

Welcome to the New School Year 2022

Dr Craig Wattam

Video Message Text

Hello to everyone in our EREA Flexible Learning Centres, Colleges, and Early Learning Centres and welcome to the new school year. Whether you are someone who has been in an EREA learning environment for a long time, or you are brand new this year – you are indeed warmly welcomed, and I know that you will soon find a real sense of belonging in your local community. The beauty of EREA though, is that you also belong to a national system of schools that spans every state and territory, as well as an international movement that sees us in many countries across the globe.

I am Craig Wattam, the Executive Director of EREA and I sincerely hope that this year, I can visit, in person, some of our schools that the pandemic prevented me from visiting in 2021. I know that yet again, our school staff – all of you – face ongoing as well as new challenges as we continue to live through this ongoing world-wide health crisis. The beginning of this year has already heralded new complexities that we must respond to with urgency, and with the health and wellbeing of our community members at the forefront of what we do.

Let me say at the outset, that the safety and wellbeing of the children and young people in our schools is front and centre of everything we do. Our approaches to child safety must be our immediate priority; and they must be accompanied by robust policy and practices that engage student voice and agency, as well as promoting a sense of personal worth, wellbeing, and self-belief. If our students have a healthy sense of self, and are encouraged to actively participate in, and have input into the decision-making that takes place at our schools, then we are preparing them for life, and we are also inherently valuing them as human persons. Self-confidence in a young person is one wonderful measure of success!

Thank you for your efforts each and every day in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of our young people.

From a National Office perspective, our prime purpose is to support you in the work of educating our young people. We are here to serve you. This year will prioritise our learning agenda with the publication of a Learning Statement for all EREA schools. This statement is equally relevant for all – for our students in pre-school, for our students in flexible learning schools, as well as our primary and secondary schools.

As the world continually evolves, so must organisations change and grow. 2022 will see some significant, innovative, and exciting changes occurring in the governance of EREA as we move towards becoming an incorporated body. What will emerge in the coming months is a settled new governance structure and attendant culture which will see a more corporate, modern and responsive approach to how we operate in governing and supporting our schools. The EREA Council, Board and National Office, with the support of external experts in the field, have contributed significant energy over the last 12 months in leading this change. Renewal is part of the cycle of any organisation, and I am confident that what emerges will position us collectively as an even better EREA in the future. I look forward to sharing more throughout this year.

On the 1st of January, his Holiness, Pope Francis released his message for the 55th World Day of Peace. This message – as we have come to expect from the Holy Father – centres around our global connectedness, and on the human family. We must listen to the cry of the poor, and the cry of the earth Pope Francis says, so that justice and peace is served. Francis reminds us that peace is both a gift from on high and the fruit of a shared commitment, and it is collective responsibility to work together to build a more peaceful world. I am sure that the life, work, and inspiration of our founder Blessed Edmund Rice, who we celebrate this year – being 260 years since his birth, would accord with the Pope’s insistence on both the “architecture” and the “art” of peace.

Pope Francis has always been a great supporter of schools and educators, and one of the three pathways he proposes for building lasting peace is education. We must constantly view education as investment not expenditure, for education lays the foundation for a civilised world, and in so doing, we promote hope, prosperity, and progress. As for the “art” of peace – I really like this notion don’t you, because it involves all of us and speaks to our innate creativity as human persons.

For our students – they have a keenness to protect the planet, to care for our global home, and to work for justice for the poor and build solidarity with the marginalised in our world. We actively engage our students in our schools on this score. I see fine examples of this in every Edmund Rice community I visit. Our task is to make this a natural part of the way our young people are for each other – for their sisters and brothers in their own families, in their schools, and across the globe. In so doing, we can continue to be hope-filled, as the Gospel invites and graces us to be, and we can also be people of expectation: that we *will be better* for each other and for our planet. Then, we can really talk about human flourishing. This is an essential element of an excellent Catholic education. EREA’s commitment to supporting Australia’s First Nations Uluru Statement from the Heart and EREBB and UNICEF’s campaign for Vaccines for All around the globe are two ways in 2022 that we can continue to bring this to life.

As workers in our schools, we are in the business of transformation: our own liberation is necessary so that we might work together for mutual liberation. Your work as teachers, support staff, professional staff, and leaders, is to help nurture and develop young people to have an ever-deepening awareness of themselves as agents of transformation. We aspire for them to become yet ever more selfless in being people firmly grounded in, and committed to, an expression of their faith that sees *others* locally, nationally, and internationally, the beneficiaries of their love, generosity, and abundant blessings.

And on that score, I offer you every blessing and good wish as we begin our yearly cycle of learning and teaching, I ask that you take care of yourselves, so that you might take care of our students. Stay safe, and well. I look forward to meeting with you at some stage during the year.

As Pope Francis invites us this year, be an artisan of peace. Then we can look holistically at the architecture of peace – to which our institutions make a valid and valued contribution.

Thank you for all you do as members of Edmund Rice Education Australia.