

Good afternoon all

I am opening and closing my talk to you today with two of my favourite songs, the one you have just heard 'You get what you give' by New Radicals and we will conclude with 'All these things that I've done' by The Killers. Music is an important part of my life, and I wanted you to hear two songs that mean a lot to me as I leave.

I am standing before you as your Head for the very last time and I have to confess that it is not easy saying goodbye. It is nearly five years now since I saw Frensham Heights for the first time. I lived and worked at a big boarding school not far from here, and I had never heard of Frensham until I applied for the Headship in 2018. Coming here for the first time, I was struck by this gem of a school nestling in the Surrey hills: the sense of space, the beauty of the environment, the calm assurance of the students and the friendliness of the staff and parents all struck me. I knew that this was a place I would love to be the Head of, and thankfully the various interview panels from parents and students to Governors agreed. It was an absolute honour and privilege to be appointed as the ninth Head of the school and I have thoroughly enjoyed my time serving the whole community over the last four and a half years.

The inevitable question that many people have asked, of course, is why are you leaving. The simple answer to this is because it is time to go. One of the most important things you learn in life is when to hold onto something, and when to let it go. You know that as teachers we always tell you as our students to take risks, to challenge yourself and to aim high. I am now able, as your Head, to say that I am practicing what I preach. I know that it is now my time to let go, and to hand over the reins to someone else to take this fantastic school forward. It is worth me going into a bit of detail about the last few years to help give this some context.

My first year at Frensham was wonderful as I spent time getting to know the school and understanding the distinctive way this school operates. All schools set about aiming for roughly the same goals for their children: they want them to be safe, to find out who they are and to reach their potential. This is certainly the case at Frensham, but of course this school is also so much more than this, and working here has genuinely opened my eyes to a different way to educate. I have

always believed that education is about the building of relationships of support and trust, but it was here at Frensham that I could truly see this in operation. With the barriers of uniform and formalities like 'Sir' or 'Ma'am' removed, you really can build effective relationships between staff and students, and students can truly be themselves. It didn't take me very long to get used to being called Rick, and I have loved the informality and genuine mutual respect that exists here. It is precious and needs to be preserved, and I will certainly find it strange being called Mr Clarke or Sir again when I move to a new school.

The challenge for me, and for all of us, was that just over three years ago now to the day, a national lockdown was declared, and we entered one of the strangest and most challenging of social experiments any of us has ever known as the COVID pandemic struck. The impact on all of us was profound, and we are still feeling its after-effects. Leading a school through the pandemic was really challenging. Just as I was getting to know both students and staff, we were forced to remain at home and work remotely. I am really proud of your amazing teachers and the incredible work they did to make remote learning so effective, but there is no doubt that as a Head, suddenly being removed from the day-to-day interactions of the school, proved really difficult.

I have mentioned the staff, but I want to pay tribute to them again. All the staff worked incredibly hard through the pandemic, often battling their own challenges whilst at the same time doing their very best for students. In particular, I want to thank my senior leadership and senior management teams. They are the staff I have worked most closely with, and I can honestly say that you are all very fortunate to have such dedicated and professional staff looking out for you. It is invidious to single any people out, but I do want to pay tribute to some staff who have been with me from the beginning, who I worked so closely with through the challenges of COVID and much else in between, and that is Becks and Laura, your Deputy Heads. I certainly could not have achieved what I have achieved without them, and I want to thank them for their support. I also want to thank someone who you may not know very well, but who has played a crucial role in helping me to be the best that I can be. Many of you will know that I have a personal assistant called Lindsey, and it is fair to say that without her, I would not have been able to manage the demands of this job. Lindsey has been at the school for a long time, and together with lots of other amazing support staff, she has ensured that I can

do the best I can for the school. I want to thank her for her support, hard work and loyalty over the last few years, and I want to thank all of the staff, both teaching and support staff, for their dedication, commitment and support over the last few years.

You might be interested to know about my experiences at school, and how they have shaped my educational approach. I went to an all-boys school in Johannesburg in South Africa in the 1980s. I knew that the most important thing for me at school was to work hard – I didn't actually do hugely well at school academically as the South African system at the time, much like the UK's GCSE system, compels you to do subjects you don't really like or enjoy. I did my best, and even though I may not have enjoyed all of my subjects, my teachers were caring and passionate about their subjects and *I learned how to learn* – that was one of the most important aspects of my education as it set me up for success at university. I managed to achieve a first-class degree at university because I chose subjects I was passionate about (English and Psychology) and I knew how to work, because of the grounding I had received at school.

But for me, the most rewarding aspect of my education was making the most of the co-curricular provision. I played a lot of sport, mainly hockey and cricket, but I was also into public speaking and debating, I sang in two choirs and I auditioned for virtually every single play I could as I loved being on the stage. I went on trips, I volunteered to help at school if I could, and I took on leadership roles. In fact, in my last school year, with my final exams approaching, I took the lead role in the school musical 'The Pirates of Penzance'. I recall some of my teachers asking me if it was sensible to do all of this with exams approaching, but I knew in my heart that the experience I was gaining on the stage, being part of a production and working with others would be as important as the exams I was about to sit. And that is why I believe so passionately in all-round education, and why I have repeatedly stood on this stage and exhorted you to get involved in all the school has to offer – as the New Radicals say, you get what you give.

I never thought I would one day be old enough to say this, but here I am about to give you some life lessons from my experiences so far:

- Follow your passion. Have a dream and aim high. I grew up in a country thousands of miles away from here, but I had a passion for English and

teaching, and I had a dream of one day working in and running a school in England. I achieved this dream.

- Do something meaningful with your life. The pursuit of money or fame may appear enticing, but be careful about chasing things that may not ultimately fulfil you.
- Be nice to everyone, even when they aren't nice to you. Believe me, it pays you back in ways you can't imagine.
- Don't let your mistakes or failures define you. Failure is part of life, and the key is learning from it and becoming even stronger.
- Aim for integrity and loyalty in all you do. It's not always easy to achieve, but it will be remembered by those around you.
- You get what you give – apathy is corrosive and will not bring you happiness. Get stuck into all that life offers you. This is one of my core beliefs and it is why you heard that song by the New Radicals as you came in today.
- Be spiritual. If you have a faith of some kind, whatever faith, nourish it. If you don't, take some time to think about why we are here. It is humbling and important to see that there is a purpose to all you do, and there is something bigger than all of us.
- Take risks. I finished university and left SA to come to the UK. It was really hard leaving my home, but it was the best thing I could have done. I went back to SA for a great job opportunity – if I hadn't done so, I would not have met my amazing wife. I then took another risk by leaving SA in 2010 with my wife and young daughter, to take a completely different job as a boarding housemaster and it was this experience that got me to where I am now. And here I am again, taking another risk.
- Finally, those of you who have been here a while will remember the word ubuntu, something I have spoken about before. Ubuntu is an African concept which roughly translated means 'I am because you are'. It is about the importance of recognising our human bonds, recognising what unites us, not what divides us and truly looking out for other people. If you remember nothing else from what I have said today, remember this.

The greatest pleasure of being a Head is being able to see students at their best. From the drama, music and dance productions, to the sport, charity projects and

everything else in between, I have loved getting to know so many of you. You are all unique, talented and amazing young people who have so much to offer, and I wish you all the very best for the future.

So, to conclude. Frensham is a truly magical school, and it has been an honour serving you as your Head. I know that the staff and Governors are determined to preserve what makes this such a distinctive school. Make the most of all that you have here, do your best, look out for other people and go out and change the world. I am going to finish with a quotation from one of my favourite novels, 'On the Road' by the American author Jack Kerouac:

"What is that feeling when you're driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? - it's the too-huge world vaulting us, and it's good-bye. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies."

Thank you.