Good morning students, parents and teachers,

I would also like to first acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to Elders past and present. I extend my respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here with us today.

It is a privilege and honor to be invited back to today’s assembly as a former ex-student of Canterbury Girls High, school captain and a proud product of the public education system. I can now also add to that, former student teacher, as some of you may remember me from my recent internship I completed at the school, earlier in the Term.

Today though, I’m not here as Ms. Costa, today I am here as Athanasia. The loud Greek patriot and Drama Queen with a voice that could be heard from a mile away and lunches that could feed the whole class. I tried to convince my mum to make my lunch on my internship but apparently I’m too old for that now.

CGHS was always a place of diversity and inclusion. So I always felt my identity very strongly as a student here. We all know how important this is not only for student success, but also in life – people should always feel valued and included, particularly as young women, strong self-esteem helps us throughout our life. Belonging to this place, this community, does not end once you leave the gates of this school; it is a life-long bond, which you will only realise the further you roam. You
will find your mind and heart will drift back here more than once along the journey of life - even though I know it’s hard to imagine now!

Now, the question on everyone’s mind when you tell them you’ve decided to enter the field of education - why ON EARTH did you want to become a teacher? Well, obviously I wanted to choose a career where I didn’t have to constantly sound out every syllable or spell out every letter of my name... A-tha-na-si-a. That seemed like a pretty justifiable reason... Just kidding... It was more than that... Who wouldn’t want to work in a job where the students always tell you how fabulous you look? Ok ok it was more than that... who wouldn’t want to be hassled by students constantly wanting to leave class to use the bathroom?

I actually come from a line of teachers; Athanasia senior aka yiayia aka greatest dolmades maker of all time was also a teacher. Then there was my beautiful mum Penny, former Canterbury-Hurlstone Park Taxi driver between the years of 1992-2008, and now there’s me!

So why on earth did I become a teacher? Well, teaching allows me to combine my love of two subject areas - Drama and Modern Greek language - and share what I love with my students. In the beginning, people tried to steer me in the STEM direction. “There are more job opportunities. You’ll make more money.” Well one piece of advice; whatever you decide to do... “On earth” and in your life make sure it’s something you feel is worth fighting for, especially between the hours of 9-5. For me the driving force for becoming an educator was the frightening idea of a society and culture where we value Maths and Science and under value other areas of the
curriculum, such as the Arts. Besides, we all know Drama combines all methods and thinking in one fantastic subject.

I’m glad I didn’t listen and I trusted my gut instinct because a love for Arts and Languages Education also led me to many rewarding life experiences. I love performing in bilingual productions and have had the opportunity to do so both here and overseas. However, I think the most rewarding experience thus far, which happened through studying languages, was being able to go on to do my TESOL teaching method. Earlier in the year, I had the honour and the privilege to work with young refugee students at an Intensive English Centre, students who had fled persecution and war, students whose parents and families were tortured and killed, whose school life and life more generally had been anything but regular, happy, or safe. Spending time with these students as a teacher was really valuable because I realised that there are many things we often take granted, like our right to an education. The importance of simply being in a classroom and learning without fear, of having dreams and goals but also the opportunity to reach for them, to make them a reality through education. Keep that in mind when your counting down the minutes till the bell rings - it will certainly make you humble!

Now, while I would love to tell you about all the great experiences I had as a student at this school… I have only a short amount of time left before they start playing the music to get me off the stage!

So it’s come down to this – do I tell you about how attending a public school was the greatest decision my parents ever made for me? Or, the story of when we went wild at
Canterbury Aquatic Centre because Sonny Bill Williams former Bulldogs football player was working out in the gym… I guess we’ll have to save that story for another time…

My recent experience here was a reminder of how proud I am to have to have attended a public school. Why? I think former Justice Michael Kirby said it well when he wrote in a recent article – “there is something special about public education. It is a microcosm of the diversity of Australia. This is the laboratory of the entire nation… the secular feature of public schools is particularly precious.” (Wentworth Courier, Nov 25, 2016)

Which is why it saddens me that public education is not given the priority that it needs. In fact, a recent trending hash tag on social media put it quite succinctly. It is simply - #absolutelyinappropriate.

It is #absolutely inappropriate that schooling has become a privilege and not a right. It’s absolutely inappropriate that teachers in the public system have to struggle with limited resources. It’s absolutely inappropriate that there is an achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in this country. It’s absolutely inappropriate that our students need to take time off class to circulate a petition against the privatization of recreational sport.

The wealth of a country is in educating its young people. You are our future leaders. I know it’s hard to imagine life after school but I also want to say that these years really set you up for the rest of your life. I know you’re all thinking – how will learning
about Mitochondria with Ms Delmas or Romeo & Juliet with Ms Papadopoulos help me in any way? But your time here is more than that - I can assure you that the values that you learn here, in these classrooms, in the music rooms and science labs, will stay with you forever – and hopefully one day, in different ways, you will all be able to give back to this place, to this community because that’s what it’s all about.

And let me tell you – the best values are learnt in our great public schools. So be proud when you walk out of here tomorrow, like me, a product of the public system. And for those of you, who aim to further your studies once you leave CGHS - be PROUD when the lecturer/teacher asks you to raise your hand if you went to a public school–

In fact, I was thinking how about we practice that right now? Hands up if you’re a public school student and proud!

(SCHOOL SELFIE)