

Saying Goodbye to our Leavers

By Celia Tedd, Head of Sixth Form, as published in The Independent Schools Magazine.

It's the time of year for farewells. Head of Sixth Form from King's High School, Warwick, Celia Tedd, reflects on what can be one of the hardest aspects of the job, and the importance of giving young people the chance to have a proper goodbye.

When people talk about the hardest aspects of being a secondary school teacher, thoughts turn to piles of marking, reports deadlines and the constant shadow of exams, not to mention our recent and sudden mastery of online learning in the midst of a pandemic. Every year, however, something far more basic and human takes centre stage. For many of us, particularly those on the pastoral side of education, bidding farewell to a generation of pupils is both the hardest, and most inevitable, aspect of this job. Every summer I feel a pang of loss as we say goodbye to another wave of pupils leaving school for the final time.

Over the years we have invested so much in every aspect of their education. Got to know them and their families and helped them navigate the joys and sorrows of their teenage years. Guided them through decisions that will define their adult lives. They in turn have brought us laughter, young wisdom and frustration in differing proportions. Those ties are cut abruptly one day in July, and we wish them well on the next stage of their adventure. At the formal leavers' events, we smile for the camera as every possible combination of pupils huddle together for final snapshots. It's like being at a big family wedding. Will those 25 pupils ever again be in the same place at the same time? Will they remember one another's names when the photo surfaces in several years and they shriek at their haircuts and how fresh-faced they all look? In those final moments they want to capture and commemorate every highlight of these important years, and to stamp themselves up on the school.

Despite all the promises of postcards of youthful dream destinations of the moment, you know this bunch will be gone for good any moment. Their promises to keep in touch offer a way of not quite saying goodbye and not quite severing those ties. The postcards won't come, though the occasional sheepish reference request might. It is important that we give young people a chance to say their goodbyes at school properly, with celebration of this huge milestone plus moments for individual as well as collective farewells. The departing pupils need to understand from our goodbyes that we are proud of them, and that our good wishes for their future are not proportional to their individual successes or misdemeanours. Saying goodbye also reminds us about the nature of the teacher-pupil relationship. We are not parents. We are certainly not friends. We occupy a space that comes with responsibility, intensity and care, and that space is fundamental but temporary.

As teachers, we have been secondary attachment figures for those pupils. Their excitement at leaving school, and indeed us, can therefore also mask apprehension, confusion and fear, particularly for those whose attachment style is not secure. Many won't want fuss, but saying goodbye is emotionally healthy and provides a sense of closure. The truth is that despite the annual surge of empty classroom syndrome and the postcard pledges, we secondary school teachers don't want the pupils to keep in close touch. We know that our promises to those young people have been fulfilled when they turn to face the future and head off without a backwards glance. We want them to be full of confidence and wonder, their young lives loaded with potential and possibility. There will be wobbles along the way for them, as there are for any adult, but they will be negotiating those wobbles without us yet with our words ringing in their ears. Everything we have taught them and introduced them to has knitted together into a pathway that leads irreversibly out of school, and so we bid them a fond farewell on that one-way journey.