OPENING ADDRESS OF THE GATHERING, 20 AUGUST, 2011,
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY, CHRISTCHURCH

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Welcome along to The Gathering.

It is a great privilege to be asked to speak this morning.

And exciting to see reflected here, once again the growing acknowledgement that no one part of the sector can do it alone.

Every year I see greater understanding throughout the educational world, of the critical role that team work between professional managers, teachers, academics and parents plays in delivering excellence.

While I am a parent, I am neither a researcher nor a teacher – yet here I stand, addressing a day devoted to formal investigation and the “science of learning”.

As someone who runs an early childhood education service for over 3,500 children, but who does not have a teaching background, I have watched over the years as the sector has grown with an acceptance of the wide variety of skills, disciplines and connections that it takes to deliver excellence. Whether that be in early childhood, primary, secondary or tertiary education.

It sounds clichéd – but there are three key professionals, teachers, academics and managers, who need to be working in concert in order to run an educational service to its best potential - these are like the three legs of a stool. No one is more or less important than the other. Each is essential for strength, balance and fulfilling the purpose of supporting the platform for learning.

This is certainly something we have recognised and continue to build into our own organisation.

Kidsfirst appointed a few years ago its first ever Strategic Leadership Team. We brought on board an Operations Manager, Human Resources Manager and Support Services Manager to compliment the existing team of two. Of the five, only one – Operations Manager Dr Ali Wegner had an education background. The remaining four of us come with strong experience and professional skills from other disciplines.

These additions to our team have brought not just broader experience and skill sets, but a more objective view of the world to Kidsfirst – something that must always remain a key priority, as we stay true to our community roots and commitment to connection.
Bringing the outside world in, and encouraging and facilitating the sort of research that is greatly needed by those outside of the walls of academia, will continue to be an important part of the path forward for the sector. We need to let the researchers in. It has never been more urgent for us to be able to prove the value of certain parts of our education system, to counter those who will always try to use us as a political football.

Forming true partnerships with parents, and through them with communities we are part of, is also more important than ever, at every level of the profession.

The future for successful providers will be about the three professional groups – academics, managers and teachers alike – each bringing their own strengths; confident in their own knowledge; truly understanding one another; learning from each other; and being able to speak the same language.

It sounds so simple – but our sector still struggles to distil its often-complex concepts and practices into messages that parents, the media, politicians and the general public can connect with and relate to. The understanding and support of all these groups is critical to our development and the future of education.

So much of the input that parents have at home determines how engaged children really become with learning. It is also widely recognised that the support that our sector needs to innovate and expand comes from far beyond the classroom environment.

The backing we all have from key influencers such as government, private providers, professional bodies and businesses – to name just a few – the backing from such groups for research programmes, innovations, initiatives and resources can literally make or break our ability to continue to achieve the excellence, of which we are all so proud in this country.

We **MUST** be able to demonstrate what we have achieved and are achieving for our children, as a result of the work we do every day. Equally we **MUST** be able to articulate the learning that occurs for children and their families in a language that all in our community can understand.

And so the challenge we face, as we look ahead, is how to continue to grow and extend the partnerships that are represented at events like today’s. Growing these partnerships will enable us to better develop understanding amongst those who have the power to enhance further our sector . . . and the undeniable value it brings to every aspect of our society.

We, within the sector, know that team work makes for more engaging, responsive, high quality education services. What we need to do however is to find new ways to provide evidence for those outside the sector to whom we look to for support, - that the investment of time, money and other resources into our sector is not only an investment worth making, but one that is worth extending.
None of us can do it alone, nor can we do it well in isolation. Teachers can teach, researchers can research; academics can explore, develop and advance theory; parents can parent; and managers can manage. And each group will do the very best they can for the benefit of every child who crosses their path and for the sector as a whole.

But bring them together with mutual respect and room for all to shine: and that’s where the true magic begins . . .

Robert A Heinlein, stated “A child’s life is like a piece of paper on which every person leaves a mark”. I challenge you to think of the mark that you will leave on a child’s life as a result of being here today and how will you describe that mark in a language that all parts of our community can understand and therefore value.

Thank you ladies and gentleman.