



**Text of the speech given by Mr Mike Smith, Principal of Alphington Grammar School, at the 2011 Speech Night in the Andrianakos Centre on 25 November 2011.**

Nick Koukouvitakis, Council members, parents, families, students, staff and friends of the school.

I would like to welcome everyone to the 2011 Alphington Grammar School Speech Night, the first one ever to be held on campus, thanks to the fact that we now have a venue large enough in this, **the beautiful Andrianakos Centre**. Named after our generous benefactors, the Andrianakos family, this building, long anticipated, warmly admired and extremely versatile, has made a great difference to the life of the school. **We felt it was important to hold our Speech Night here this year, a fact of powerful symbolic significance to everyone in the school community.** We have not yet given up the idea of holding Speech Night off campus in the future – we will decide that when we review how things have gone tonight – but for the moment let's just reflect with pride on the fact that we can now hold an event of this size and importance in our own hall.

Tonight is a time to recognise the achievements of our students, to celebrate the end of primary school for our Year 6 students and to bid farewell to the Year 12 students who have finished their school lives here and wish them well for the future. I thank and congratulate the organising team for this evening, who are acknowledged in your programmes, and especially the Speech Night Co-ordinators Tracey Nicholson and Jacinta Shannon. I also thank and congratulate our 2011 school leaders, Ben McWiggan, Emily Gibney, Maria Tsibidis, Sedar Altun and Cameron Liu, for hosting the evening so capably, and all the students who are performing the musical items tonight. **You will realise, if you haven't already, what huge strides forward music performance has made at Alphington Grammar in recent years.**

I also want to acknowledge the staff who will be leaving us this term and thank them for their invaluable contributions to the school. Nicole McCulloch has already begun her maternity leave, Maria Mina and Liz Rizzuto are completing their fixed-term contracts with us, Anya Latham will be leaving us after four years teaching in the Junior School, and Elaine Billington will be retiring after nearly five years as our Learning Support Co-ordinator.

Last but definitely not least, Irene Port will be retiring from our Junior School after 16 marvellous years at Alphington Grammar. All these people have been wonderful members of staff and we wish them well, and in particular we wish Irene and Elaine a very happy retirement. They have certainly earned it.

Two other individuals who have given great service to the school also need to be acknowledged, namely Gerard Gibney and Colin Kapeleris, who complete their terms as parent members of the School Council this year. Gerard served on the Council for eleven years and Colin has been a parent member since 2007. Both have given generously of their time and energy and made a major contribution to the good governance of the school, for which I thank them on behalf of the school community.

Last year at Speech Night I said 2010 had been a watershed year for the school. At the Valedictory Dinner for Year 12 last month I spoke of the school taking on a whole new look and a whole new feel in 2011. **The last 24 months have really brought momentous changes – to the campus, to the senior management structure, to the composition of the school council, and to our strategic view forward.** Last year we developed our new Strategic Plan for 2011 to 2015 (a summary of which was sent to every family) and this year we have been implementing that Plan. One of the most exciting innovations included in the plan is the Development Strategy for Information Technology. **Already that has seen the thorough renovation of our IT infrastructure and support systems, the provision of staff and student portals and, in the near future, a parent portal.** In the next year or so we will be equipping all our teaching spaces with wireless technology and data projectors, and then **we will be rolling out portable tablet devices, iPad type devices, across the school,** eventually providing these for all students from Prep to Year 12 and all staff. This will be a major change for us and we will be one of a growing band of schools who, having wisely resisted the illusory appeal of laptops in the classroom in the late 90s, are now adopting the much more user-friendly portable devices that have recently become available. We held a parent briefing on this earlier this month and will be providing further detailed information for all parents in various forms in the coming months.

**Also in that School Strategic Plan we set out our Vision Statement and our Key Values,** that you can see behind me and on the screen. They show that we want Alphington Grammar students to:

*respect others, value diversity, aim high, analyse critically, live creatively, think globally and show compassion.*

**The Vision Statement says:**

***The school's vision is to be recognised throughout Melbourne as providing an exemplary total learning experience in a uniquely rich, international and inclusive secular environment.***

The purpose of these statements was to clarify and re-emphasise exactly what Alphington Grammar School was all about, now that the school had reached a new maturity and completeness. Although there will be many future developments the school, having eliminated portable classrooms and built this wonderful Centre, now provides all the

necessary facilities of a school in a range of buildings any school – ANY school at all – would be proud of.

The values and the vision statement define the school's ethos and purpose, and reflecting on this and the school's place in the educational community of Melbourne, the following thoughts occur to me.

Back in 1989 the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria started a very new kind of school. Grounded in a proud Greek heritage, it aimed to educate students from all backgrounds. This was entirely new at the time. Some people wondered why parents of non-Greek background would choose to send their children to a so-called Greek school. But this school was, and now is even more so, one that looks forward, not backwards. It looks outwards, not inwardly on one ethnic community. It is inclusive, embracing the cultural diversity of our city.

**This school suits perfectly a modern Melbourne, a modern Australia and a modern world.** It recognises that people need roots, they need to view their heritage with pride, but they also need to adapt to the modern world. Australians from all backgrounds now espouse values very much like our school's key values. I would challenge anyone here in this hall tonight to, in all conscience, reject any of our key values or to regard them as irrelevant. **Everyone needs to learn to *respect others, value diversity, aim high, analyse critically, live creatively, think globally and show compassion* in order to live a productive life in the modern world.**

So I return to that question: **why do parents, in 2011, choose this school? First of all, parents of Greek background?** Forgive me if this seems presumptuous of me, coming as I do from an Irish and English heritage. But after 13 years as the head of this school, and having talked to literally hundreds of parents of Greek background, I think I have developed some understanding of their priorities. **Yes, they want their children to learn to know, appreciate and identify with their Hellenic heritage. They want them to learn Modern Greek, the language of their ancestral homeland. They also want them to have access to another major world language, as they would in other schools. In our case it's Chinese. But most of all they want their children to have the best possible education for the modern world, to equip them to live happily and productively in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia and to be able to play a full part in its multi-ethnic society.** I think they subscribe to all our key values and see them as priorities.

**Why do parents of non-Greek background choose Alphington? Well, their top priority is the same: they want their children to have the best possible education for the modern world, to equip them to live happily and productively in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia and to be able to play a full part in its multi-ethnic society.** I think they also recognise that there is great merit in learning the Greek language, underpinning, as it does, so much of the English language and other languages. But they too want access to another language as well. They also know that much of Western civilisation and learning has derived from the Hellenic cultural and intellectual tradition and that, to be a truly educated person and to genuinely understand how we got to where we are today as a species, you need to know about this. **They recognise that, at Alphington Grammar, their children will learn about the rich variety of that Hellenic tradition.** Like their Greek/Australian counterparts, non-Greek parents also see our key values as priorities. They know that they are part of a widely and deeply interconnected world. And they want their children to be able to play their part.

However there's more to Alphington Grammar School than that. This school embodies many other features that I, as a teacher now for some 36 years, personally believe in deeply. My conversations with parents have taught me that they also believe in them. **These are, first, a commitment to maintaining an inclusive and tolerant environment, where people are accepted and valued for what they are and difference is viewed as a positive attribute.** We are not trying to produce clones here, but fully rounded and appreciated individuals. Another feature is that we are a comprehensive school – by which I mean one that does not exclude or divert children who academically aren't as strong as some others. **I see the job of this school as being to maximise each individual's success, accepting all along that some people will not do as well as others but still challenging them to aspire to do better.** Part of this is not to pre-judge the ultimate capacities of our students. In this I draw not only on a long held principle, a belief that we should not select and divide up children between those who are academic and those who are not. Every child will benefit from a well constructed, broadly based and creatively taught liberal academic curriculum. But I also draw on the keenly felt personal experience of my own son, who was rejected by at least one private secondary school because of his poor academic record. He has just finished the second year of his BA at Monash University and is maintaining a distinction average. When he was 14 some experts told us he would not finish Year 12. So much for academic selection.

**A third thing this school embodies is an international perspective.** Only this year we have hosted a student from Mozambique and a deputation of teachers from Russia. Our own students have visited Greece, France and England. We have thirty different ethnic origins represented among our students and staff. **We observe Anzac Day, Chinese New Year and Ohi Day.** We celebrate Christmas and Easter but we don't have religious services. **I am firmly of the belief that Melbourne needs secular independent schools – we are one of the very, very few.**

**Finally this school, if it does anything at all, demonstrates that everything hinges around relationships.** Talk to any of our students about their experience here and they will tell you that what they value most is the quality of the way their teachers relate to them and the way they relate to their teachers. One Year 11 student said to me recently that Alphington Grammar's teacher / student relationships were "like no other school's". Students who come to us from other schools confirm that the approachability of their teachers and their readiness to help are outstanding here. Students who have left us for a variety of reasons have returned to us for that very reason. **Relationships make an education.**

In saying all this I'm not saying we're perfect. We're not. We want to do everything better, we want to go on improving in very way as we have done, I would argue, for ten or more years now. **What I am saying is that these are the things that count in education and these are the reasons parents send their children here.** So in 1989 the GOCMV started something that turned out to be more than they probably bargained for – a new kind of school and a new mix of educational values.

Tonight we celebrate the achievements of our students and of our school. I want to thank all members of the school community, the parents, the students, the Senior Management Team, the Council and the staff, for their hard work and their commitment during this year, in helping to make this school what it is today and what it will rise to being tomorrow.

Thank you.