

## The major attributes of schooling

### Como High School Graduation

November 4, 1992

Graduations often bring out the cliches in people. We hear discussion about learning continuing for the rest of your life, now that the best days of your life are over, life is a school, the memories of your school days will be forever, and the school beyond the gates. Like many things you have been exposed to over the past years, there are all vaguely true, but sometimes the message gets lost in the manner of delivery.

My message to you tonight is much simpler, and relates to three attributes.

1. **Commitment.** I value an education which instills commitment. A commitment that one's conception of the good life is worth carrying out is all-important. Such self-respect is not natural, does not come easily, is difficult to be engendered in a schooling system based on hierarchical rules and one that often forgets that it is inculcating a morality. Being good at something with out self-respect leads to tragedies. I trust that you can measure your schooling as a function of the increased commitment you have to excel in whatever you back yourself to excel at, and that this commitment leads to aiding others to have commitment to do the same.

2. **Challenge.** An ability to confront challenges is a key ingredient in life's success. At schools, we often change the language and construe challenge in words like TEE, Maths, English literature, Ancient Greek, painting in a post-modern style, and cooking a souffle.

For many of us, what we have actually learned while at school will quickly be forgotten. Most senior maths teachers will never understand Pickwick's responses to the man in the wheelbarrow, conjugate a verb, or read My Place. Most senior English teachers will never again differentiate an equation, determine an exponential, or play with a probability. But I bet the English and maths teachers have told you how critical it is, for you future life, to study their subjects. The key reason we study these subjects is that they teach the thinking, decoding, and processing strategies to solve real world problems. The world of progress requires critical enquiry, disciplined rhetoric, simultaneous thinking, and much automatic processing of masses of information.

One of the most systematic findings of research into education change, management effectiveness, and teaching is that setting challenges and then structuring the environment to help the student reach these

challenges so they can set further challenges, is the hallmark of successful teaching and learning. The worst possible strategy is to ask a person to "do their best". When you ask someone to "do their best", that is what they merely do. It is okay-ing the status quo, asking for no challenge, there is no risk of not succeeding, and it is a damnable strategy.

When I look to the world that the politicians are about to inflict on our schools, I wonder where the challenge went. Given the Mayer and Carmichael reports, which aim to inflict a new competency based system on schools, particularly post-compulsory years, I cringe at the lack of challenge, the loose rhetoric, the desire to find something which everyone can do their best, the will to not fail anybody, and if students only attain these Canberra- and Victorian set competencies suddenly they will transform themselves into little Keatings and Kennetts.

I notice that our State Minister wants to increase the standards in High Schools. She wants to make it a C minimum to get your secondary graduation. As I understand the politics she will get her way - but at what price. On this years figures a C-minimum means that 43% of you would not graduate. So, behind the doors the system is being changed so that next years students will need to get a C minimum in far fewer subjects, and they will be asked to enrol in much easier subjects! This is raising the standard?

When you join the workforce you will find that it is challenging, requires commitment, and doing your best is not good enough. You will be asked to structure environments to produce the very best, and then asked to excel beyond this very best. For many who will not join the workforce, you will be also challenged, asked for commitment, asked to do beyond you best, and then be damned that you did not excel or structure the environment to produce for yourself. One of the toughest aspects of being unemployed is that you are constantly reminded that there is no future in it, you can not get promoted, you do not get a raise, it does not lead to commitment to being unemployed, and you get challenged at their game not one of your making. We have much to explain as to why we are not addressing the realities of living in the 1990's at ages 18 to 28. We need to ask our education politicians why they keep promising that if only you get more education will a job open up. You have attained an excellent education but who believes that this will create a job. The good news is that schooling at Como probably is your best insurance to face the challenge and commitment.

3. Let me turn to my last critical component alongside challenge and commitment. That is, **fun**.

As you have noticed I am not a witty speaker, have a terrible repertoire of jokes, and sometimes have trouble remembering my kids names let alone remembering a good story. But I sure can have fun, and preach the values of commitment and challenge to keep having fun. For my own kids, every night they get asked the standard question - what was the fun-nest thing you did at school today? The number one rule I inculcate into them about schooling is to have fun. They have to generate the fun as schooling can get too serious. I have fun doing my work, and ask that you also never forget that creating fun can be challenging and requires commitment.

Graduands, the government is going to institute nation-wide testing of all Years 3, 7, and 10 students to ensure that standards are maintained. This wonderful new innovation is preached as the new cure to educational ills. But let me tell you a secret. It is a secret, because no one seems to remember this, and the newspapers did not report it. In WA the Government undertook this exact-same innovation two years ago. Why has it remained a secret and not reported: because there was mainly good news. The public school system of WA has very high standards, students were attaining at a very high level, we were world competitive (well ahead of the USA, UK and in the league of Japan, Korea, and the other super-education powers). You have finished this stage in a great school system, you are prepared to world class levels. I congratulate you. Enjoy this commitment by your teachers and principals, take up the challenge, and hey, have fun out there.