I am a product of public education in Australia. Like about 70% of Australians of my age, I received my entire school education in public schools.

The aspirations of public education, as I came to understand them, were togetherness, helping one another, growing in the strength of Australian citizenship, imbibing the principles of the ‘fair go’, aspiring for excellence, and the fame it would bring. But never forgetting the communitarian values of a place when the mind and heart were still fresh and open. A place that did not depend on parental wealth and the differences that can bring. Nor on religion and the divisions that can cause. Nor on political, social or other distinctions. An impressionable time to graft onto the minds of young boys and girls the values of democracy, egalitarianism and unity in fundamentals.

We should strengthen public education and never harm it. It remains one of the greatest achievements of the Australian people. It is also a key to our future social, human and economic success in a fiercely competitive world and region.

So I would like to outline my 10 Commandments for Supporters of Public Education in 2014.

1. It is counter-productive to ignore the 2013 Australian federal election and its outcome. To go on as if nothing has happened
and that all that is needed is to get everyone signed up to the Gonski Report and its objectives. A new government has been elected by the people of Australia. They have the power and responsibility, subject to the Constitution, the Senate and the requirement to face another election after a three-year term, to manage the federal role in education in the interim. This is the way democracies operate. The public education I received instilled in me a faith and confidence in democracy. Contesting the democratic legitimacy of an elected government to embark on a different path is going to get supporters of public education nowhere. Those supporters must be more realistic and intelligent. They must accept philosophical differences, but attempt to influence new policies as far as they can.

2. There are important supporters of public education on the conservative side of politics in Australia. The New South Wales education Minister, Adrian Piccoli, is an outstanding example. There are many others. Wisdom suggests reaching into the strong seam of support for advancement in education by hard work and merit, that is a recurring theme in Australia, particularly (but not exclusively) on the non-Labor side of politics.

3. Many current leading politicians (indeed a majority of them, on both sides of politics) did not attend public schools. They can hardly be blamed if they are not much aware of the ideals and achievements of public education. Or if they fall victim to stereotypes and misinformation. Every effort must be made to invite members of parliament, federal and state, to visit public schools. There they will witness the achievements, the aspirations and the often desperate needs of the teachers and students in that sector.
4. Politicians on both sides in Australia subscribe to the notion of the ‘fair go’. A powerful case can be made today that, as a result of federal funding in the separate sectors of public, private and Catholic schools, we are now locked into a non-merit and non-need basis for funding school education. Most of the heavy lifting in Australian schools falls on the public schools. They have most of the children from indigenous and multicultural backgrounds, with special linguistic and social needs. Most of the incapacitated and handicapped children go to public schools. Most of the regional, rural and remote area children attend public schools. Most children with learning and behavioural difficulties also attend those schools. If you are at private or religious school, you can quite easily be terminated. “Weeds in the Pope’s garden” as some of them are unkindly called, end up in public schools. A ‘fair go’ will ensure more, and not less, support for this unavoidable residual role of the public school system.

5. Parents have a right to select religious and private schools for their children. But many in Australia will understand the competing need, as well, for a secular principle. Educating separately every Muslim and every Catholic school child can have some downsides. Recent reports in Australia have found how homophobia and transphobia have a very serious impact on many young people’s educational opportunities and on their personal confidence and wellbeing. Some (although not all) religious schools insist on teaching that LGBT students are disordered; even that they have an ‘inclination to evil’; and must keep any minority sexual orientation to themselves. Fair and enlightened politicians and citizens will understand the special role that public schools play simply by being secular. They are there for all students, whatever
their family’s religious beliefs, whatever the parental wealth or social class.

6. We live in an age where economics dominates our political debates. The OECD in Paris has now identified the effective trajectory of Australia’s educational trends. It has pointed to the decline in our country in real equal opportunity for students of socially deprived backgrounds. They need extra help. This means extra funding. Inevitably, most of the burden for their students will fall on public schools.

7. The opportunity costs of failing to resource properly our public schools will partly fall on the students themselves and on their families. But eventually they will fall on our country. On a new Elizabeth Blackburn, Nobel Laureate. Or a new Peter Doherty, Nobel Laureate. Both are proud products of public education, respectively in Victoria and Queensland. We cannot afford to lose such talent. Yet to the extent that we do not invest equitably in public education, we run the risk of underachievement in the schools where most Australians still get their educational start. In sheer economic terms this would be a squandered opportunity in the greatest resource in Australia – the latent talent of its children.

8. Public schools in Australia increasingly offer specialised opportunities for special talents and needs. Selective public schools in New South Wales and other states regularly top the school achievements in the finals. They are the flagships of public education. Specialist musical and sporting schools tap particular talents, cherished in Australia. Public schools should speak more about the excellence of their scholars. Those who have benefited from public education, on both sides of politics, should speak up
for the education that they received and should be there for those following.

9. Because most of our new migrants attend public schools there is a special, democratic reason to remove the underfunding of that sector and to repair the particular challenges it faces in outcomes and trends. Underfunded schools will produce underachieving citizens. We must not allow categories of our future society to be disadvantaged in the opportunity stakes, especially so by reference to Aboriginality, race, nationality or postcode. The local public school is the crucible for our future population. It is in the interest of all citizens to ensure that there is no Australian underclass. Truly that would spell the end to the egalitarian ideals of Australia that both sides of politics support.

10. Advocates of public education must face the fact that nothing good (except sometimes love) comes for long without cost. Increasing financial support proportionately for public education in Australia may require new taxes or levies, call them what you will. As a nation, we should be willing to provide that support to schools that can demonstrate need. And that means, for the most part, public schools. The Commission of Audit acknowledges as a fundamental principle of good government in our country, protection of the truly disadvantaged. Many of its principles of good government can be applied to support additional federal funding for schools with pupils in need. Freezing and simply indexing federal subventions within the current classifications will only preserve past injustices. If we are to be a country of excellence, equal opportunity and aspirational citizens, we will increase support for public schools. And these are principles that both sides of politics can embrace.
So my appeal is that we speak up about the positive advantages of Australia’s achievements in public education. That we live in the present and don’t just yearn for the past. That we engage with all politicians of goodwill. That we advocate equal opportunity and special attention to proven educational needs. Then, indeed, we may avoid the culture wars and keep Australia as a lucky country for all its people.