



The last word

The Anzac spirit

ANZAC DAY: IT'S SOMETHING WE SHOULD CELEBRATE – NOT JUST BY MARCHING, BUT BY ENSURING THAT OUR STUDENTS SHARE THE TOUGHNESS, RESILIENCE, COURAGE AND PERSISTENCE OF OUR ANZAC ANCESTORS.

ANZAC DAY SERVICES ACROSS THE nation this month will, as always, celebrate the Australian spirit of the original Anzacs. We like to think of their toughness, resilience, courage and persistence in the face of adversity as being quintessentially Australian.

We see many instances of the Anzac spirit as our students face adversity and problems, yet many of us these days find ourselves too often dealing with parents who wish to help their children avoid anything that appears to be difficult.

One of the major roles of schools, in partnership with parents, is to help young people to develop resilience, the ability to cope and persist despite the inevitable buffeting and hardships that are part of life. Only by attempting things which are difficult and take us out of our comfort zone do we grow as people.

The peer group ostracism and bullying that probably occur in every school in

Australia are two of the most serious forms of buffeting and hardship our students face. Figures indicate that around 20 per cent of students experience instances of bullying on a weekly basis, and that no school is entirely without such instances.

By Year 10, students are usually developmentally emerging from the hormonal soup of adolescence and beginning to exhibit some of the maturity, poise and discretion of budding adults. It's one of the tasks of adolescence to negotiate the tricky waters of making friends, changing friendship groups and dealing with problems in friendships – a task that cannot be done for them by parents, teachers or counsellors. Our role is to encourage each child to engage confidently in the process, and provide support and resources.

It's alarming, then, that the first instinct of many parents, faced with even minor turbulence in peer group relationships, is to withdraw their child. At my school,

St Paul's Grammar School, Sydney, we gain more students than we lose, but we certainly do lose some students because of this.

One of the problems with departures on these grounds is that rather than teach children resilience, it teaches them to flee from their difficulties. What will happen when they experience something similar in their next school? Will they change schools again, and again? In the long run, children can be disempowered, and grow up as adults without coping skills.

Students who depart for such reasons are usually those whose parents have not told the school – or not told the school early enough to make a difference – that there was a problem. No one can pretend that an anti-bullying policy, the provision of anti-bullying programs and the support of trained pastoral welfare staff can, or ever will, eliminate harassment, but all schools are keen to contain it and support students through their difficult years of growing up.

Parents sometimes limply tell me they cannot get their children to do homework, go to camp or even go to school. The purpose of schools is not to hand control and decision making to our young people before they have developed the perspective which comes with experience, but to provide sufficient direction to our students so that they can act for themselves, and face situations with toughness, resilience, courage and persistence.

This is not to say that schools *ought* to be places of adversity, but to say that when our students do face adversity they can face it with toughness, resilience, courage and persistence.

When they do, we'll be able, in good conscience, to celebrate our Anzac history, and will indeed continue to show the attributes of strong character that we celebrate in our ancestors. **■**

This month's Last Word was written by John Collier, principal of St Paul's Grammar School in Penrith, Sydney.