

Chair of the Board, Mr Trethewey '76, MP for Epsom Hon David Seymour '97, Hon Paul Goldsmith '84, members of the Board, invited guests, our young men, staff and parents, it is my pleasure and privilege to present the 2024 Headmaster's report. Being present, at a ritual of this nature, whether a prize winner or not, we hope is aspirational.

It is your presence that turns this tradition into a celebration and a trait seen in quality education – one that can too readily go unrecognised, that is; where rituals and traditions teach us about how to be a contributing member of a community. In our case this includes the formalities of behaviour, dress standard, appropriate responses, and the respect shown to endorse high-level achievements at all levels of the School.

Given the educative elements of our traditional prizegiving, it is a pleasure to welcome Hamish Kerr' 10 to the stage. Hamish's gold medal success at Paris this year, inspired the country, so it is even more special that he has remained connected with his School. His presence, along with other special guests helps gives this ceremony further gravitas. Thank you.

Hamish's gold medal success reverberated around the world because of his preparedness to be measured, to keep competing – share the gold, or compete for outright gold. His actions endorsed a meritocracy and that very aspect of today's prizegiving – *“be prepared to be measured on your own performance and your attitude”*.

That meritocratic education, as Hamish experienced and every young man seated in the hall today knows about, involves clearly defined boundaries, structured days, consistency in approach, accountability for above the line behaviours and the little things like the grooming and uniform checks that are almost a weekly ritual.

Boys, you have had to make sacrifices to be part of a meritocracy and to be a contributing member of Auckland Grammar School this year, just like those before you did too - the expectation to study, the consistent standard of uniform, the grooming, the 3 internal examination series a year and the bonus of externals in your 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> form, with some of you sitting in excess of 20 examinations through October and November, are all part of who we are.

I raise this structured approach and our formal rituals with you, as they have been in place for good reason – to progress your learning.

You also probably know that in 2024 you are outliers in the New Zealand education system. That's not because of change here, rather its due to the erosion of our education system nationally. Personified, it has licked the lollipop of mediocrity.

You gents, contrast this and continue to exhibit what a quality and rigorous education can and should look like in our country.

Nationally, the curriculum needs to change. The national qualification framework needs to be obliterated. Both are overly politicised and shouldn't be. Both need to be prescriptive to advance education for all and if we are no longer going to disguise nation-wide underachievement by amending assessment methodology so more students experience success.

Since the introduction of NCEA in 2002 this school has been asking for change to national curricula and assessment systems, for the betterment of all. The School's 2002 critique of NCEA said, *"This system will not close the gaps, it will open them"*, and asked whether we really wanted to inflict this system on our teenagers. 22 years later this is a reality and the reactions about fixing it are the wrong ones.

Self-proclaimed education experts and Ministry types now share messages with schools that reiterate an over bearing obligation to 'well-being' rather than best educational practice. Well-being to disguise a lack of learning & poor behaviour. This is creating greater disadvantages and widening the gaps in learning between schools.

Geoff Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, who wrote *Coddling of the American Mind* reinforce this point with statements such as:

*"Human beings need physical and mental challenges and stressors or we deteriorate."*

Nassim Taleb, Professor at New York University spoke of systems that are antifragile becoming rigid, weak and inefficient when nothing challenges them or pushes them to respond vigorously. He said:

*"Just as spending a month in bed leads to muscle atrophy, complex systems are weakened and even killed, when deprived of stressors."*

You know learning new content in subjects is often difficult. It is often complex. It often challenges.

New Zealand writer, Karl Stead said:

*"You cannot create equality by legislation; you can only create opportunity and let time and individuals do their work. Equality of opportunity is the moral principle. Inequality of talent, energy, commitment, intelligence, strength of purpose and will is the fact of life."*

Creating the equal opportunity for all students to receive a high standard of education doesn't remove the stressors, it adds them in. This process teaches self-management and the independence to know where to seek support. Well-being is promoted through learning and through being part of a high standards community.

Today you will see equality of opportunity in action, with students from A through to R crossing stage – acknowledging we are all different, and have different strengths and

weaknesses, but if given an equal opportunity to learn, those who take it, benefit the most. Every student who crosses today deserves our collective praise.

If we are to achieve equality of opportunity in education across our country, it will require a number of non-negotiable traits being visible in all schools. Hopefully, you recognise them.

They are:

1. A curriculum that specifies in detail the knowledge that students should learn, the sequence it should be taught in, and what students should be able to do it
2. A culture that puts learning of the curriculum at the top of the priority list
3. Shared understanding of what “good” performance looks like, in all fields
4. High expectations for all students, where students know what is expected, want to meet those expectations and know they will be held accountable
5. Regular, honest, precise information about what students know and can do well, and what they need to focus on to improve
6. Building anti-fragility by deliberately training to build up students’ tolerance of difficulties
7. A supportive learning environment where high standards and strictness are balanced with carefully planned challenges
8. A network of support so there is always help available when it’s needed
9. Celebrating successes: sharing and enjoying the sense of satisfaction that comes with achievement.
10. Teachers who understand their work, deeply, and who have the passion, time and resources to be able to do their work well

When these traits are evident in schools (and applied with consistency), students have a framework to operate within. They know the expectations to learn and as they apply themselves consistently, they understand that they can learn. They understand too that sometimes it will be difficult and there will be stressors to manage.

These traits do not stand in isolation and are more important than ever, given the freedoms students experience in their daily lives, including access to devices, on-line content, vaping and social media channels.

Two other traits, as described by education researcher, Gert Biesta, also play a critical role and must be visible in all schools across our country:

#### Socialisation

Where we initiate young people into the traditions and ways of doing and being – At Grammar that includes the basics such as addressing teachers correctly, dress and appearance, understanding the formality of a daily assembly and occasions like today’s.

And, subjectification – having education impact positively on students – encouraging them to be responsible and show initiative, rather than just following the actions of others.

At Grammar we want to test your character – how you act when you think no one is looking and we ask you to lead by exhibiting the School’s values, and formulating their own. You know what is expected so there is no need to feel peer pressure to succumb to mediocrity or accept the lowest common denominator.

The more of you, and the more staff who have the courage to lead the consistent implementation of these traits and rituals – (let’s call them the basics of education), then the more chance we have of being that lighthouse for state education in our country. We start the revolution as the exemplar for the high-quality state education that every student could (and should) receive, without excuses.

In that regard, my thanks are extended to our highly effective masters - those who are respected by the boys because they are demanding of them. They are specialists and they work hard for the boys and are involved outside the classroom and are loyal to the School. It is these contributions and this standard that helps set the tone and culture on a daily base.

Thank you to our senior staff members, Leadership Team, Heads of Faculties and Departments, Directors and the wider student support network - their professionalism, loyalty and leadership ensure that the curriculum being taught across programmes prepares students well.

My specific thanks are extended to our Board. Our School continues to be overseen by a highly professional group who willingly donate their time and expertise to protect, secure and advance our approach to education.

My thanks to the Board Chair, Mr Trethewey '76 who has succeeded Mr Sandelin and has competently drawn together our skilled board whose combined expertise help guide and advance the School. Thank you also to all our support groups who are represented here today – Mr Porus, Chair of the Foundation Trust, Ms Muir Chair of the Headmaster’s Council, Dr Ingram Chair of the Outdoor Education Trust and Mr McKinnon, President of the Old Boys’ association

To the wider School, congratulations on a successful year. Today we share in and celebrate your successes. Congratulations also to those who have actively led in a variety of roles, most ably including the Head Prefect, Tom Jones and Deputy Head Prefect, Harry Klouwens, along with Senior Prefects Storm Peita, Makea Upu and Mark Galloway.

My final advice to you, given your understanding of a Grammar education, is that of Lukianoff and Haidt:

*“Whatever your identity, background or political ideology, you will be happier, healthier, stronger and more likely to succeed in pursuing your own goals if you seek out challenges rather than avoiding everything that feels unsafe, freeing yourself from cognitive distortions,*

*rather than trusting your initial feelings and taking a generous view of other people and looking for nuance rather than assuming the worst about people.”*

My genuine thanks are also extended to parents who have not only supported your son’s Grammar education, but have supported the School’s traditions, rituals, traits and standards including whether these were personally favourable to your son or not.

I wish you and the entire Grammar community a relaxing holiday, a Merry Christmas with friends and family and a happy and prosperous new year.

Per Angusta Ad Augusta