



Principal's Reply

From the Commissioning Service 22 May 2023

Thank you Rosie for your kind words and for your very warm welcome to the school community, delivered just now but also in many of conversations over the last six months. I add my acknowledgement and welcome to the Reverend David Fotheringham, members of the College Board, principal colleagues from other schools, special invited guests, College staff and most importantly, students. I would particularly like to acknowledge and thank the principal of Braemar College, Russell Deer for being here today, someone without whose guidance and great support I would not be ready to step into this important role.

I am delighted and humbled to have been invited, and now commissioned, to be your next Principal. I am aware of the great trust that the College has collectively placed in me to lead the wonderful young people and dedicated staff assembled in front of us. This is a responsibility that I feel keenly, and one that I accept with gratitude and optimism.

I come to the position with a solid but still-growing sense of the history of this great school and of the legacy of those who have stood here before me. I pay particular thanks to my immediate predecessor Dr Andrew Hirst, whose warmth and commitment to community I will attempt to continue. Andrew deserves our collective gratitude for guiding the school through the tumultuous last years. Andrew, thank you. Similarly, I am conscious of the inheritance left by all past heads and principals, whether that be in the superb Simons-era facilities, the tradition of academic excellence reinforced and grown by Stephen Newton, John Turnbull's stoicism and grace in the face of economic challenge, or the bold vision of Tim Murray. These educators and leaders, and all of the heads before them whom I view with equal gratitude, have left us a school in very good shape indeed.

Schools are often places of great tradition. The rhythms of the school year encourage and reinforce cyclical rituals which give rise to each school's particular emphasis and culture. I have come quickly to learn that among the traditions and culture of The Hamilton and Alexandra College are that our students:

- apply themselves thoughtfully and diligently to their academic work;
- have access to and throw themselves into a wide range of sporting, outdoor, and cultural activities;
- and that the College is a central connection point for the broader community.

In these things, it could be said that the Hamilton and Alexandra College is a traditional school. And that is not a term that I necessarily take issue with. Things that the best traditional schools did

best – engaging students in a life of the mind, creating relationships within classes of rich discussion and debate, and then extending those relationships on the hockey field or by the campfire – are the very things that are now reappearing under the banner of a modern, student-focussed education. The best traditional schools have *always* known the value of these approaches.

And yet, part of the tradition of The Hamilton and Alexandra College is a tradition of innovation and change. Throughout its history, and the histories of its constituent schools, The Hamilton and Western District Boys' College and Alexandra College, the school has both through desire and sometimes through necessity, sought to be at the forefront of educational thinking and action. The College recognised the benefits of co-education and made a move to amalgamate in 1962. The school saw early the benefits of an authentic international partnership, joining with Gaoyou Middle School in a long and beneficial relationship that only a pandemic could stymie. The College was an early adopter and, again, a partner in the Positive Education movement, a philosophy which – while evolving – still informs our practice. These are a few, but illustrative examples of the school's preparedness to change and to strive to be better. So, yes, tradition, but a tradition that includes a long pattern of innovation. Great schools are not great because of the things they have accomplished in the past, nor because of the ways in which they *used* to work. It is incumbent upon us as the custodians of this history to preserve and cultivate the many great things bequeathed by our past, but always, always, with a view to how we can be better, more excellent, more innovative, smarter, more caring – for the good of the College students here today and all that follow over the next 150 years and beyond.

At the heart of every good school is the magic of the classroom, and I am and will continue to be unapologetically focused on ensuring that we teach in the best ways that educational thought and research have discovered. The skills that the wider world demands – creatively, thoughtfulness, collaboration, design – are not fostered exclusively outside of the traditional curriculum, but I would argue are developed *within* the best classrooms as teacher and students together challenge each other and grow intellectually. We will, of course, increasingly have to face the questions brought to the classroom by artificial intelligence which can write our essays for us or do our maths homework without anyone being the wiser. Schools in this moment face a choice between continuing in a charade where students are asked to produce 'work' which can easily and sensibly be done by AI; or being open to technology helping us, as it always has, to do things more efficiently and assisting those who might benefit most. I will argue strongly for the latter path, one which thanks technology for creating more space for human skills and connections. The removal of knowledge as the sole property of teachers which is then imparted beneficently to students, is a challenge for many of us as it has fundamentally changed the currency of power in schools. I firmly believe, however, that having to spend less time chasing and, worse, memorising, facts creates a space for what we have always really needed: creative reimagining of process, emotional development and regulation, connection and the exchange of ideas leading to new knowledge, and most importantly for me, ethical consideration. Helping students to develop an ethical framework for thoughtful discernment – informed by the best thinking of the millennia preceding us – is both required and facilitated by the march of technology. Schools in my view remain relevant as sites of

deeply human connection, and the conversational alchemy of the best classrooms often forms the fondest memories of our school days.

In the immediate future some may be looking to me for a silver-bullet program, or a building, or an initiative, to grow or 'fix' the College in the ways that they would like. But learning is a complex process, and schools have many, many other complex processes within them. There is no single intervention or answer that can perfect a school, because schools are rich and varied places which, like all complexities, resist simple solutions. Of course, changes will come, but looking for *single* interventions or changes that will improve what we need to improve won't work. The programs and approaches of a school like The Hamilton and Alexandra College are co-dependent – academics aren't sufficient alone, sport makes more sense coupled with music, outdoor ed complements drama, innovation refreshes and honours tradition. I hope to be a principal who understands this interplay in the life and success of a school and seeks to grow *all* aspects of our College.

What happens in this College matters greatly to all of us here today, regardless of the duration, type, or strength of our association with The Hamilton and Alexandra College. What happens in schools and in the learning of our young people must matter to all of us, as our collective futures rest with them. Yet, we must always be conscious that the endeavours of a school are for the benefit of its students. Students, you should not be made to perform – on the stage, or the field, or in the examination hall – for the gratification or self-satisfaction of those of us who look back longingly, but rather should be asked and invited to learn and grow for your own development and improvement and to help you form a character and dispositions that will serve you in your lives once you depart. The Hamilton and Alexandra College has had a long and proud presence in this place, and as I accept the responsibility of Principal I encourage all of us to work to be worthy of it. I accept this commission, and I am delighted to lead you, with great hope, towards the continued flourishing of this wonderful school.

Thank you.