**Presentation Night 2017**

**Andrew Turvey**

***Editor’s note****: Andrew advises that each presentation night he tries to address a specific issue relevant to his school community. This year it’s about over-rewarding students for average performance only, building student resilience and supporting true student growth and achievement.*

Welcome to presentation night 2017 and the first as a stand-alone school without the Distance Education component attached. This is a sad, exciting and significant time all in one. For the past 40 years we have been defined as being a joint-site school with two distinct but very different arms. As we finalise the separation and become Karabar High School without the extension, it provides us a great opportunity to define ourselves and what we stand for without trying to be the jack of all trades and masters of none.

However, having said this, please do not misinterpret me, as the gains will definitely be going both ways. Over the past term I have coordinated the development of two school plans and the Distance Education school has an exciting plan that caters for the very unique needs that this educational setting has, just as our school plan allows us to focus specifically on targets and plans suited to a face-to-face delivery of education. Our pursuit of excellence is very different in this setting so it is exciting to be able to create some target goals that are focused on students who are, literally, right in front of us.

I acknowledge and thank the efforts of our fantastic team of dedicated teachers and support staff who have worked tirelessly at building student success throughout 2017. Tomorrow it will be announced that we have a total of 13 student results across the whole school that are in the Distinguished Achievers list. Our Karabar High School students have worked hard and demonstrated what can be achieved from true application and the commitment of their local comprehensive high school.

As is customary we farewell a number of staff at year’s end as they move off to other pursuits, whether this be teaching or the greener grasses of retirement. This will also be the last year of the Principal farewells where, instead of cramming them into a Principal’s speech, they will have their own section of the program where honour given can be to those who have assisted student growth for either a short time or an extended career.

I thank the following staff who have been members of the Karabar community in a temporary or casual basis. We thank you for your contribution to the school. [Names, faculties and the achievements of seven staff]

For those who have sat in the audience before, you will be aware that I like to take this opportunity to challenge thinking and to pose some questions. Not all are ‘hill to die on’ beliefs, but they are things to think about and opportunities to challenge thinking which we quite often blindly follow, and tonight this speech is no different.

This year has been an interesting one for me as we continually attempt to raise the bar. The push back from some sectors of our wider community has been interesting and appears very much like an acceptance that mediocrity is OK. Whereas for the senior leadership team and myself, this is not what we are willing to accept. We did not walk into these jobs to accept the average, nor to allow your children to just get by. We have instituted procedures and processes to have your children reach their potential, whilst giving you the tools to assist them to get there.

We are truly of the belief that this has to be a partnership to work, and that no child deserves to be left behind. We have actively taught all students one set of rules so that they can survive their schooling journeys. We do not treat students in a patronising manner by changing the rules as they grow older. We do not believe that they do not have the capacity to play in the big field from day one (see, you can take the PDHPE teacher off the field but you cannot take from me the sporting analogies!).

Seriously though, it is around this theme that I am wishing to talk to you a little further in this speech tonight, as sometimes I question what we as a society are doing. I wonder if as a society we have lost our course?

Last week a new survey came out stating that mental health issues are amongst the top of concerns for our young people. The report went on to discuss the rise in anxiety amongst our teenagers and to speculate on the causes of this spike.

As a society we are spending billions of dollars attempting to ‘fix’ the problem rather than address the problem at its source – a bit like putting a band-aid on a cut to an artery.

We have spawned a whole generation of industries ‘fixing’ kids, rather than stepping back and asking why they need fixing in the first place. Why is it too hard to say we have gone too far down the wrong track and it is time to stop? Structure, discipline and support is what is needed – not medication and therapy.

When did we decide that kids needed what I affectionately call, ‘turn up trophies’? It may make us feel good that we are ‘building their self-esteem’ but most kids can see straight through the tokenism and think it is a joke. I remember a time when I heard a child mockingly celebrating getting their ‘turn up trophy’ at the end of a sports season – nothing special or exceptional had happened, their development was as would be expected, not exceptional or outstanding but still worthy of a trophy apparently. Another dust collector to add to the shelf with all of the other ‘turn up trophies’ received.

And this has filtered into every way we raise our children. Let’s give them a smiley stamp because they sat in their seat today rather than just saying, “Well done, you did as is expected of you.” We get lambasted over social media if we challenge the thought that just turning up is not good enough, and that everyone is capable of much better than that. We face slanderous comments being made if we challenge the status quo and put it out there that we will only reward those who go the extra mile and who make huge gains, rather than ‘turn up trophy-ing’ everyone.

Added to this phenomenon is the rise in those incredibly wise folk out there who have seen what is happening and have made an absolute fortune off the back of telling us ‘we have it good’.

Yes, we do, and as an adult with a 50 year life experience behind me, I can appreciate that – but try telling that to a 5 year old or a 10 year old who knows of no other existence. Let’s stop trying to make children feel guilty for living their life which, by fortune of birth, happens to place them in a better situation than others. Let’s stop rolling out programs that may be meaningful to some, but are incredibly insulting to others because they do not take into account personal circumstances.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not saying that we should not foster understanding, compassion and empathy, but this does not come from having a child reflect on something which they have no understanding of or control over. Allow them to live their lives and stop trying to make them feel guilty. If we do that, maybe we would not need to put them into therapy later on to deal with these deep-set feelings of guilt we planted and watered for a decade or longer.

As educators we have the power to make a child’s schooling wonderful or disastrous, and we acknowledge that ability. We also acknowledge the fact that our partnership with the home is extremely important and we want to build our relationships to ensure that we are on the same page at the same time. In building this relationship we can share the job of supporting children develop into competent and capable young adults.

After all, I ask: At what other activity do we think that it is acceptable to let a kid sink or swim, or that we leave them on their own?

Do we put a child onto a 1000cc motorbike when we want them to ride the two-wheeler, or do we place them on a bike with training wheels attached? Is it any wonder that we have spawned a whole industry of picking up the pieces when we do not apply the same support, guidance and assistance approach to educating, instead of providing over-the-top praise for minor gains such that the child cannot handle the reality of life? I dread to imagine where we would be today if Einstein had been raised to accept that an unsuccessful try was fantastic, such that he did not get to understand that failure is the first part of success, and many failures will often lead to mastery.

There may be some therapists looking for employment elsewhere if we worked on preparing our children for their futures and the stresses that cannot be avoided, rather than focussing so hard on looking for ways to make our kids feel good about themselves – but would that be such a bad thing?

I ask: When did we lose sight of the fact that near enough is not good enough, simply because we did not want our children to experience failure?

This is one thing I have worked very hard on during both my Principalships. At Karabar I am pleased to lead a team that are working extremely hard at developing true and genuine resilience in our students. We are focussed on demonstrating to them what success looks like, allowing them to fall over, to skin their knees, and then picking them up and supporting them to try again, constantly striving for improvement.

I thank our teaching staff who have understood that to build a successful student entails multiple points of feedback and the need to develop the individual. Those who understand that you cannot just leave the student hanging in the wilderness, hoping that they will ‘work it out’, and those who understand that over-the-top praise is equalling damaging to a child’s chances to achieve mastery.

In our pursuit of excellence I wish to thank [name of teacher] who came into school from the Distance Education side and assisted our staff to develop tools that will, in turn, assist student success. [Name of teacher] worked on our assessment booklets which we distribute to every student within the first few days of term one. These are booklets that allow students to plan ahead, whilst also allowing our parent and community body to join us in explicitly teaching organisational and time management skills. [Name of teacher] has also worked on refining the quality of our assessment tasks that enable our students to succeed – we have not dumbed them down, but in actual fact we have probably done the reverse and made them more rigorous, but in doing so, we put the support and scaffolding besides the task to allow true success to be achieved.

At Karabar we will continue to rally against handing out ‘turn up trophies’ and remain focused on our aim of building stronger, more capable and more resilient youth that will inherit our community and I look forward to doing this in partnership with our community and yourselves as our parent body.

I thank you and wish you all the very best for a relaxing and joyous holiday period.

**Contributor details**

Andrew Turvey ( andrew.turvey@det.nsw.edu.au ) 17/4/19



Andrew led Young High School from 2011-2014 and Karabar High School and Distance Education Centre from 2015 onwards. He joined the SPC Executive in 2014 and is currently a Deputy President, representing the SPC on the School Excellence Framework, Principals Classification, RAM and EPAC. He is also working on the Reducing Administrative Burden and School Planning Matters groups. Outside of school Andrew enjoys spending time at the beach and with his family.​