schools of that era and then when these were scrapped for comprehensives in the late 60’s, some looked back nostalgically, conveniently forgetting that cohorts of young people were labelled failures at 11.

We now have many types of schools because modern life demands variety. Variety also gives politicians an opportunity to create an illusion of choice.

Faith schools have enjoyed a surge in popularity based partly on self selection through regular attendance at church. Other ways of working the system include researching the data on the websites and Ofsted reports. Ordinary schools wait in fear of an academy being set up alongside them.

But we know choice is limited mostly to those able to exercise it. Allocation of 11 year olds to secondary schools by lottery seems fairer- after all, isn’t life the biggest lottery of all? What kind of mixed messages are we sending out?

Let me move to the theme of this conference- ‘Dare to be creative!’ We shall hear and watch young people perform in ways which raise our spirits and the smiles on their faces would suggest theirs too! Yet too often it is the arts subjects in our schools which are squeezed when it comes to fitting in the latest pronouncement of a government minister’s pet theme of the day on Radio 4. Literacy hour was never necessary for all, but everyone had to do it. Not every child will learn to read by Clackmannanshire synthetic phonics- but some will.

Too often we see teachers, perhaps aided subconsciously by anxious Heads, concentrate on those measurable skills in order to achieve those results at all costs. Lord Adonis informs us
annually that we are only as good as our position in the annual league tables. He insists parents want this information, and yet time and time again parents disagree. Who are we to believe? Who is listening to whom?

Do you remember story time with mother? After lunch in the good old days, our mums sat with us whilst a nice lady on the BBC asked us if we were sitting comfortably, and she would begin to tell us a story. In our early years centres we hear descriptions of little ones not able to sit still, so over stimulated are they or just plain tired because they did not get put to bed early enough.

But when the inspectors come to call, they need to listen to our stories, ones that are not always comfortable in the telling just like those awful fairy tales we listened to when we were small.

We know that the traditional models of learning are no longer appropriate- but the assessment machine that we are beholden to leads to a mechanistic model of learning for too much of the time. We see our young people vote with their feet. “Truancy rates still too high!” scream the headlines. Low level disruption drives teachers out of the classroom. Together we have failed to create the new curriculum for character that Professor Guy Claxton describes so cogently; a curriculum which allows greater self determination and will genuinely prepare generations of young people for a technologically advanced future within a global economy. NAHT published its own version of the 14-19 curriculum long before Tomlinson. How worrying to hear Jerry Jarvis, Chief Executive of Edexcel, express publicly his concerns about the successful implementation of the new diplomas as they go national this September. Jim Knight’s response acknowledged that the diplomas are the most significant change in decades. As the clock ticks away the weeks and days to the countdown, but without the essential levels of resources and training, he was being at best optimistic and at worst in denial of the realities confronting schools and colleges. Almost every day we see government spokespersons reiterating the same propaganda despite evidence to the contrary. They do not like the findings of the Primary review; so they set up another one in the hope of better news.
At a recent conference in USA, an eminent American Maths and Science consultant was scathing about the ways in which those subjects are taught in American schools. There are similar concerns here, resulting in our low rating in world comparative data. NAHT has a strong working relationship with the NC for Mathematical Excellence. We have a free resource which is there for us all to use- and should result in a growing confidence in the way we teach Maths. For too long it has been an acceptable confession for many of us to chant the mantra “I’m no good at Maths”.

Similarly, organisations such as the Smallpeice and Arkwright Trusts stimulate excitement and reward creativity in young technology learners and provide high quality, low cost CPD for their teachers.

They are almost ignored by government and business organisations that call for excellence in the 21st century but fail to support financially those organisations which are in a key position to deliver on this quest. It is always easier to criticise from the sidelines.

We are fortunate to link closely with the NCPTA in promoting creative practices aimed at strengthening partnerships between parents and schools. How different this is to a government approach which almost invites parents to take up the cudgels. “Convene a meeting and get rid of that useless Head,” they write in their latest Children’s Plan document.

Thankfully, our relationships with NCPTA and NGA are based on professional, mutual trust. We meet regularly to discuss the key issues and how together we might address these. We are intent on working in harmony- conflict is so wasteful of energy consumption.

All schools have anti-bullying policies. I should like to see a copy of the ones used by the DCSF, Ofsted and local authorities. Schools are awash with policies. What an indictment that we now need to have a policy on how to teach our children to play!

This surely serves as a chilling indicator of what our society has lost through years of persistent interference in education, which
in truth seems less concerned for every child really mattering as a person, but focuses on the child as a unit of resource, or AWPU; or percentage of A*-C and CVA based on FSM, and most recently, the obesity rates of children in postal code districts.

‘Dear parent,

I am writing to inform you that when weighed on January 5th, your child was found to be on the 5th percentile of obesity. Please ensure that you feed your child according to the diet sheet enclosed.’

Schools are almost always on the front line. We are usually the first to have to deal with abuse, emotional deprivation, lack of care, mental ill-health and a host of other social problems. We find ourselves penalised if we are too tolerant and generous in our support for the most disruptive—-but what are the alternatives? Last year we warned about the likely effects of the 6th day exclusion ruling; more permanent exclusions would result. Yet we also know that we have to work with our governors to make our schools more sustainable, to teach citizenship which warns against financial impropriety, debt and environmental impact through our unique carbon footprints. How many of us here have signed the pledge to no longer fly or take the train—-but never at bank holiday weekends? We live in a densely populated island where communities come together in their schools, returning to stay isolated in their homes, or foraying into gangs where they feel safe and less alienated.

Despite all of the pressures on schools we hold on to traditional values of caring for others. We manage to find creative ways of helping those worse off than we are. Our partnership with World Vision through the School Aid programme serves to illustrate this and I am pleased to announce our continuing commitment to this project during my presidential year.

I should like to lay down a challenge to our political masters. If you are serious about wanting to eliminate underachievement, to raise the game for everyone, not just those who are already gifted and talented and born with the silver spoon of living in the
right postal district, you must:-

- ignore us less and ask our opinions more- and not just listen to your chosen, favoured voices.
- allow us to show you how we make enjoyment and achievement in learning synonymous
- mirror the skills of choreography, so that we can interpret the same tune in ways which truly personalise the learning for our school communities

Only then will come improved economic well being, health and welfare.

We chose to become educationists- and our young people tell us they love to be taught by enthusiastic teachers who make learning fun and set consistent boundaries. We can do it- but there needs to be a massive shift in attitude and tone. Please, as Guy Claxton describes, change your habits and stop wielding that big stick in threat.

We rely on a loyal and committed cohort of deputies and assistant heads. As we approach the retirement exit of many ‘baby boom’ leaders, we need to recruit from the very best of our aspiring teachers. We have a collective duty of care to show how much we value their skills and growing expertise; but the job of Headship must not be perceived as a poisoned chalice. That is why I shall during this presidential year I shall be inviting leadership team members to join regional symposia to plan for change in their schools.

That is my challenge to us all. Dare to be creative. Our children regularly show us how creative and positive they can be, sometimes even in desperate circumstances. We adults must not be left behind wallowing in bad habits which breed cynicism and negativity. Sir Ken Robinson frequently reminds us how courageously imaginative we were when we were young and innocent. Let us re-discover our creativity and flair and go forward to enjoy and achieve in our own working lives, making real and lasting impact on children’s lives for the greater good of us all.