

Leavers' Assembly – Jonathan Bierwirth's Farewell

Friday 31 October 2025

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Head of Development and Community Relations



Good morning, staff, students, parents, invited guests, and our school leavers.

The reason I'm here this morning is because I was once a student here too – a long, long time ago. So long, in fact, that the year I started was the same year that Mr Jonathan Bierwirth also started here at St Andrew's College as Preparatory School Principal.

So, this really feels like a full circle moment to be able to say a few words today. The Preparatory School was, both metaphorically and physically, in a very different place from what we see now.

To give you a bit of context, 1996 was a different time. Cell phones weren't common, the internet was barely a thing, there was only one Leota working at St Andrew's, and you could still smoke indoors. Good times. For us here at St Andrew's, Mr Bierwirth's predecessor, Mr John McDonald, had recently passed away over the Christmas holidays. He left big shoes to fill, and in June of 1996, Mr Bierwirth stepped into the role.

I'm guessing how I felt starting school back then might have been a bit like how Mr Bierwirth felt starting at St Andrew's, too. Excited, probably pretty nervous. Overwhelmed with the sound of the bagpipes.

Now, you're probably wondering what Mr Bierwirth was like in the 1990s. From what I can remember – pretty much the same, to be honest. Instead of his goatee, he was rocking a lush moustache; his hair was dark brown, but the top of his head was still pretty shiny.

More importantly, I remember he was the same warm and caring person we honour this morning. The empathy and kindness he shows his Preparatory School students today is the same experience I had when I was a student. A nurturing father figure to all the Preparatory School students.

In fact, I remember being in the library once, checking out a book with my personalised library bag. He handed the book to me and I said, without thinking, "Thanks, Dad." You didn't say anything – just smiled. You probably don't remember, but I felt like I needed to change schools and to this day I am still embarrassed by it.

Over the last 29 years, Mr Bierwirth has been one of the driving forces in the transformation of the Preparatory School, to ensure that students have the best possible facilities and opportunities to learn and grow.

Where the Commerce Department is today, was once the Junior Department, where Mr Bierwirth inherited classrooms perched on questionable wooden poles above an equally questionable bikeshed – structures that definitely wouldn't have survived the Christchurch earthquakes.



He spearheaded the transformation of that area into a space that was more welcoming and safer for students, before the Junior Department classes transitioned to the current Preparatory School.

Where the College Shop stands today, there used to be a massive wooden playground, which was definitely responsible for several broken bones – which would've given our Health and Safety Manager a heart attack. Mr Bierwirth helped to replace it and made the area safer for students.

There was an old converted brick house that served as the Preparatory School office, with a staffroom upstairs and Mr Bierwirth's office just inside the front door – a house that would later make way for the Pre-school.

Another old brick building, the Burnett Block, was converted into a computer lab, Science, and Art classrooms for students. The building wasn't actually level, and was on a slope, but that's a minor detail.

In the early 2000s, the brand new Preparatory School Library was built – a worthy upgrade from the small classroom that had been doing its best at the time.

And, ultimately, the Preparatory School itself was renovated into a purpose-built facility that allows our Year 1–8 students to find their passions, learn new things, and build confidence. Many of those students are sitting in this Chapel today.

Beyond the bricks and mortar, Mr Bierwirth – you've created traditions that bring people together. This year, over 800 grandparents attended Grandparents' Day, now a "can't miss" event on the school calendar, and the annual Book Parade turns the school into a living storybook. These showcase what you believe a school should be: welcoming, fun, and full of curiosity.

Mr Bierwirth, you've left large shoes to fill. Generations of families have passed through the Preparatory School during your tenure, and they're grateful for all you have done to make it the special place it is today.

Thank you for everything you've given to this school and its people over the past 29 years. It's been an incredible journey, and I hope you look back on it with pride. Wishing you all the best for a well-earned retirement. Thank you.