

**Michael Pain, Speech to National Early Headship Conference 2017 in Nottingham – 13<sup>th</sup> October 2017**

Thank you, Aidan

Good morning everyone

May I add a very warm welcome to Nottingham and to this year's national early headship conference.

It is a pleasure to welcome you all here today.

Indeed, it is an honour for Forum Education to host you and to support you at such an important point in your leadership journey.

You are – each one of you – I am quite sure, at the beginning of a very exciting period of your lives; ready to make an even greater difference to the lives of even more children and young people.

The opportunities you have to make a difference are endless. The responsibilities are great. And – crucially - the potential legacy you can leave for a

whole generation of children and young people is significant and worthy of very very careful thought at this juncture.

So, that's where I would like to begin today's National Early Headship Conference: by reflecting on the core purpose of this great profession that you are now set to lead as a new generation of headteachers and school leaders.

How can you take that sense of purpose forward and make it relevant to this moment in history and to the lives of this generation of children and young people? What – ultimately – are the outcomes that you wish to achieve for them?

From now on - the way in which you approach your roles and the priorities and agendas you set will define the education and lives and life chances of many many children and young people. It will also define the way in which your staff work, their priorities, their motivation and their development, and the impact they will have both within and beyond the classroom.

That is a great privilege.

So, I want to begin by sharing with you two recent and, I feel, quite profound quotes about the core purpose of education professionals. Both quotes are shamelessly stolen from the internet!

Together, I think they capture what we need from you – as leaders - more than ever before....

The first comes from a headteacher in Lincolnshire, and it is about the role you have in shaping children's lives today, in the present moment:

### ***SLIDE***

***“Teachers are the guardians of childhood.”  
Fiona Booth, Twitter, August 2017***

I think that quote has so much resonance and importance as you take on the mantle of leadership in today's world. How will your leadership define and enrich the childhoods of so many children and young people in your care? In schools up and down the country – what is children's day to day experience of childhood and how are they being nurtured and enriched throughout this fundamentally important stage in

their lives. I want to come back to that a little later.

The other quote is just as important. It's about your role in shaping the future and in shaping children's futures:

***SLIDE***

***“Teachers are the builders of society – we build people – we build and develop future generations. There is no more important profession.” Psychology Today***

Taking both those roles together, I want us to consider this overarching question this morning:

***SLIDE***

***As a leader, what is the legacy that you wish to achieve for children and young people you serve?***

Indeed, potentially the many hundreds and thousands of children you will serve.

So those are very big questions for a Friday morning! Nonetheless, there is no better place or time to reflect on them than here today. At the beginning of your leadership journey, surrounded by the future of the profession.

As CEO of Forum Education I am not a school leader. I am, first and foremost, a champion of the profession and the work you do. I and Forum Education do that through research, through the leadership training and support we offer, and through advising and supporting school leaders week in week out. I've worked with and continue to work with hundreds of schools and academy trusts to help them to adapt to and prepare for change, and make the most of the opportunities that schools have to make a difference. I've visited hundreds of schools, met hundreds of head and leadership teams, student and children's councils, met thousands of teachers – and written extensively about it.

And I can tell you that – in my view – there has never been a more critical time for leaders to focus on the true legacy they wish to shape for a generation of children and young people.

Why is that?

I see an education system that is in many ways out of kilter. That has become – to a degree - lost and slightly out of touch in a changing world.

It's focused on some of the right things, but not all of the right things. It's responding to some of the challenges and opportunities that children face, but overlooking some other, quite profound, ones.

I also see a generation of children who are doing well against some measures, but not always in the ones that are most fundamental to their ability to thrive in a challenging, uncertain world. And by thrive I mean to be happy and to succeed socially, as well as economically.

Some of this is down to what we – each one of us – considers to be a successful education. And that view is often different depending upon who you listen or speak to. Here are some things to consider...

- **What do politicians believe to be the key measures of children and young people's success?**

- **What does the media consider to be a successful education system?**
- **What do parents want for their children?**
- **What do employers and businesses consider to be a successful education?**
- **What do educational professionals believe to be a successful education?**
- **What are children telling us they want and need to thrive in their lives?**

When all is said and done – at the beginning of your leadership journey – it is about asking the question: **what do we really wish to achieve for our children and young people?**

It's about knowing what those we lead need from us.

We are living in a world that is changing rapidly before our eyes. A world that is rapidly shaping and reshaping children's todays and tomorrows. A world that brings unprecedented challenges and new, exciting opportunities for children – both now and in their lives ahead.

Yet, we have an education system that largely measures itself and its success in terms of Ofsted

judgments; performance tables based on pupil performance in particular tests; and a curriculum largely written by politicians a few years ago now.

And we have a media obsessed with league tables and competition between schools.

That would be all OK, if it didn't define the direction of our education system. It would be OK if it didn't do so much to set the agenda and priorities for us and sometimes make it more challenging to respond to the wider needs of children and to prepare them for a fast-evolving society.

Now let me say from the outset that you do need to meet the government targets and that Ofsted does matter. Of course, these things are of paramount importance. However, our vision and your vision for education can and I'm sure will be much bigger and bolder than that.

How will you define your school and your legacy?

I want to share a video with you.



In this video you will hear the rhetoric of politicians over the past twenty or so years. You will hear the very generic calls – that haven't changed so much over the last twenty years – for 'higher' and 'better' standards. You will also see children facing a fast evolving, increasingly complex and challenging world.

Are we ready to shape an education system that helps them to navigate the challenges and the opportunities?.

Here it is...

## **YOU ARE THE PEOPLE WE HAVE BEEN WAITING** **FOR**

Colleagues – the political messages tell us one thing – an insatiable drive for standards and 'the best education'. You will be 'educated, educated, educated'. Yet they only tell us so much. Those statements are woolly – and woolly platitudes do a disservice to children. They only provide a narrow perspective of what education and childhood is about – and what is required of us in today's world.

The truth is the politicians do not have all the answers. They are also not the experts in children and in learning – you are!

The experiences of children and young people's daily lives presents an increasingly complex picture. They need high standards of literacy and numeracy. That is a given. Literacy and numeracy are the foundation of academic success and a cornerstone of success in life. But children also need to be happy, content and engaged if they are to learn. They also need to be equipped to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the modern world. How well are we preparing them and supporting them to do that?

Let me take the first quote...

## **1. 'Guardians of childhood' (& staff!)**

### **i. Academic success must be built on solid foundations**

I want to share some research with you – the 'How's Life' report published by the OECD last year.

And it makes for rather stark reading.

The research looked at the views of children from across a large number of economically developed countries. It gathered their views on a range of issues and aspects of their lives.

Children in the UK rated their life satisfaction at a level that puts us amongst the lowest third of countries surveyed.

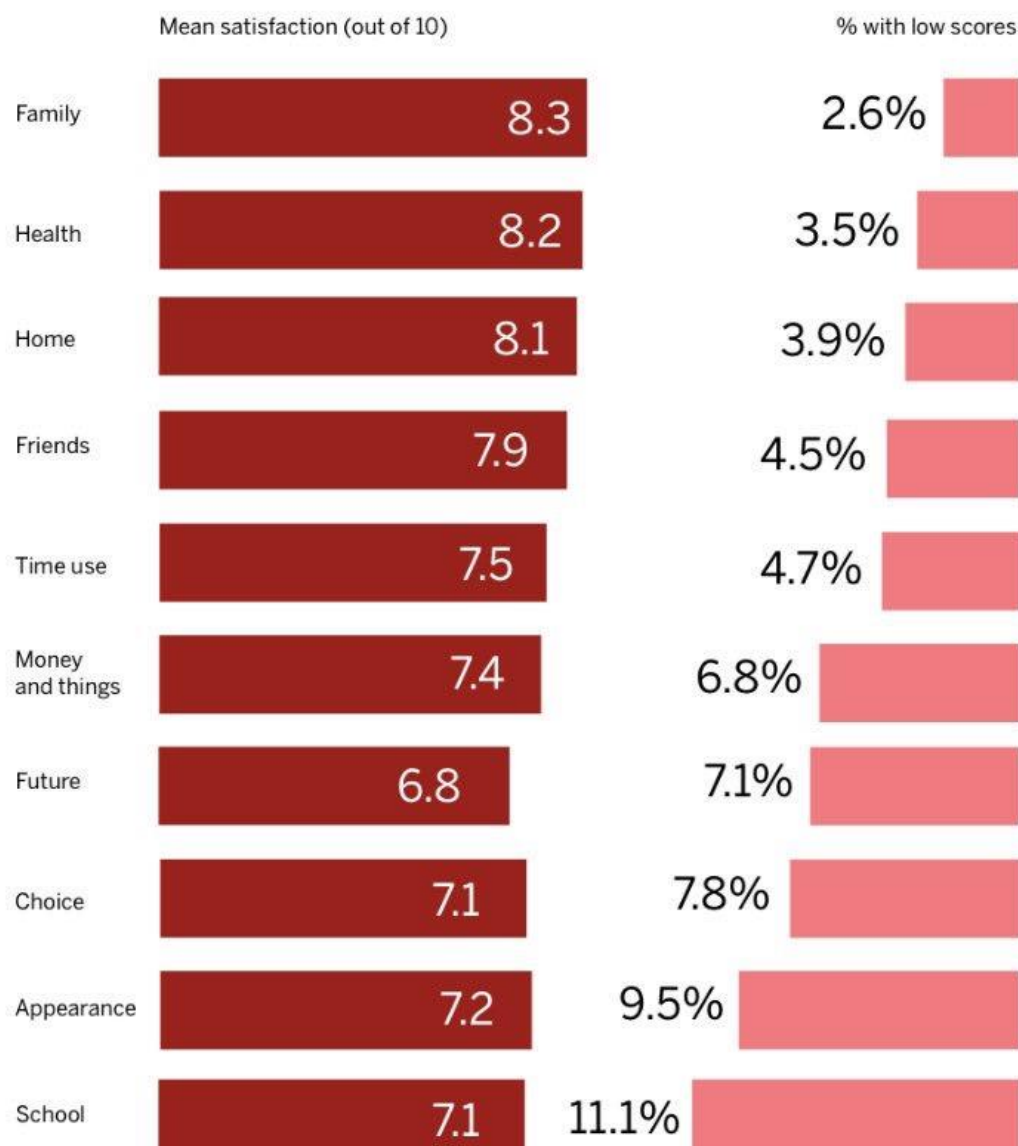
We have a big red circle next to us.

We see this replicated in areas such as levels of obesity, how children rate their own health and wellbeing, and – most unfortunately – in terms of the pressures they feel around performance at school.

This research is backed up by 2016's Good Childhood report which shows children and young people's happiness in decline. Children are least satisfied with issues such as appearance, certainty over their futures, and – again – their performance at school.

Indeed, satisfaction with school was the by far the most frequently lowest scoring aspect of children's lives.

**Figure 2: Latest figures for The Good Childhood Index**



Household Survey Wave 15, April/May 2016, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain.  
Equally weighted by age and gender.

This is stark reading at a time when we know children's mental health and general life satisfaction is of major concern. Instead of supporting children to navigate some of challenges and concerns that the modern world presents – school is, to all intents and purposes, too often part of the challenge.

As a researcher involved in a recent study that found that almost a quarter of teenage girls are struggling with depression said: ***“we need to rebalance our education system, so that schools are able to prioritise wellbeing and not just exam results.”***

Now very few of these statistics and conclusions make their way into the narrative about education in this country. They are rarely discussed as we get lost rating success in terms of league tables and the Ofsted criteria. The day to day lives of children, the experiences that shape them, too often fall under the radar.

Academic success is enormously important, but it cannot be built on sand. The research shows that the pressures children are under are higher than at any other time. It is a scar on the conscience of or

country that one in four teenage girls are struggling with high symptoms of depression. And this seems to have an increasing link with the reality of day to day life in schools.

This is a generation of children who need us to prioritise their wellbeing. A generation of children who need us to protect them from the ‘high stakes’ culture – that undoubtedly exists in too many schools – and to set a very different tone around what school is about and what education is about. Is education all about tests and exams, or is it about learning, discovery and developing the skills and traits that will serve us well in our lives ahead?

Headteacher John Tomsett recently wrote in the TES that

**“The best thing a head can do is to protect staff from pressure and allow them to teach in a climate of freedom not fear.”**

Of course, children absorb pressure and fear like sponges. So in protecting our teachers – and this is a big responsibility of headteachers – we should also ask, what can we also do to protect our

children and ensure they can develop a love of learning – without the fear? Yes, tests and exams are inevitable, but should they dominate our thoughts, culture and our children's day to day experience of learning. Should children and young people be feeling the pressure in the way they seem to be?

We're going to hear more on this from Lorraine Petersen later today.

As a group of new heads what can you do to set the climate in your schools so that school is a place that enriches children's lives, where learning is enjoyable and where children feel comfortable and confident to do their very best.

Children's mental health and sense of anxiety and fear is a major issue generally. The best schools, those who nourish and prepare their children well, will be those who are part of the solution. Those schools who provide - as our next speaker, Marie-Claire's school calls it - 'a haven in which children flourish'

Pushing back and reducing the stakes is a challenging prospect in a high stakes system. For

you as leaders it will take courage and the ability to balance the pressures and demands of the system with the needs of staff and children.

However, there are one or two other key challenges you face as the guardians of childhood and I'd like to touch on these briefly too

### Time spent outdoors

Recent research has shown that children are spending less time outdoors than prison inmates. Only a tenth of children regularly spend time in wild spaces compared with half a generation ago.

This is, again, a very stark situation, and I mentioned the challenge of obesity and the fact that children are rating their own health quite poorly.

I recently met a headteacher at a fantastic school in Lincolnshire who had developed an inspiring outdoor learning environment and had embedded outdoor learning across most aspects the curriculum. When I asked him why, he simply said: "because children are spending more time inside



boxes, looking at boxes, and increasingly thinking in boxes.”

That head had recognised the issues and had wanted to change things on his terms and for his school. He retired last summer and his legacy is a generation of children who value the outdoors and have a thousand memories to draw upon.

It's about physical health and learning

***“The outside world is the brain's food – the richer the diet (experienced by the child through sound, vision, smell, touch and taste) the more the brain rapidly develops. This is particularly true for language development.”***

John Abbott

So what can you do in your leadership to ensure that children are spending more time outside and are stretching their legs, exploring, being creative and enjoying the fresh air? It may sound twee-but, again, we know the importance of play and exercise to healthy and happy development. It is a building block of childhood.

How can you guard it as a new generation of heads?

And finally...

## Technology

And I cannot leave reflections on childhood without a few words on the impact of technology.

Technology is playing a massive role in children's lives.

When a child is born, their brain is only one third formed. The rest of development takes place between birth and adolescence. This is the natural process of childhood.

However, technology is playing a more prominent role in the way children think and interact. It is playing a fundamental part in children's development – including the way they learn, think and interact.

The average age of first-time mobile phone ownership now being seven years old!

Technology can be a force for good – a source of learning, a platform for creativity. It can open a world of opportunity if used carefully.

Yet without guidance and when used in excess technology can be toxic.

It can encourage children to be passive recipients of information – which can be either junk or more sinister. It can be a barrier to regular, meaningful social interaction. We are seeing more children coming into school with lower levels of speech and language development than before – with less communication at home seen as a key factor in this. This continues right through childhood, I spoke to a sixth former the other day who said that no one in the common room speaks to one another anymore!

Researchers have already highlighted the addictive nature of smartphones – making comparisons with gambling. British health watchdog NICE guidelines suggest a limit of two hours of screen time a day for adults and children yet we know for many it is so much more.

Technology can also send harmful messages of self-promotion and insatiable search for self-validation generated by sites such as instagram, - present messages of how gratification can be

achieved instantly through the purchasing of material goods.

Technology is now an inevitable part of childhood. We cannot turn the tide. It's not going anywhere. However, how will your leadership and your schools equip children to be 'masters' rather than 'servants' of technology?

How can we retain a premium on social interaction in the face of the online world? How can we encourage independent learning and creativity in a world where we have instant access to information and games/apps designed for us at the click of a button? How do we equip children with the skills to use technology in a very positive way, which enhances their own lives and contributes to society?

Technology can provide the answers as well as the challenges, but these are big big questions for you as the new generation of leaders.

## **SLIDE**

What is true is that the mental health and life satisfaction of children, their health and their

ability to play and explore, and their healthy development in terms of technology can no longer be seen as 'bolt-ons'. They are fundamental to children's healthy development and their ability to thrive in today's world. They are fundamental to a successful education – even if they don't feature in the league tables and the judgments.

So I believe that a big part of your legacy as a new generation of headteachers must be to be the guardians of childhood. To do what you can to create a culture, climate and agenda to make a difference in these areas.

It is hard.

There are many competing agendas.

However, they promise to be the defining issues for this generation of children – and how you equip children to manage them will – I am certain – ultimately define the success of your leadership. Whether Ofsted and the DfE says so or not.

## ***2. Build and develop future generations.***

***“Teachers are the builders of society – we build people – we build and develop future generations. There is no more important profession.” Psychology Today***

This second area of purpose is just as pressing and important.

How do we prepare children for a society that we do not yet recognise or understand?

The last thirty years have provided us with relative economic stability and well-funded public services. We have seen huge investment in our schools. We have seen a state largely ready to step in when the going gets tough.

That has changed and the next fifty years do not offer the same prospect.

Let me share some facts with you.

This generation of children are far more likely to change jobs multiple times (and even careers at

least once) during their lives; more likely to face redundancy at some point; far more likely to be self-employed and need to seek their place in a competitive and fast-changing market – without the employee benefits such as sick leave, pensions and maternity leave that so many of us take for granted.

These are times that are going to require resilience, adaptability and creativity.

However, it also won't surprise you that the risk of poor mental health is higher for this generation than those before – indeed, as we have seen, it is becoming an issue long for so many children long before leave school.

This generation of children will live during a prolonged period of restrained investment and spending in public services. The safeguards won't necessarily be there. They will retire well into their seventies.

And this generation of children will also need to care for and provide for us – the generation before them who are going to be living longer.

How are we preparing them for this new world?

However, whilst there are challenges to prepare them for – there are also opportunities.

They are much more likely to work in a global market place – working across cultures and continents. Building new experiences and relationships that were out of reach just a couple of generations ago.

There will be a premium on creativity and innovation. The creative industries have constituted the fastest growing part of the economy for the last ten years. It is the sector most likely to be resilient in the face of automation.

The rise of an entrepreneurial economy is also a positive and exciting prospect. Our children will be involved in solving complex challenges in terms of climate change, environment sustainability, and the positive use of advanced technology.

All of this will require high standards of literacy and numeracy. Without this children and young people are destined to struggle and to lose out in a



competitive world. However, with just literacy and numeracy skills alone and without being equipped in other ways – failure is also a very real prospect.

I want to share another video with you now.

It's from Centre Online and it attempts to look at the world ten or fifteen years from now.

(VIDEO 2- The world in 2028)

The evolving world around us will require us to prepare children and young people to develop literacy across a wide range of areas:

**“Schools must promote an understanding of academic content at much higher levels by weaving 21st century interdisciplinary themes into key subjects:**

- **Global Awareness**
- **Financial, Economic, Business and Entrepreneurial Literacy**
- **Civic Literacy**
- **Health Literacy**
- **Environmental Literacy**
- **Information, ICT & media Literacy”**

## Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning

As leaders, how do you foresee building this into the life and the curriculum of your school. Much of this can be aligned with the national curriculum – whether it be developing financial and business acumen in a way that is aligned within the maths curriculum or entrepreneurial, marketing and public speaking skills in a way that aligns with English. Whether it be raising awareness and understanding of environmental challenges within the geography curriculum or developing deeper global awareness within the modern foreign languages and RE curriculum. Whether it be the prominence of creative arts – including music and design, or the way in which you make the space to educate and support children to be discerning users and developers of technology.

REAch2 Academy Trust have developed a scheme called 11B411 – a scheme not too dissimilar to the National Trust's

The scheme makes a pledge to all children that they will engage in 11 activities before age 11, including sleeping under the stars, riding a large

animal, and climbing the summit of a mountain - all enriching childhood experiences. But it also includes doing 10 good deeds in ten days – for civic education, public speaking opportunities, the chance to visit another country – to broaden global and cultural awareness, and creating a sculpture or piece of music.

For that trust and for those schools it is about making the scheme and the work a priority by aligning it to the curriculum wherever possible – but also ensuring it is prioritised and its value despite much of the work not having a direct bearing on year to year performance indicators.

Margaret Clarke, Training and Development manager at REAch2 describes this:

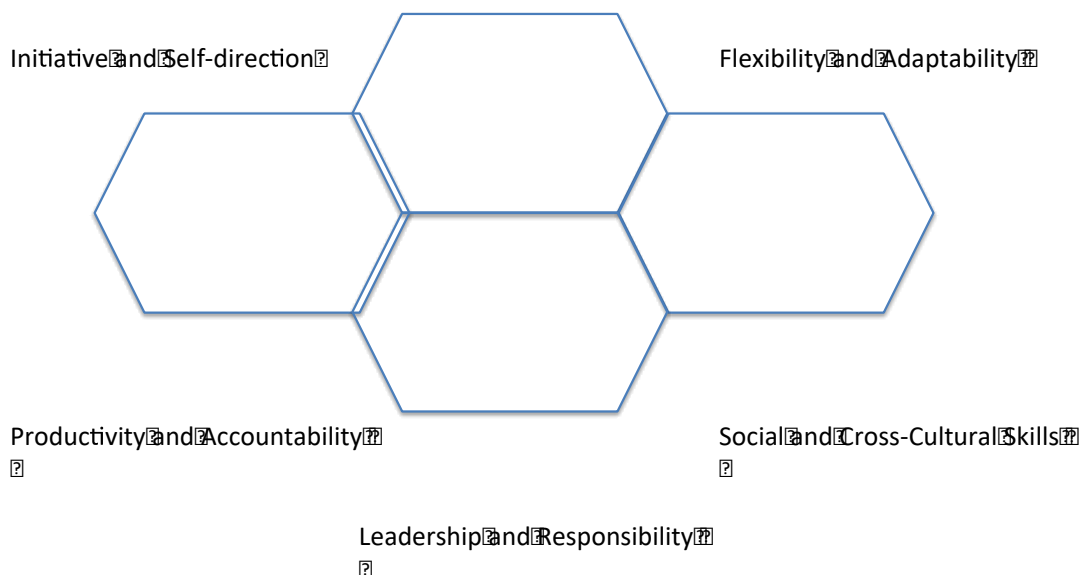
***“Because something isn’t measured or quantifiable does not mean it doesn’t have enormous value or worth. Some of things our children need from us cannot be readily measured. Experiences and opportunities that open their hearts and their minds to the possibilities of the world.”***

The challenge is to ensure learning and the education experience of children is geared in a way that prepares them with the understanding, skills and traits that will serve them well in future.

The Partnership for Learning research highlighted the key traits and characteristics required to succeed in the century ahead.

Traits such as

## Key skills & traits for 21<sup>st</sup> century



As well as redefining the curriculum and making it future-ready, how do you as leaders ensure that you and your teams are modeling and encouraging the characteristics and traits that will underpin children's and young people's future success.

Are we demonstrating the commitment to creativity and innovation, to collaboration and working with others, and to identifying the problems our communities face and finding solutions.

That is a much more conducive culture to preparing happy, health and engaged children and young people than one that is so focused on compliance and competition with others.

I love this quote from Jean Piaget

***“The principle goal of education is to create people who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done – people who are creative, inventive and discoverers.”***

**Jean Piaget**

So, how will you model this as a leader so that you staff and ultimately your children can achieve this too?

How does this become a reality in your contexts?

## Conclusion

As leaders your big job is to ensure that schools are serving children well in their lives today and preparing them for the lives they will lead in future.

It is a big and important task. It is a calling - and you can't do it alone.

Which brings me on to the final section of my speech today.

As leader of an organisation and as someone with significant experience of supporting school leaders to thrive, what advice can I give to you in making sure that your job is both doable and successful..

How can you put yourselves in the best position to serve children and create a great legacy for them.

Here are a few conclusions...

1. Recruit people with values, passion and talent. Ensure you are always striving to be an 'employer of choice' – the returns on investing in people are substantial.
2. Recognise talent and empower people with high potential to lead, create and innovate (with support). This will ensure your leadership is sustainable.
3. Set the bar – always model the standards and the values you expect from others
4. Remain a restless learner – seek mentors, look outwards to others for ideas. No matter how successful you become, remain humble in the face of change. Welcome and encourage challenge from your governing body. The better your governing body, the even better a leader you will be.
5. Listen to those you serve first – children and communities (look outwards, then upwards)
6. Keep coming back to the legacy and vision you wish to achieve – tell the story constantly. Do this in partnership with your governing body.

7. Maintain a sense of humour! You're doing an amazing job – enjoy it!

Colleagues, you do have an amazing and hugely important job ahead of you.

You can make a difference.

The quality and impact of your leadership will only be as strong as the legacy you set out to achieve to begin with.

Today I've been quite challenging, quite provocative,

I hope that you go away firm in your own minds about what you wish to achieve – and most importantly why you wish to do so.

As leaders - no one else can give you the answers, you are the people we've been waiting for. But you will need to work together - with your staff, your communities, with other schools and with other heads – to make a bold and ambitious vision a reality for your children.



There hopes, dreams and expectations are to a large extent in your hands – that is an honour and a privilege

I want to end with a poem...

***The Contract: A word from the led***

**William Ayot**

Stay true to why you do the job, to the children and young people you serve, and what you are trying to achieve for them.

A whole generation of children and young people will remember and thank you for it.

That is your legacy.

Good luck!