**ST COLUMBA’S COLLEGE**

**PRIZE NIGHT – 27TH NOVEMBER 2014**

**PRINCIPAL’S ADDRESS**

***‘ST COLUMBA’S COLLEGE CELEBRATES ANOTHER YEAR OF REMARKABLE EXAMINATION SUCCESS’***

St Columba’s College is a ‘very good school’. You would expect me to say that but don’t take my word for it, those are the words of the Education and Training Inspectorate. They have designated St Columba’s ‘a very good school’.

Giving this recognition, what do these words mean and what is it that makes St Columba’s ‘very good’?

Three key ingredients must come together to make this happen. The first is Pastoral Care. On visiting the College people remark on the warm, friendly atmosphere they experience and the positive relationships amongst the pupils and between pupils and staff. When needed, I have no problem in getting supply teachers to come to St Columba’s College. They know they are going to have a productive, worthwhile experience interacting with students who are respectful of each other’s efforts and of the teacher’s commitment. Pupils are content and look forward to coming to school. Our attendance is above the NI average. Teacher absenteeism for short term and long term illness is amongst the lowest in the SEELB for the last two years. We have an open door policy and parents are encouraged to bring forward any concerns they have about any aspect of their children’s education. They are quick to comment about how quickly they have settled in, their new confidence, their greater self-belief and how they have developed an ‘I can do…’ attitude.

Students are encouraged to put forward their opinions, to let their voice be heard and to effect decisions that affect them in the daily running of the school. A vibrant student council ensures that senior management is informed about changes students would like to see happen and with the help of our PTFA their suggestions are put into practice. Students have decided on our mission statement; ‘Inspiring Learning, Celebrating Success, Respecting Others’. They have had a major input into our college charter and our classroom code. They have told us how they would like to be rewarded and which behaviours should have consequences if they don’t conform to expected standards. We are one of the few schools where students have permission to have their mobile phones with them, subject to an agreed policy of use. Students have also had a major input into the review of our Internet Safety Policy and Homework Policy. Given this level of involvement, our pupils have a greater sense of belonging to a school which values their opinion and engagement and they are inclined to give that little bit extra. This makes for a healthy, wholesome organisation where pupils efforts’ can flourish. It was this culture of inclusion and appreciation that helped gain us a UNICEF UK Rights Respecting School Level 2 Award – the first post primary school of any type in Northern Ireland to get such recognition. Comments from the assessor’s report capture something of the ethos of our school. The assessors themselves remarked that ‘everyone places a real importance on developing a Rights Respecting ethos’. They also observed that ‘student voice had an exceptionally high profile in the school’. Pupils interviewed had this to say; ‘the difference between our school and other schools is that we have a really good relationship with our teachers’. ‘Teachers listen to what we have to say and they always take our rights on board’. Amongst parent opinion one said that ‘the school feels like an extended family’.

The second ingredient that defines a good school is the quality of its learning and teaching. The Education and Training Inspectorate have commented on ‘the standards achieved by our pupils’ and ‘the examples of very good teaching which they observed’ all down to ‘the work of industrious and dedicated teachers’. They are experienced and committed and give freely of their time taking additional classes after school and regularly working with pupils until 5.00pm. We have invested a lot of time and resources in making sure they are competent in the use of recent technologies – video conferencing, iPads and Apple TV. They are very adept in the use of performance data; PIE/PIM administration and analysis, STAR tests and the outcomes of Accelerated Reader and Pupil Performance Tracking. An organisation is best judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. I am pleased to report to you our unique approach to those children with Special Needs. All staff, teachers and classroom assistants, have had an input into special needs recognition, target setting and intervention strategies making sure that IEPs are tailored to the specific requirements of identified pupils. No longer is special needs provision the preserve of a SENCO. This is now very overtly a whole school responsibility. Our curriculum offer is one which is all inclusive irrespective of ability. All students are entered for GCSE English, mathematics and science exams. While the majority are enrolled in GCSE courses, students also follow other award bearing courses to provide the widest possible success. Considerable progress has been made in meeting the Entitlement Framework. This year pupils have had access to 27 subjects, 10 general and 17 applied. A carefully planned curriculum ensures that all our pupils are challenged and encouraged to produce their best.

The third ingredient of our ‘very good school’ is the achievements of our pupils and I want to dwell on the success of these students we are about to recognise tonight. They have once again secured the reputation of St Columba’s College as a very good school with excellent examination results. 77% of them have achieved 5+ GCSEs A\*-C. Allow me to put this performance into some sort of perspective for you. The comparative figure for all NI non-selective schools is 67%. Controlled non-grammar scored 59%. Catholic Maintained schools produced an average of 74%. Controlled Integrated had a figure of 60%. Grant Maintained Integrated returned 69% and the average score for non-grammar schools within SEELB was 59%. Can I repeat the score for St Columba’s in this category was 77%?

Please check these statistics. They are contained in a press release from NI Statistic and Research Agency published on 27th March 2014. Let me factor in another key statistic and that is 5+ GCSEs including English and maths. This group of students scored 55% in this category. What does this mean in comparative terms? Well the NI average for non-grammar schools was 38%. Controlled non-grammar had a performance of 34%. Catholic Maintained produced 41%. Controlled Integrated had a figure of 29%. Grant Maintained returned 41% and that average for all non-selective schools in SEELB was 35%. I repeat, St Columba’s scored 55% in this area. These figures confirm the remarkable performance of this group of students and they are to be congratulated on this achievement.

In summary, St Columba’s College is a very good school because of the quality of our pastoral care, the high standard of our learning and teaching and our examination success. The students we are about to honour here tonight have made a very valuable contribution to this wonderful tradition but I also want to acknowledge their part in achieving our Rights Respecting School Level 2 Award. They have been involved from the outset helping to create a rights respecting ethos that permeates all aspects of our school life. They have had a very definite impact on the culture of our school and the way we operate. They are rights respecting ambassadors stamped with the DNA of St Columba’s College and are much sought after wherever they go. I commend this group of students to you and I hope you and they enjoy this evening celebrating their success. Thank you for your attention.