

Good evening everyone

“We Can Make The Change” is our theme for this year and how delighted I am that it has been embraced in so many areas of the College.

Where have some of those changes occurred? Let’s look at NAPLAN as a starting point – we have had our strongest set of results ever this year, exceeding State results in all categories 3, 5, 7 and 9 other than spelling at Year 5 where we were the same. This places our students well in advance of local schools and the gap is widening.

I don’t think that one can make drastic changes in the four months prior to the tests and impact the outcome that we have seen this year. Our continuing stronger results are the outcome of many years of excellent teaching and preparation, most particularly the work of our Prep to Year 2 teachers.

You have seen the presentation already this evening that shows the terrific achievements of our students across so many of the interschool competitions, competitions that are all based around testing students’ academic ability. They are tests or competitions in which our students can only experience success if they have strong literacy, numeracy, language or scientific understanding.

As a College, we put enormous investment into the VCE as the vehicle by which our students move from school into tertiary study. Consequently, the majority of our students move from Overnewton into the major universities and, from there into careers that reflect their educational journey. We are proud that our Year 12s have mostly been with us since Junior School and that we don’t buy in academically gifted children close to the end of their schooling to inflate our results, nor do we block access to VCE exams because we are concerned about the harm that a few students may have on our public standing. Recently, I heard that a Principal of a local Government school quite publicly stated that his school offers VCAL because it makes their VCE results look better. As VCAL is a program that schools offer for the less academically able students, the increasing number of schools and students undertaking the program means that their average study score is inflated as a consequence.

I am proud to say that we allow every student who wants to sit his or her VCE do so. We are an open entry school and we celebrate the increasing number of high 90s that our students are achieving along with those students who might achieve an ATAR of 50 but that is a great result for them and it might have been enough to gain a place in the VU access program.

If I could be slightly controversial for a minute, I would like to say that we all know how easy it is to teach a class of academically able, motivated students; our teaching skill does not have to be challenged terribly much in such situations. Given the mixed ability of the classrooms across our College, it makes me even more proud of our teaching staff who strive constantly to challenge their own teaching practices to get the best out of each of the children in front of them and I thank them sincerely for their work in this regard.

Clearly, academically, we are making a change in the lives of Overnewton students this year as we always have and this is terrific.

We know also, that we have had our best year to date in the 5/6 sporting program and with ACS sport. Again, in a school that does not have compulsory team training but offers training as an optional extra, it is outstanding to see how well we have performed in the sporting arena and the continual changes that are being made in this regard too.

But these points are not the real area of “making a change” that I want to push this evening. Making a change in curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students should be the annual goal of every good school.

Let me talk about an area where I would like us to continue striving to make a change in the context of our community.

In the last school holidays, Bev and I had the opportunity of travelling to Scotland for a dear friend’s wedding. We had two weeks of blissful escape.

Whilst away, I must confess that, when we had access, I was glued to “The Age” online – we kept up with the local UK news too but I wanted to keep up with what was going on at home too.

It was an interesting experience to read articles on my iPad but not really have anyone else from home to talk to about them in depth or to have seen the same stories reported on the news or in other newspapers.

When we stepped off the plane in Melbourne after that long 26 hour flight, the first headline that I saw online was “Is this the most hated man in Australia?” I wonder if you know to whom the article referred.

It was not a footballer or a politician; the most hated man in Australia is, apparently, the Bachelor.

The Bachelor is not a program we have watched in our family...although every time an ad for it came on the TV, Bev and I were taken aback by the girls’ apparent knowledge of all of the bachelorettes, who they were, who should go next, and so on. In a single TV household, I guess that is the power of catch up TV during the day whilst the girls are at “Uni”.

I wonder if anyone here tonight has ever met Blake Garvey? I know that a large number of you will have seen edited versions of his life over the past few months and you will have been fed snippets of his life prior to his time on national television. He was named the most hated man in Australia by “The Age” newspaper because, even though he had already split with the winning Bachelorette, Channel Ten still showed his proposal to her...the break up came out a few days later, the potential pregnancy with the runner up and then the new relationship with the woman who came third...all reliable because they were reported in one of the country’s most reliable magazines “New Idea” and gaining even more credibility when confirmed by “Woman’s Day” and “Mamma Mia” too.

Yes, I know people accept going onto reality television knowing that the producers will determine how we get to know them. However, how awful to think that, without ever knowing this man, Channel Ten and a range of digital media sites have been able to mould a person from being so loved to being so hated...great TV for them including all of the follow up press that has resulted.

Why am I spending so much time talking about a ridiculous program on TV? I am doing so because I want to use it to illustrate where I believe our greatest challenge lies in terms of making a change.

One of the greatest threats to world peace at the moment is the threat of the IS. And what are journalists doing with that threat. Some of them are intentionally creating fear by linking all people of a particular faith with those amoral terrorists. We have many beautiful Muslim families within our community. I know that they are as appalled by the practices of the IS as the Catholics in our room will have been by one of their fellow Catholics, Adolph Hitler, committing his atrocities in the second world war against those of a different religious viewpoint to his own.

So what do we do about it, how do we overcome the constant fear and distorted stories that we are fed in the media each day. I believe we start with each other, each person in our own community by making sure that we don't listen to stories about others that we know, or believe messages that we hear, without actually getting to meet with that person face to face.

Earlier in the year, I was inspired to hear of a parent in our Taylors Lakes Campus, Junior School who organised a couple of other mums and some of our students and spent a day talking to and providing food for some of Melbourne's homeless. This was not the first time this mum had done this; it was just that she took some Overnewton people with her.

"They all gave so unconditionally and brought so much joy and love to those in need" was the comment of one of the first time mums who went.

Another parent to whom I have been speaking recently told me that she is reducing her working week so that she can continue to spend one day a week working with refugees. She said that working in a kitchen and providing food and other comforts for refugees has been some of the most rewarding things she has ever done.

In both instances, the parents commented that meeting the homeless or the refugees and talking to them face to face had changed them – changed their view of what we are led to believe homeless and refugees are all about and changed them personally in terms of their own humanity.

Speaking to people face to face is the change that we need to make if we are going to really build our community to the best community that it can be.

In his book *The Art of Belonging*, Hugh Mackay has some terrific things to say about this. He says that:

“We are social creatures who depend on each other to nurture and sustain the communities that, in turn, nurture and sustain us.

Meanwhile, the IT revolution makes it easier for us not to see each other, while creating the illusion of connectedness.”

And don't we know how easy it is to send off a long email to someone rather than talking to them face to face – because sending an email means that we can hold onto our anger, or we can hold on to our misperception, or we can bully another anonymously, or we can send pictures of someone that we would never send if the person (or their grandmother) was standing with us as we sent it.

One of the reasons I so love restorative practices, is because the process forces people to sit down face to face, look each other in the eye, talk to each other and try and repair the relationship. It is not always perfect but it is a vast improvement on a model where people never sit down together and talk through their issues.

Hugh MacKay goes onto to say:

“It is no solution to put up the shutters and retreat into a world of our own. As with every other kind of human relationship we value, our relationship with local neighbourhoods and communities requires effort. We need to connect, to associate, and to engage. Joining a service club, giving a neighbour your undivided attention, responding to the needs of strangers – all such actions help build the social capital that makes us strong.

Communities can be magical places, but the magic comes from us, not to us. Social cohesion is never about our religious beliefs or where in the world we came from. It's simply about treating each other with kindness and respect.”

Blake Garvey, James Hird, Tony Abbott, Louise Pillidge...do any of us actually know them or do we base what we know of them on what we are allowed to glean from journalists or people who say that they “know”.

I loved hearing from some Year 11s last week who had been on the NZ trip. One of them reported to me that another boy on the trip could not believe how funny one of the other boys was – a boy with whom he had been at school since Prep. Getting to know that boy in a new context and from personal experience opened his eyes to a new friendship.

Unless we find it within ourselves and find the time to talk to each other rather than listening to the stories of others we will never have the chance to make the sort of changes in the broader community that must start with each of us in our own community.

And that is the change that I believe we are beautifully positioned to make as a community, if we truly desire to do so.

As I finish this evening, I would like to acknowledge a few people.

This year, we lose a cumulative total of 155 years of teaching experience from the College. Mrs. Vie Brown retired at the end of 2013 and I was not in a position of acknowledging her at Presentation Night; additionally Mrs. Lyn Jordan has retired but continues to work with us from time to time. In recent weeks, I have been advised that our College Head of Curriculum, Ms. Andrea Dart will be leaving us to move to the west coast, Ms. Aileen McLeod, long serving Keilor Campus English and learning support teacher and Ms. Nina Bondarenko also a long serving Keilor Campus Mathematics teacher will retire. All of these staff has given 25 years of service to Overnewton. Mrs Glenys Berry, College Risk Manager, leaves us after 18 years with the College. And finally, our Head of Library at Keilor, Ms. Joy Whiteside is leaving us too. Together 155 years of exceptional teaching and leadership has been given by these people to our community and I ask that you all join with me in wishing them well as they move into the next exciting parts of their journeys.

Mrs Lena Gogos (JS) and Mrs Marilyn Healey (Library), long serving staff members at Taylors Lakes, and Mrs Claire Clutterbuck (Visual Arts) from the Keilor Campus left us during the year too.

We are blessed to have a College Board that knows what they need to do to ensure that the College remains financially viable well into the future and to ensure that the mission of the College is core to the decisions that are made. Our Chair does an exceptional job leading our Board and its committees and our Board members give passionately of themselves to Overnewton to ensure that Overnewton students and their families have the best opportunities we can provide for their learning. Mark has mentioned the work of three retiring members this year in Manny Stamatopoulos, Don Hilton and Michelle McLean and it would be incredibly remiss of me not to acknowledge their extraordinary contribution to the College and its Board over many many years.

I continue to be inspired each day by the incredible contributions made by all of our parents to the life of this community. Please never underestimate how much it is valued. Our Old Collegians too, continue to provide wonderful reconnections back to their old school, a school that is still an important point of connection for them when they need it.

And finally, to our students: Your quirks, your laughter, your tears, your successes, your questioning, your challenging, your articulation, your wisdom sometimes, all combine to make every day coming to Overnewton an absolute joy and, for this I thank you.

As a last comment, I wish our graduating class every success as they leave us in a few weeks' time...but I will expand on this in their final assembly on Friday.