

A background image of numerous colorful pencils (red, blue, green, yellow, orange, purple, pink) arranged in a circular pattern, pointing towards the center. The pencils are sharp and vibrant, creating a dynamic and artistic backdrop for the text.

NASUWT NI

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

David Baxter

NASUWT NORTHERN IRELAND
CONFERENCE 2019

NASUWT
The Teachers' Union

Notes:

Welcome the following:

- The Mayor of Lisburn and Castlereagh, Councillor Uel Mackin
- The NASUWT Gen Secretary, Chris Keates
- The National SVP, Dave Kitchen; the Scottish NASUWT President Edward Carroll and the Welsh NASUWT President, Owain Morgan-Lee
- Our Colleagues from other unions both here and in the Republic of Ireland
- Our other guests from other organisations and especially those who took part in our debate last night; Fiona Ferguson, Claire Hanna, Mike Nesbitt, Mártín Ó Muilleoir and David Graham.
- The National Official (NI), Justin McCamphill and all the staff in the Northern Ireland Regional Centre for their tireless professionalism at all times.
- My fellow officers; SVP Clive Bowles, JVP Angela Wallace, Ex-President Delma Boggs, Hon Secretary Tommy McLoughlin, Hon Treasurer Raymond Beggs and NEMs, Susan Parlour and Eamonn McDowell
- All of you; the 12 local associations represented here today, not least my own Fermanagh Omagh Association under the aegis of the President Pdraig Connolly.
- Our sponsors and exhibitors; please support them and visit their stalls.
- Finally, all of you who are observers, individuals who are here out of professional interest and other such individuals. Thank you for your attendance and support throughout the year.

The Welcome Address

I didn't really mean to be a teacher, it kind of crept up on me by accident. I didn't really mean to be a union activist either, but that's another story.

I can vividly remember the moment I decided I wanted to become a teacher. As a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed graduate and straight out of college, I was working with some young people on a music project and full of enthusiasm for life. I can recall the moment well; the setting sun going down as the youth choir I was working with were singing the Barbara Streisand song 'The way we were'. It was a huge choir, the amalgamation of many other smaller choirs brought together to sing in a farewell concert at a summer school.

As the sun set and as every eye focused on the beat I was conducting, I felt the sheer emotion of the moment and even at that youthful stage of my career, I realised its significance. Several days before, those same young singers looked at me blankly at an early morning choir practice as I introduced the song. I played their parts on the piano and taught them phrase-by-phrase. Bit-by-bit their confidence grew and then as if by magic, we were all sharing a very special moment. I suppose that's essentially the core of teaching; instructing people, watch them learn and then when the final product is realised, sharing that experience and success with them. Maybe it was whimsical, maybe not; but that was the single defining moment for me and shortly afterwards I enrolled on a PGCE course.

Many years later, the choir singing their mellow strains on a summer's day became a distant memory and moments like the one I just described started to become few and far between. Of course I know we can't recreate magical times in the past and even to do so, to live your life based on 'how good it used to be', would leave you with acute *Pollyanna Syndrome* (a medical term I coined myself). Nonetheless, the question remains, at least for me; why was the magic of teaching slowly starting to fade away?

In theory we all know the answers; huge changes in society and indeed the world we live in, maladroit and absent local political leadership, power struggles, adversarial management, acute lack of funding, the increasing complexities of family life impacting on pupil behaviour, increasing external criticism and that's before we get as far as the pupils themselves. With all this in mind, what chance have they got?

But. Quite soon in your teaching career, you realise who the teacher next door is, the colleague you need when you're not having a good day. The teacher who keeps an eye on your class while you nip to the loo, the one who gives you a nod and wink if a troublemaker is hyper that day or watches your back when the head is in a foul mood.

As I got to know more people I realised that the teacher next door was nearly anybody in the school, the trusted friendship group rippling out like a pebble thrown into a lake, as you got to know more people slowly over time. In my case, almost

always being the only music teacher in a school, my teacher next door morphed into becoming the music teacher in neighbouring schools and again, expanding into other schools in the area and region. You can see where this is going, we are all the teacher next door for each other and that, my colleagues, is the greatest strength of the Union. We can all be the teacher next door for each other.

Let's be honest, we need our neighbours' broad shoulders.

But what do we have to do to make our profession more rewarding? Teaching is such a demanding profession, but everything in the world seems to be conspiring against us. Society wants and demands well-trained and well-rounded young people who are employable, engaging, reliable and ready to lead the next generation; and so they should. The paradox is that firstly, society is not willing to pay for that and secondly, human-kind needs to be able to look after itself and not blame young people's education and what they do at school for its own failures. We are not a panacea for society's problems.

When I was young, many, many years ago, we were told that we needed to be prepared for the challenges we faced as adults, but by and large, those 'challenges' either never materialised or became redundant quite quickly. For example, when I was at primary school we were all told we must write with our right hand. This led to me having my 'good hand' tied behind my back as I was deemed a slow writer. Well, that piece of policy didn't last long.

Next, we were told about the horrors of what would happen to you if you failed the 11+ but if you looked like someone who had no chance of going to a grammar school, then you were told by well-meaning people in the most patronising way possible, that you still were a 'lovely wee child and could do ok'. Next came O' Levels and the main role of these was that you could do well enough to do A' Levels and then we were constantly reminded of the importance of going to university. Well, that's no longer true – if it ever was.

It's a sense of bitter irony that the biggest house close to me is inhabited by a Ferrari owner, lorry driver who started out as a mechanic. These examples are many and I'm sure you could think of quite a few yourselves. However well-intentioned, are we accidentally giving people the wrong advice? Will tomorrow's adults berate us and laugh at us uproariously for us the things we tell them now they must do. Will tomorrow's society blame us for all we should have telepathically known what was going to be 'trending' in their adulthood? The omens are not great, how many times have we complained about all that was wrong with our contemporaneous systems.

All this raises a serious point though. What am I? What skills do I have and how in God's name am I supposed to be able to talk about citizenship, employability, learning for life and work and everything else that the tabloids say we should be teaching young people when I haven't had a day's training, not even an after-school session or an online resource. There's certainly no point in asking the teacher next

door as they haven't had it either. I go back to the initial point, how are we supposed to address all society's shortfalls if we're neither funded nor trained to do so. If you're under 25, have a look in the mirror because when you're my age, I haven't the faintest notion what you'll be teaching, in what environment it will be or what the expectation will be like. Society wants a well-trained workforce to answer tomorrow's needs but how can we do that if we don't know what tomorrow will bring and we're not given the resources to find out.

Undoubtedly we have a pastoral role in our teaching, but I feel it's almost, if not already, at a tipping point where the tail is starting to wag the proverbial dog. More and more, teachers have to become amateur social workers and being increasingly criticised for essentially, not 'parenting' the kids. We must strive to find a way of moving away from this or else we'll not have any time left to actually cover the examination specifications by the time we address every single growingly complex pastoral need and then, of course, record it. Also, don't forget we're given just a few minutes to do this and all against the backdrop of twenty-five plus students simultaneously demanding your attention. Again, I want to reiterate the fact that we do have a pastoral role, a strong pastoral role but we're close to breaking point while society still expects ever-rising examination grades, year-upon-year.

Against this, we face a slight disconnect. Young people are essentially very fair. Some may have no concept why the Stormont impasse is in place, perhaps they don't fully

understand Brexit, (who does?) the Footsie or many issues we talk about daily; but they do understand the global impact of pollution and why, for some reason, we're doing our level best to destroy the very planet we live on. They ask us, 'would we trash our own homes?', a fair question.

Last week, my friend's daughter organised a demonstration in Derry/Londonderry to highlight this very topic and many were surprised that young people felt so strongly about it. Well, it's not rocket science, we've been teaching environmental awareness to them since they arrived in school. In early Key Stage 1 we start with simple issues of waste management and end up with fairly substantial pieces of work on global warming at post 16. Let's reach out to young people for our inspiration, we may surprise ourselves. Let's not obsess about the present at the expense of the future . . . and vice versa.

Anyhow, we need to make teaching an attractive profession. With all I've said, one truism exists, we must be treated professionally. But how do we do this? There are many strands.

Firstly, we must remember we have 'you next door'. Yes . . . you, you and you. We are not alone, we're in the largest union in Northern Ireland and indeed the UK. We must always work together; one voice our size has and continues to, lobby, pressurise governments, systems and decision makers to improve our lot.

Next, there's the issue of funding. Our first motion is on pay so I'll not pre-empt this.

What I do need to say is that lack of money underpins everything and we know that.

That said, all aspects of education are in a perilous state and we must never forget how hard some schools, departments and indeed sections of society find it so tough.

A third point is that far too often, many of us are treated like the pupils we teach.

We're frequently checked up on, seldom trusted to make professional decisions and then doubted to the extent that some start to self-doubt and become ill.

Not unrelated to this is that all too often, managers respond in a knee-jerk way. The old precautionary suspension was very much part of this narrative but even in less dramatic ways, there is a management-inspired gravity towards taking the most stringent action against staff 'so *they* know we're doing something'. Whoever *they* are.

The fifth issue we need to take cognisance of is the acceptance of failure; in short, we need to learn how to fail. Failure isn't always negative and in fact, we inundate children with quotations and examples about how failure is part of the learning process or as Samuel Beckett said, 'fail, fail again, fail better'.

I certainly remember drawing many diagrams of 'Bruce and the Spider' at primary school. Despite this, do we take our own advice? No, of course not. We're not allowed to fail and if you do make a mistake you can face disciplinary action or worse

again, the wrath of parents on social media. Instead, we bluff over our errors and are systemically encouraged to tell white lies.

The introduction of new initiatives is another thorny point in the life of a teacher. At some point in the early years of my career, I can remember being ridiculously underwhelmed at a meeting I went to once where the then-new 'Six Pack' was introduced; the new curriculum. We were all sternly told that there were challenges ahead but if we all worked ourselves to the knuckle we would get there. Sadly, once I just got down past my fingernail, it was replaced . . . and replaced again . . . and replaced again. And it will undoubtedly be replaced many more times. True, education curricula does need to be revised at times, but in schools, we seem to get more than our fair share of new initiatives. Sometimes these can seem quite benign, like filling in a certain form when a pupil drops a pencil or opens the door at the wrong angle, but then the criterion has to apply to everybody in the school and then recorded on SIMS. At some point, one is called in after school to analyse these results, make meaningful comments and work in small groups to undertake further analyses before they're safely stored away to impress an inspector at some point in the future.

Would you tell an engineer how to build a bridge? No. Would you constantly question a chartered accountants methodology? I doubt it. Despite this, every Tom, Dick and Harry seems to be able to tell us how to teach and sadder still, we seem to

capitulate to this agenda. I must admit, I'm pretty disappointed that the GTCNI haven't made the teaching profession an impregnable fortress like the way RICS has for chartered surveyors, the GMC for doctors and so on. In my view, this needs to happen as a matter of urgency.

I believe we need our membership fees to be used in this way in addition to us basically paying for something the government should be doing anyhow, which at present is just teacher registration, providing disciplinary functions, advice to the DE (effectively the GTCNI are advising itself) and the development of codes of professional values and practice. All interesting, but all peripheral to what the real needs of teachers are on a day-to-day basis.

We need professionalism and that calls for all of us to refuse to do tasks that could be done by non-specialists as well as fighting for more pay, better working conditions and most critically, a sea-change of how we're perceived as a 'profession'.

My final point is that I'm very concerned about the mental and emotional state of teachers. We are pushed to the limit, due to a very caring and compassionate workforce which is used and abused by management. As Union president, I've had my eyes opened at the level of ill-health of teachers and also, the number of physical assaults on staff. I keep my most impassioned call for the police and government to work together to protect us in the teaching profession. We professionals, we caring professionals, constantly face trial and jury by social media and the wrath of angry

pupils and parents. We have some degree of protection in our classrooms but against a global internet industry, we are powerless. I implore you, my colleagues, to talk about this, raise this issue with politicians and do what you can to ensure that all of us, and I don't mean us in the room today or the Union membership, I mean teachers worldwide, have online protection. If society doesn't take account for its actions then the results will be disastrous, need I say more?

So in the words of Monty Python, what has the Union done for us?

Everything. We are quite simply, the teacher next door and believe me, we are much better united than divided. In the classroom 'next door' we have solicitors, caseworkers, a raft of very well-qualified and experienced lay workers who give their time freely. We also have trainers who deliver hosts of courses and a welfare system which supports you from the start of your career to the end. Finally, we have a team of volunteers who give freely of their time to help you. I'm talking specifically about all the lay people who are out there. Thank you to all of you, it's not a cliché to say you do a wonderful job.

Today we face not only a crisis in education but a crisis in the morality of leadership the world over and at least in the UK at present, there is a serious conflict between representative democracy and an attempt to have government by plebiscite. It's a sorry state of affairs that we have a situation both in Northern Ireland and the whole

of the UK where politics seems to be in a constant state of name-calling and tit-for-tat paralysis.

Moving closer to home, the un-going lack of a legislative assembly is undoubtedly stifling our children's education, impacting on society's development and of course, adversely affecting our careers and livelihood. I repeat the word 'legislative', we must never forget that this means the assembly has the power to make legislation and until Stormont is resuscitated, in whatever form, we remain in perpetual limbo.

I call on politicians to use every ounce of energy they have to restore governance in NI. MLAs, I address you directly; 'if you don't owe that to yourselves and us then at least, you must owe it to our children. These fine young people, tomorrow's leaders, are the ones who are ultimately suffering . . . they only have one crack at growing up'.

So, on to the main event itself, the debate that follows. It's the day we decide policy so take the discussions earnestly and speak your mind. We invite, and indeed need, well-reasoned argument backed up by empirical facts, so be frank and say what's on your mind. On the other hand, try not to be hurtful or disrespectful and respect opposing points of view as just being different.

For what it's worth, I think we're a great organisation; we're inherently diverse, extremely relevant and because of our size, we have genuine power and a strong voice at every top table that matters.

As President of the Union, I have travelled the length of the country listening and engaging with teachers. I have sat in on the meetings of other unions and engaged with many end-users and decision makers in the education industry. I thank you most sincerely for electing me and giving me the humbling opportunity to fulfil this role. It has been, and still is, an immense pleasure and honour.

So, what have I learned? Well, my conclusion is pretty much is all I've just said, which leaves me with one final point.

I'm not just the French teacher next door, the art teacher three doors away or the Chemistry teacher in the science block. No, I am the English teacher in Belfast, the Geography teacher in Ballymena, the FE lecturer in Coleraine and the Year 4 teacher in Newry.

But one thing unites us; we're all 'next door' . . . for you.

David Baxter PhD
Northern Ireland President
NASUWT

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