

**Message to the Grade School Graduates of 2010:  
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Good Afternoon, thank you very much for this honor, and it is nice to be home at the Ateneo de Zamboanga.

It has not been over eleven years since I was in a similar position as you, the graduates – happy, proud, excited, and nervous all at the same time. My grade school graduation was bittersweet and the mixed emotions were overwhelming. I was sad to be bidding farewell to a protective cocoon where my teachers were always around to guide my every step. At the same time, I was proud to have successfully conquered the last six years. I was proud to share that moment with my parents and friends. And I was excited to embrace high school.

There are many values that school has taught us, though not all can be easily appreciated until we realize their worth in terms of the outside world. If I could go back in time and tell my twelve-year-old self the things I know now, there are four things I would emphasize.

I wish I could be optimistic and offer comforting words and clichés such as that grades do not matter and that the lessons we learn in the classroom are not as important as the friendships we nurture. However, I cannot. Unfortunately, we live in very challenging times where the promise of a brighter future is becoming more and more elusive. This leads me to the first idea. Academic excellence is our weapon in the fight for a better tomorrow. The mastery of basic foundational knowledge in Math, Science, and English is what will open more doors for you in the coming years – be it to get into the school you want and eventually, the job you dream of, or at the very least, to enjoy enough flexibility to be able to choose from a wider set of options. However, it gets better. In a world where many of the people we meet will probably have the same academic abilities, an Ateneo education sets the bar higher by pushing for excellence in other dimensions as well. I have very fond memories of working in the Student Government under Sir Nono, when we tried to get students interested in participating in decision-making processes that affected them. We generated political awareness even among younger minds through several interesting activities. I also vividly remember the colorful and vibrant intramurals culture when different classes battled it out in the sporting arena, the camping trips supervised by Ma'am Fernandez and Sir Santillan, and the late-night review sessions for Math and Science competitions run by Ma'am Bello. I cannot possibly forget the tedious practice sessions for the choral recitation under Ma'am Drapiza. Every word we uttered, every move we made, had to be perfect. This holistic education is something I am convinced I would not have been able to get anywhere else. I recall my grade school teachers painstakingly drilling in our minds the importance of Magis – always trying to do more and surpass expectations in whatever it is we do. And now, I wish to let them know that they were absolutely right.

The second is that there is a bigger world out there to which we are bound. While access to a good education ought to be a right, in our society, unfortunately, it is a privilege. We are here at the expense of many others who were not as lucky, through no fault of their own. This is why education should never be seen from a purely individualistic perspective. There are greater social responsibilities involved. Ateneo has always been conscious of its role in molding the future leaders of Philippine society. As things stand, I do not suggest resting comfortably in the status quo. There is significant room for change, especially in our country. I challenge you to apply your skills to problems and situations beyond the classroom – such as getting to know the candidates and issues in the upcoming national and local elections, watching and understanding the news, and volunteering time to actively help the less privileged. The Love Drive every Christmas or the annual visits to orphanages were never meant to be ends in themselves. They were meant to light a fire that would trigger a more sustained commitment to serving society. You don't have to be above 18 to be a responsible citizen.

Third, I wish to highlight the unique cultural realities in which we are immersed. I am lucky to have graduated from the Ateneo de Zamboanga because it offered me the best balance between a strong spiritual grounding and exposure and interaction to diverse cultures and religions. This part of my background, thanks to the Ateneo, has been very helpful when I deal with different types of people in my work. In our multicultural society, where different cultures and religions inevitably become sources of tension, I think that an approach that seeks to approach a single absolute worldview is dangerous and is bound to fail. Ateneo taught me the value of dialogue ... that God means different things to different people and that the best way to serve God is to embrace others and serve them. There is a way to stay true to our Jesuit identity without closing doors on other beliefs. Celebrating diversity is personally enriching because we can learn from other people, but it is also exactly what we need in this country, and especially in this region.

Lastly, I can assure you, having been in your place, that many of the anxieties you now face such as meeting new people, trying to belong in a group of friends, coping with rigorous academic challenges, and dealing with parents in negotiating for more freedoms are things you will look back on with fondness and amusement. They are unavoidable, but also manageable. High school life is rich with potential. However, it also requires more intellectual and emotional maturity. Do not be paralyzed by its complexity. Dive into it and join organizations that promote your interests. Interact with people. Find your voice and challenge your teachers and classmates. Ateneo prides itself on developing articulate and independent-minded students. In high school, enjoy the newfound freedoms, but be mindful of the responsibilities.

I am very honored to join you in celebrating this new chapter in your lives. I wish you the best of luck in high school, and savor this moment.