

Principal's Report 0910

Mr Gibson, Mr Carlaw, honoured guests, governors, staff, parents and pupils – it is once again my privilege to report to you and reflect on this latest School year, during which we celebrated the 80th anniversary of the founding of the School.

It has been another very busy, interesting but successful year, full of many challenges and, of course, heavily dominated in the pre-Christmas period by our much-anticipated visit from Her Majesty's Inspectors. Every year as I prepare to stand before you on this occasion I take a significant amount of time to consider the message I wish to convey and there is the usual speculation from others as to the themes I will follow and, of course much more critically for some, the likely duration of this speech – for clarity, and despite rumours to the contrary, a mere 19 minutes last year. On this occasion I have, in truth, had little difficulty in settling on the key messages today for the simple reason that our inspectors have, to a large extent, written this speech for me through their Report, which I trust you have all read.

I make no apology for quoting quite liberally from the Report in my comments to you this morning – to be frank, there have been one or two in this past session who have taken the opportunity to undermine the School, if necessary being “economical with the truth” in doing so and I trust that the unbiased, neutral, incisive and above all accurate assessment from the Inspectorate will be allowed to stand unchallenged as a benchmark of where the School is at this stage in its development. We have much that we still want to achieve, and we have to accept that our small size and the current financial climate places some limitations on what we can do and the pace at which we can do it, but the simple truth is that our inspection report stands very fair and strong comparison with *any* of those achieved by our larger and supposedly more illustrious competitors within the other West of Scotland Independent Schools in recent years.

Let me reaffirm once again that the School remains true to its core values: recognising and developing the talents and abilities of each individual; creating a community where friendliness and mutual respect are encouraged; and providing the educational and social conditions for each to thrive and achieve, and often exceed, their potential. We are proud of the achievements of Belmont House as a School, but even more proud of the achievements of all our pupils, both in the contribution they make whilst they are here and in the qualifications and skills they leave with. The School is a family and one of the most gratifying comments made by the Managing Inspector was when he said that we not only knew all of our pupils extremely well but also knew their families – I believe very few schools can genuinely have that said about them.

Our Core Values identify and reaffirm commitment, cooperation, identity, individuality, reliability, respect and responsibility as being central to the essence of what is expected of each member of the Belmont House family, whether as a pupil, parent, member of staff or governor. Each individual genuinely matters to us and this philosophy continues to manifest itself in a real and demonstrable commitment to small class sizes at a time where the trend in all other sectors of education and in other schools is in the opposite direction; a size of School where every pupil is genuinely known for whom they are, and where the maximum of each child's potential is sought, achieved and regularly surpassed. The Inspectors highlighted our *“positive and inclusive ethos”* as a particular strength of the School and said that they found that *“pupils felt valued and included in all aspects of the life of the School”*.

In relation to academic performance, our own Value-Added Data continues to show that our pupils across the entire ability range regularly exceed what might be reasonably expected of them in terms of academic performance against their baseline ability. Indeed, the Inspectorate commended us on our efforts in systematically tracking and monitoring the achievements of our young people.

At Belmont we are focused on the attainment of each individual child in the context of their baseline ability as being of the greatest importance to us. HMle directly reported on the simple but vital fact that ALL of our pupils, at every level, were *“making very good progress in all aspects of their learning”*; that the School had *“maintained consistently high standards of attainment in recent years”*. They additionally commented on the *“high but realistic expectations”* we set for what our young people can achieve and of the *“very good ethos of hard work and achievement”* in the School.

The new *Curriculum for Excellence* will eventually see the demise of the 5-14 Programme but for now it continues to provide us with a measure of performance from Junior 1 through to Senior 1 and it is again encouraging to note that in our National Testing in Mathematics, Reading and Writing every class in these year groups comfortably exceeded Government targets, with nearly all of our classes having close to 100% pass rates at their designated levels or above. Level F is designed to challenge the more able pupils nationally in Senior 2, but it is again interesting to note that a number of our Transitus and Senior 1 pupils have already passed at this level. The inspectors commented that *“a significant number of children.....achieve national levels early, in reading, writing and mathematics”* and that our *“young people are achieving very well at Transitus, Senior 1 and Senior 2”*. They further commented on the performance of our young people in Senior 3-6 in national examinations being *“well above the national average”* and of almost all of our leavers in Senior 5 or 6 being *“well supported into university or college”*.

We continue to analyse our academic performance in great detail at the level of each individual subject department, class and even pupil in our quest to ensure that our performance is the best it can be – and our aim in each child’s educational experience is to develop their individual strengths, whatever they may be, and to ensure that they leave us as well-rounded, successful, confident individuals well-equipped to face the many challenges of the modern world. As I have said from this platform before, if it is academic greatness, sporting or artistic excellence they will achieve it; if their ambitions or talents are more modest pupils will be nurtured and encouraged to maximise their potential – however, the one thing all Belmont House pupils have in common is that they attend a school where **they** matter, are significant, have the opportunity to stand out, make an impact, play a part and be so much more than just a number, a face in the crowd or an exam statistic, an environment where they are known as the individual that they are.

As a School we continue to objectively measure as much as we can in terms of our educational performance and in the context of our Business Plan we apply a range of Key Performance Indicators to the commercial aspects of the School. You do not need me to remind you that we continue to live in extremely challenging economic times for all sectors of our society, including independent schools, and there is some consensus that the worst is by no means over – as a School we are acutely aware of the pressures on family budgets and remain firmly committed to providing value for money. Our fee increase for next session is very competitive and our ongoing commitment to a highly personal, individual approach to education delivered via genuinely small class sizes and effective pastoral care, will not change; and we continue to offer a very broad range of academic subjects throughout the School with the inspectorate commented that *“from Senior 3, young people choose from a very good range of options enabling them to build on what they have already learned”*.

It is once again a genuine pleasure to highlight just a few of the individual and collective successes that our pupils have had in the last twelve months, in the context of the very wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer. Again, the Inspectorate commented favourably on the *“many sporting and cultural activities”* on offer and *“the engagement of our staff in providing a range of high quality out-of-hours activities”*.

Netball has continued to grow apace within the School, with no fewer than three teams being fielded on a regular basis in various matches and tournaments, with ever-increasing success.

Our pupils have taken part in various Volleyball tournaments around Scotland and for the first time this year we played in the Scottish Schools' Cup. The growing interest in this sport has seen increasing numbers of girls and boys from Junior 6 upwards opting into the extra-curricular programme. A number of our pupils were selected for further training by the National Development Officer and Mhairi Agnew has just been selected for the Scottish Squad to participate in the UK Schools' Games. Regular Staff v Pupils matches have also taken place on a Friday evening after School although I have been unable to ascertain the scores in these fixtures for some reason.....

Badminton has also featured regularly on our extra-curricular programme and our Tennis teams again entered various competitions. Our Judo and Fencing Clubs again proved to be highly popular, with Judo in particular having pupils from Junior 1 to Senior 6 involved, and in the Junior School a host of activities ran on a weekly basis.

Golf is a popular and growing sport in the School and has been established on a much firmer footing this year, with competitive matches against other schools being organised and a large number of pupils in the Senior School being involved in our own in-house competition, for which we have a new, rather handsome trophy to be awarded today, courtesy of the Wilson family. Our senior golfers won their first competitive match against one of the larger Glasgow schools this term but unfortunately came third in their defence of the East Renfrewshire Rotary Club's Schools competition.

In Cricket we have had an encouraging number of Junior 5-Transitus pupils learning the rudiments of the game each week at training and they were unlucky to lose their first competitive fixture a couple of weeks ago. Our Junior XI successfully played a number of fixtures and came 2nd in the Glasgow Schools' League 6-a-side tournament, with our Senior XI coming 3rd in the equivalent competition. They also travelled to the North-East of England to participate in the British Cup, the only Scottish school to enter this competition.

In Rugby, our boys had a mixed season, not helped by some particularly inclement weather over the winter as you will recall. We have some strong playing groups coming through in terms of both skill and the numbers of boys available and we look forward to improved fortunes next year. My thanks once again to our former School Captain James Eddie, now of the Glasgow Warriors, for his continued coaching support. James was capped once again at Scotland "A" level in recent weeks along with another former Belmont pupil, Ed Kalman, and it is again a pleasure to acknowledge James' presence with us this morning.

The School continues to punch above its weight in rugby terms – while the strength of our age-group sides fluctuate as a result of our small size, individually our pupils continue to achieve very high levels of success in this sport and many of our older pupils are prominent players in their local clubs. Jonathan Tait of Senior 4 is currently in Perpignan with the Under-16 Glasgow Thistles Squad and he has again earned selection for his age group national training squad. Johnny Adair and Jonathan Elliott gained selection for the Under-17 & Under-16 Glasgow Pathways Squads respectively, Mark Gordon, Noritomo Komatsu, & Angus Taylor were selected for the Under-16 Glasgow Rhinos XV and Richard Winton is part of the Glasgow Under-14 Development Squad.

Several of our pupils are outstanding athletes and competitors in a variety of other sports. 12-year old Rhona Ferguson of Senior 1 is ranked 4th in Great Britain at Under-15 level in Trampolining and has been selected to represent GB at the World Championships; Lewis Clothier is ranked 10th in Scotland at Under-16 level in Tennis and Euan Hammersley is a member of the Scottish Under-18 Eventing Squad.

In Outdoor Education, this session has again seen the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme continue to grow in strength within the School, and 2009-2010 has again surpassed the previous session in being our most

successful year in the last decade. We have had several strong groups functioning; a group commencing the Bronze Award in Senior 2, those continuing to completion in Senior 3, commencing Silver in Senior 4 and completing in Senior 5 and, finally, a strong Gold group starting in the last few weeks. The boys and girls involved have all gained a range of skills and experiences from the Award that contribute to their development as useful and active citizens – the pupils have been of real benefit to their local communities by, for example, caring for and entertaining the elderly, helping out with youth activities and coaching sports teams.

A number of enjoyable and successful hillwalks have also been held and Junior 5 & 6 enjoyed their biennial, and Senior 1 their annual, Outdoor Education Weeks at Lagganlia.

In the Performing Arts, we can truly claim that this has been a year of innovation and a number of “firsts”, characterised by some outstanding shows and productions across the School and notable individual success.

In the Junior School, Junior 1-3 treated us to a production of *“The Very Hopeless Camel”* and the Junior 4-6 Drama Club presented *“Ye-Ha”*, with both shows playing to packed audiences in the Broom Church Hall. Other highlights included our annual Christmas Seasonal Concert, involving many pupils from Junior 4 to Senior 6, our latest Comedy Revue and the haunting and highly original *“Viewings by Appointment”*, written by Mr Pichotka of our English Department and superbly presented by the cast in a range of “ghostly” locations within the old school building over two evenings in late October.

The Music Department has been “under new management” this year and a succession of new and innovative events have taken place – lunch-time concerts themed around Halloween and St. Valentine’s Day, visits from a Jazz Band and Del Castillo from Texas immediately after their participation in Glasgow’s Celtic Connections Festival. A number of rock and pop groups have formed among the pupils this year, all having opportunity to play publicly on several occasions such as the recent *Band Blast*. The Celtic Rock group has been a major success this year, participating most recently at our 80th Anniversary Dinner & Ceilidh, and we are hopeful that they will be playing at this year’s Edinburgh Festival in late August. Finally, a choir of just six pupils represented the School in this Church last September during Community Week; within a few months, a much augmented group won the XScape Choir Challenge competition and this September some forty pupils will participate here in our Choir.

Finally, our musical and dramatic year culminated in this week’s outstanding and innovative production of *“South Pacific”*, the first major show to be staged in our own Hall. There continues to be a rich seam of talent in the performing arts extending throughout the School, with several leading roles in this most recent production taken by younger pupils. This excellent show was also the catalyst for an extensive amount of cross-curricular collaboration across the entire School, a fine example of a *Curriculum for Excellence* in action.

My thanks once again to all my colleagues, too numerous to mention individually by name, in both the Junior and Senior Schools who work so hard to nurture the talents of our young people through the very wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer.

We also continue to provide an extensive programme of instrumental tuition and once again throughout the year pupils have been successfully presented for Associated Music Board exams on a wide variety of instruments and London College exams on guitar. A large number of pupils also gained success in a variety of classes at the Glasgow Music Festival and also in London College Examinations in Speech. Finally, many of our Junior School pupils again participated in a highly successful Burns Verse Speaking competition in January this year which was again judged by Mr George Anderson, Past President of The Robert Burns World Federation, and the associated Art Competition was judged by Mrs Maureen Hall, our retired PT Art.

A host of extra-curricular visits to places of educational interest almost too numerous to mention have served to make this year another varied, interesting and challenging one for our pupils, with the Inspectorate commenting on the *“wide range of purposeful learning experiences within the classroom and through well-planned visits”*. I would particularly highlight the recent highly successful French Exchange Trip with the College St. Joseph in Thônes and we look forward to the return visit during the first week of next term. We intend these exchange trips to be an annual feature of our School calendar.

Our Mathematicians in Transitus to Senior 2 entered the United Kingdom Junior Mathematical Challenge, with three Bronze, two Silver and two Gold certificates being achieved. Congratulations to Mhairi Agnew and Andrew Macmillan of Senior 2 in achieving their Gold awards. Our Senior 4 Higher Biologists are working towards completing their Bronze level CREST Awards – this is Britain’s largest national award scheme for project work in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths, and affords young people opportunities to explore real world projects in a creative and engaging manner. Our Eco-Committee have also had a busy year, with the Eco-garden resurrected this session through a great deal of hard work and effort by the pupils and staff concerned.

As usual, the School has been proactive in supporting a range of charities over the year – a sum in excess of £4000 has been raised through the efforts of our pupils, parents and staff, in particular our Senior 6 Charities Committee. The charities supported this year included Jeans for genes, the British Lung Foundation, Children in Need, Yorkhill Children’s Trust, Cash for Kids, the Haiti appeal & Macmillan Cancer Support.

Thank you all for your generous support.

The Playground Committee were also highly proactive in raising funds to refurbish the external play facilities of the School, with the Quiz Night being particularly popular and successful.

As always, it is entirely appropriate that I publicly acknowledge the role played by several groups of people, all of whom in their own way critical to the success of our School.

The Parent Teacher Association has again been very active, organising or supporting a number of events including the highly successful Ladies Night and Jingle Belmont, both regular features of our calendar in recent years. They also organised our excellent 80th Anniversary Dinner & Ceilidh held a few weeks ago. I would publicly thank Lynn Fairservice and her enthusiastic Committee who have again worked tirelessly this year, with over £3000 donated to the School for a variety of projects including, for example, the purchase of additional lockers and contributions towards various drama and music projects. Volunteers and helpers are, of course, always needed and the PTA meets on the first Tuesday of each month during term time at the School.

I would also extend my sincere thanks to our Chair of the Board, Mr Allan Gibson, and all our governors for their hard work and support of the School. Their responsibilities are onerous and their extensive work is much appreciated – again, as HMle observed, they do *“work closely with (myself) in ensuring a high quality teaching and learning across the school and nursery”*.

I would acknowledge the huge contribution made by all our staff during the course of this year – both my commercial and teaching colleagues deserve great credit for their efforts, the extra time they so willingly give, and the sacrifices they make for the School. I was particularly delighted that HMle made many positive comments about our staff – as previously noted, particularly commenting on the engagement of staff in extra-curricular activities but also in terms of them being *“highly committed to the school and (taking) an active role in its improvement”*.

I thank all my colleagues on the Senior Management Team for their help and support over the year and the unstinting work of my Secretary and Office Manager, Mrs Wilma Baillie. I would publicly acknowledge the huge contribution made by our General Manager, Mr Charles McIvor, our new Senior Vice-Principal, Mr Richard Doak, Head of Junior School, Ms Lindsay McDonald, and our new Vice-Principal, Mr Andy Teiger. I thank them all for their help and support, particularly for the effective manner in which they have worked as a new team in the latter part of the year following Mrs Robertson's departure at Christmas.

Belmont House is very much a family and I do hope you noted the comment made by HMIE in relation to their observations that our "*young people demonstrate a very high level of care and concern for staff and each other*" and that the behaviour of our pupils was outstanding – I am sure all parents present will be delighted if we can all say these things about our own children after a few weeks of the summer holidays.

I would also again acknowledge the unstinting support of my wife, Lynn, and our own family, particularly over the many long days and evenings prior to the Inspection.

There are some changes to the teaching complement for next session.

A number of our Junior School staff - Mrs Turner, Mrs Grindlay and Mrs Rush - will be on Maternity leave at the start of next session, returning at various stages during the next 12 months. Mrs Thorburn [Modern languages] leaves the School after six years service and Miss McLaughlin [Computing & Business Education] also leaves us to return to the maintained sector, with her successor to be confirmed in the next few days.

We acknowledge the retirement of two of our most long-serving and senior members of staff. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the presence of **Mr Fred Orr** today – many of you will be aware of his health concerns over recent months. Mr Orr retires as Faculty Head & Principal Teacher of History after 27 years of excellent service to the School and **Mr Brendan Maguire**, our Head of Careers, teacher of Computing and erstwhile teacher of Latin, is also retiring after almost 36 years of loyal service. Such length of tenure and commitment to one school is, I fear, becoming a rarity in the modern teaching profession and I salute the huge contribution these two gentlemen have made to the School with over sixty years of combined service. I wish each of them every happiness and, above all, good health in their well-deserved retirements. Mr Maguire will, however, still be seen around the School next year, continuing in a non-teaching capacity as Head of Careers.

In August we welcome new staff to the School and also acknowledge the changing remits of some of our current staff. **Mr Pichotka** takes over from Mr Orr in the History department and maternity cover in the Junior School will again be provided by **Mrs Macpherson** and also **Miss Jilly Hawker**.

I would also pay tribute to the young people who leave us today at the conclusion of their Sixth Year. They have been a small but good group this year, all of them making a significant contribution to the life of the School, and I know Michael will say more in this regard in a few minutes. Michael himself has done a fine job as School Captain, very ably supported by Vice-Captains Susan Forbes and David Gallagher and the rest of the Prefect team. I would particularly thank Susan for her work in developing our new and innovative School Magazine, the *e-Belmontian*, available on-line via the website. Please look out for regularly updated editions of this excellent publication. I wish the Sixth Year every success in the years ahead and thank them for all that they have contributed to the School.

I conclude with a brief look at the year ahead.

Significant physical changes will be made in the school over the summer period, with the Nursery relocating to the current Art Block and the Art Department relocating to the former Library and current Senior Staff Room.

Additionally, the Modern Studies, History and Geography Departments will move, with the Senior 6 Common Room also moving into the old building and the Senior Staff Room also relocating. As a result of these changes the temporary unit at the front of the School will be removed from the site.

In relation to purely educational matters, the targets set in this year's School Improvement Plan have largely been surpassed and we have identified our provisional educational Priorities for Action, based on the Inspection report, for next year - we will communicate these to parents early in the Autumn Term.

Major changes are being put in place for the future of Scottish education which will affect every pupil currently in Junior 6 and below, and we have already outlined these with current Junior 6 parents a few weeks ago. We believe that as a School we are well placed to implement these changes and we embrace them with confidence, with HMIE noting that *“across the school and nursery, teachers are developing high quality experiences in line with Curriculum for Excellence”*. This major initiative in Scottish education speaks of producing *successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors* – ladies and gentlemen, this School has a proud 80-year history throughout which we have indeed produced generations of fine young men and women who fit these criteria in every regard. I had a lovely conversation a few days ago with Former Pupil Mr Jimmy Deas which exemplified this statement from the earliest generation of Belmont pupils, he being one of the last survivors of the original group of boys who were in the first intake to Belmont House at the Greenhill Avenue site 1929-30, and I look forward to welcoming him when he visits the School over the summer period.

We have celebrated our 80th anniversary during the course of this session, a milestone reached through many good times but also trials and tribulations over the decades, and in doing so we look forward to the future with confidence, secure in the knowledge of the very high quality of the young people which this School has always produced and the recent highly positive endorsement of the Inspectorate. Only this week we received news of two of our former pupils from the class of 2006 who have both been awarded 1st Class Honours degrees in their Law courses, one claiming the additional prize for being the top student in his entire year, the other being awarded an additional prize for the best dissertation – please never doubt the very high quality of the young men and women this School produces year on year.

I am a Physicist by training and the famous and iconic Marie Curie once said that *“one never notices what has been done; one can only see what remains to be done”*. Thomas Jefferson also said that *“the dreams of the future are better than the history of the past”*. The School has an excellent history, which we have noticed, acknowledged and celebrated in these recent months and again today, but we clearly see what remains to be done and our aspirations are, indeed, for a future even better than our past. Sir William Osler, a Canadian physician of the late 19th and early 20th century, said that *“the best preparation for tomorrow is to do today's work superbly well”* and I trust that my comments this morning have served to demonstrate that we are doing the work of today superbly well and are, indeed, very well prepared for the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, as we reach the summer period and the conclusion of another successful year, I would assure you that the School will continue to seek to improve and build upon the successes of this last year – there can be, and will be, no sense of complacency in any regard in these challenging times.

The most important word any Head Teacher can hear in the context of an inspection is “disengagement” and the most pleasing comment at the conclusion of any report is that used by HMIE to conclude ours – *“as a result of the very good quality of education provided by the School and Nursery, we will make no further visits in connection with this inspection”*. And on that note, I too will “disengage” from this Speech and make no further comment other than to wish all associated with the School a well-deserved, happy and relaxed summer holiday.

M.D. Shanks
Principal
Belmont House School
June 2010