

Wise society invests in students: Kirby

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By LLOYD GORMAN

The future of Australia lay in its public education system, former High Court judge Michael Kirby told Perth Modern School students.

And Australia needed more schools like theirs, for gifted students.

Mr Kirby visited the school while he was in Perth for CHOGM, as a member of the Eminent Persons' Group.

He spoke to 200 students, members of the Perth Modernian (Sphinx) Society, the school council and its P&C about the benefits and opportunities of good-quality public education.

Mr Kirby, a graduate of a similar school for academically gifted students, said there was nothing elitist about this system of education.

"Some opponents argue that creating selective schools diminishes the egalitarianism of public education," he said.

"It does nothing of the sort.

"It recognises that within the egalitarian and democratic ethos of public schools, gifted students have certain special educational needs.

"A society questing for its own excellence will invest in their advancement; a wise society invests in them."

He said that in 1949, after tests, he had transferred to the Summer Hill Opportunity School, about 8km from his family home.

"In NSW, since the 1930s, the public education system has offered an extensive system of selective primary schools for children chosen for special support because of identified gifts and talents," he said.

"These special schools exist throughout the Sydney metropolitan area and in some parts of country and regional NSW.

"They are feeders to a large and growing network of selective public high schools, established in the state under successive state governments."

Mr Kirby told students that there was an imbalance in funding for public schools and that this area of education needed more investment.

He said 63% of Australians were educated in the public system, which was where the future of the nation was written.

"Like many former prime ministers, including Kevin Rudd, John Howard and Bob Hawke, a Perth Modern School student, I was educated in public schools," Mr Kirby said.

"In government, in business, the arts, universities and international bodies, people trained in Australia's public schools will reflect the principles of secularism, tolerance, democracy and excellence that lie at the core of public education in this country.

"The best of them will never forget the students and teachers with whom they shared the precious years of education.

“These special experiences gave me a lifelong dedication to community involvement, social justice, equality of opportunity, and human rights for all.”



Michael Kirby with Perth Modern students, from left, Jesse Jayaseela, Ailsa Brown and Emma Boogaardt.