Next year, should you be a Prep or Year One teacher, you will be teaching students who will graduate in 2020. What will the world of work and in fact the world be like? How can fine universities like Griffith hope to educate teachers to Get Smarter for 2020 when we have so little idea of how the world will be? Wikipedia gives us a brief glimpse of some events at that time; the 32nd Olympic games will be held, the last nuclear power plant in Germany will be decommissioned, India’s vision of becoming a powerful, world superpower and an influential national state is expected to be fulfilled; the People’ Republic of China is predicted to be more economically powerful than the US, and the world wrestling entertainment will present its 36th edition of Wrestlemania.

Hedley Beare in Creating the Future School, wrote to educators from the future child, Angelica. In her letter, Angelica presents us with some startling facts; on present life expectancy figures, she will be alive in 2070 and her children will see the 22nd century. She describes the environmental, economic and technological changes that will beset children of her generation. She concludes that in a world like this, “it is important for me to know what I stand for, I will look to my school to help me form my values and decide on my system of beliefs”. I will return to this theme shortly.

The last few years have presented some of the greatest government oversight of education, in the name of public accountability. Never have we experienced so many government mandates for national testing, a compulsory curriculum and reporting. The new Federal Government has yet to fully detail their preferred stance on these issues but the fact appears to be that while Education is constitutionally, like Health, a state responsibility, the Federal Government seems determined to have a significant say in what it looks like and how it is taught.

An article in the Australian on 19 September referred to an OECD report on Education where it was noted that Australian School students spend half the time learning reading, writing, maths and science than do their counterparts in 30 other industrialised nations. Parliamentarians on both sides of the floor used the OECD results to reflect on why our nation needed to introduce a rigorous curriculum in all such subjects. Interestingly the Australian Primary Principals’ Association suggested that the curriculum was too cluttered and that core skills were suffering as a result! Other findings of the report noted that Australia was the only member of the OECD to decrease public investment in tertiary education by 4% compared with an average of 49% increase in the other 29 nations. You will be surprised to learn that this attracted less government and media attention.

If we take a stock take of some of the assessment and reporting demands that have been placed on schools in the last few years we would include, Years 2, 3, 4, 5,7, and 9 testing (and of course the preparations for this), PE, Health Ed, QCE, QCS , QCARF and Essential Learnings. Little wonder that teachers’ heads are spinning!

So what does all of this mean for you; the graduate teachers of this year?

What are the requirements of you the next generation of teachers about to take your place in our schools?

The rules and regulations of 1881 tell us that teachers then, must have had a satisfactory certificate as to moral character; that they needed to watch over the morals of their pupils and restrain all improper conduct and speech, and so far as practicable, govern their pupils by the moral influence of kindness and by appeals to the nobler instincts of their nature. Mind you if you did all this without fault for five years you were given an increase of 25 cents per week, providing the Board of Education approved!

The Old College of Teachers Professional Standards (released earlier this year) …..provides a more recent insight into what teachers of the 21st century need to consider in both their pedagogy and their manner under 10 professional standards. These standards align closely with the key elements of the National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching.

The theme of my remarks to you today actually sits comfortably with these rules and standards; that values are the most important thing that we as teachers teach.
In social settings when people learn that you are a teacher their next question is usually, “Where do you teach?” quickly followed by “What do you teach?” No matter where you are employed, the correct answer is, “I teach young people.”

What teachers and good schools try to do goes far beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. It is so important for us to inculcate sound values and reinforce the values that may or may not be initially learned in the home; of the importance of us modelling in our every-day life at school the values we expected our students to follow. The more I consider the role of schools the more I find myself drawn back to this central theme that it is the intangible things we try to develop at school; character, moral courage, and values such as loyalty, honesty, responsibility and perseverance that are what schools are really all about.

Schools are communities of learners.

A sense of community is more important today than ever. In a book written by Hugh McKay, titled, “Re-inventing Australia”, McKay’s central hypothesis is that we are living in a period of enormous social change. We see this today in the noticeable loss of trust in previously respected institutions, a scarcity of ethical debate regarding our local or international responsibilities and an apparent acceptance that truth is at a premium in public affairs. Integrity is a scarce commodity as our society appears to value a narrow, inward-looking and mean-spirited political correctness and political expediency. Altruism is less evident and voices of conscience are rarely heard, either because they don’t exist or because they are not simplistically sensationalist enough to be given media access.

To build community requires a team approach. Our team appears to be in retreat. The immediate and extended family is shrinking, the church is no longer a force in the life of most Australians, and the authority of schools is becoming increasingly challenged. The home and school are really the only parts of the team that are left and consequently the demands on these bodies are escalating.

In my experience two factors are essential for the proper socialisation of young people into the community’s values. The first is a warm and accepting environment, the second is the implementation of consistent controls that limit a child’s behaviour yet gradually allow the exercise of independence within accepted social guidelines. School (and family) rules must be expressed in terms of preserving positive values, which are accepted, respected and practised by all in that community. As a teacher I find it harder and harder to impart and uphold values to young people. The prevailing views in society undermine this task. How often do we hear sentiments such as, “to each his own”; “everybody is different.” We live in a time when the language is being subtly changed, when a ‘right’ really means a ‘personal preference’, when to ‘think logically’ often means, ‘to feel comfortable with’. Morality isn’t subjective…It isn’t relative.

Values are the lighthouse for our actions. These values are immovable and provide a reference point by which we navigate.

Today it is more important than ever to emphasise objective values and the importance of rights and obligations. Schools, communities and families have to move away from discussions, which begin, “there are no right or wrong answers here”. In most cases there are, and we mustn’t be afraid to state what they are. Our preoccupation as a community with our rights and our choices is unhealthy. Prof. Geoffrey Blainey picked up on this theme of rights and responsibilities when he observed;

“One change in the last 40 years in Australia is beyond dispute. We have moved dramatically from an emphasis on responsibilities and duties to an emphasis on rights. A just society depends as much on the fulfilling of duties as it does on the demanding of rights. A change in the balance between duties and rights might well work wonders in Australia”.

The central role of the school is to nurture, challenge and develop young minds. It is not however only about developing academic skills and abilities. Strong values and the clear knowledge that being a member of society carries with it responsibilities and duties as well as rights must also be developed in parallel because it is this knowledge that enables us to use our skills and talents to the maximum benefit of the community of which we are part.

A good education is holistic and its impact is seen over an extended period of time. Educational thinkers have known this for a long time. In his book “the End of Education” Neil Postman says it well when he says

“At its best schooling can be about how to make a life, which is quite different from how to make a living”.
The value of a successful education is observed many years later when the character forming school years have ended and the not-so-young people are functioning happily in their worlds of careers, families, community life and parenthood, conscious of what schooldays meant to them.

I have not lost sight of the fact that we also teach children English, Mathematics, Science, History, Art and Music, etc. We do and we do it well. In the long run however that is not the most important thing they will take from their school days.

Congratulations for accepting the challenge and privilege to be a teacher; you have the most important responsibility to assist in shaping the hearts and minds of our young; to make a real difference in people's lives and in the society in which we live and will grow old. Your real role is to teach not so much subjects, but children and to teach them with your heart. To value and respect them; to discipline, support, encourage and challenge them. You may never know the difference you make in their lives; unlike Rosemary Bishop, who taught Waverley Stanley and saw his potential and ensured he was able to attend a secondary boarding school where he was challenged and encouraged and now many years later has established a strong and successful Foundation, Yalari, which promotes boarding scholarships for indigenous children all over Australia. It may not be as spectacular as this; it may simply be that you allow a child to believe in themselves. No mean feat. I congratulate you all on your endeavours to date and encourage you to take your vocation seriously, our children deserve it.