Dear Parents of Year 11 students,

I am writing to you regarding the Year 11 Formal to be held on Friday the 14th October this year to give you information about why we hold this special event and how it will be undertaken.

We commenced the Year 11 Formal program as a trial in 2005. Because of this event’s success, it has become a permanent feature on the Year 11 program as a wonderful celebration of emerging adulthood. We have been really pleased with the participation and enthusiasm of students, particularly the students’ response to giving speeches, dressing up, undertaking dance lessons and performing their dances. Our students have the tremendous privilege of doing all this, surrounded by the support and love of their family and wider community. We look forward to seeing a similar successful program this year.

The background and rationale to this special event have come out of our desire to facilitate a special event that celebrates ‘growing up’ and teaches our ‘emerging adults’, adult skills and mores [social customs and conventions], specifically in dress, speech and dance presentation.

Why is MECS taking a lead in this area?
Within western society there are very few organizations or institutions that organise formal ‘coming of age’ type events. We have 21st birthdays (or more recently the 18th has become a bigger deal), getting a licence, purchasing alcohol and voting, to mention a few. Occasionally the family or a church related group may host these events. The rise of Debutantes either provided commercially or through organisations like Rotary, has sought to fill this vacuum. However these events are very exclusive and many query certain aspects of the Debutante approach (eg cost, exclusivity, over emphasis on the girls and certain qualities of appearance, lack of family involvement, etc).

Most cultures over the ages have recognised the transition from childhood to adulthood in significant and symbolically powerful ways. There is much confusion in modern western culture as to the place and function of the teenager. It could be said that a common ‘rite of passage’ within contemporary Australian youth culture is to get drunk – as an expression of freedom of choice and emerging adult assertiveness. In the initial discussions about the Formal, these are the issues we considered. We thought it would be good for Christians to take an alternate lead in this area.

Even though this is not ‘core business’ for the Christian school, we are well situated to organise this sort of event. Not only can we facilitate the process, but the wide range of skills in dance, public speaking, dress and presentation, can be taught or supported through the school context and contribute to a ‘well-rounded’ education.

Some of the features of the MECS Formal align with those of a ‘Debutante Ball’, as there are many aspects of a Deb that are worthy. However, the character of the MECS Year 11 Formal contrasts in cost and affordability, exclusiveness, partnering, style and symbolism, and program rigidity.

Both the instructional dance part of the program and the speech preparation are compulsory for all Year 11 students. Students have been notified about instructional times. We seek to achieve this within the school timetable, but have found some ‘extra’ times have been necessary and strongly desired by students. This preparatory program commenced this term.
It is expected that all students participate in at least one dance during the evening. Partners for the first set of dances will be assigned. Thereafter students can choose their partners and undertake the dance with a parent or free dance.

The Formal program will include photos, a meal interspersed by entertainment and performance items; public presentation with all students introducing themselves and speaking for up to 1 minute on prepared personal ‘insights’; set and free dancing and a closing.

There are four key words that capture the character of this event.

1. **Celebration**
   The Year 11 Formal is a celebratory event that symbolically and affirmatively acknowledges emerging adulthood (often labelled a ‘rite of passage’).

2. **Formal**
   It is a ceremonial event that is special and prepares and trains young people in some of the formal social graces and mores, like formal dress, presentation, dance, public speaking and public acknowledgement.

3. **Inclusive**
   The Year 11 Formal seeks to maximise the involvement of all students.
   a. **All-in participation** – It is compulsory for all Year 11 students to attend the Formal.
   b. **Affordable** - $65 per head. Student costs will be covered by MECS.
   c. **De-emphasising partners** – The school will facilitate dance partners and seating arrangements for students. Public presentations will be given individually.
   d. **Exclusive to MECS** – Only current MECS students will be able to attend the formal, as this keeps the focus on our Year 11s and is much easier organisationally.

4. **Family friendly** - Parents and family are very welcome and actively encouraged to attend. We start with a limit of 4 including the student per family. Families can apply for more if there is space.

There are some cautions to be aware of in organising such an event. For example, finding the right and healthy balance between ‘specialness’ (therefore involving some expenses and extensive preparation) and the opportunity for all to participate. We do not want an ‘exclusive’ event where the popular expectation is to spend hundreds of dollars on dresses and the like. Hiring a suit or having one’s hair done would seem appropriate, whilst hiring limos or $100 manicures would be discouraged. We recognise that the school cannot control individual choices, although we have clearly spelt out the character and style of the Formal the school would prefer.

We have also been conscious of the concerns expressed by some, that these affairs can be seen as quite ‘worldly’, characterised by excess, indulgence and exclusion. Therefore we have deliberately designed an inclusive and special but not ‘over the top’ approach.

Secondly, many school events like this are followed by an after-party, usually held at a student’s home, sometimes with everyone invited; sometimes with non-school invitees and other times with limited invites and information being shared. Often alcohol is available and sometimes the adult supervision can range in its significance.

From the school’s viewpoint we would rather the celebratory focus stays on the Formal. An after-party would start very late and would gain mixed participation. Whilst parties should be a part of teenage celebration, their size, timing and character should be very carefully weighed up by parents. Should a party occur and should you allow your child to attend, I would encourage you to have an active awareness of: (1) supervision; (2) who’s attending; (3) alcohol issues; and (4) transport arrangements. It is very appropriate for parents to ring the host parents and to enquire about these matters. We would encourage parents to carefully guide their childrens’ understanding on appropriate uses of alcohol.
In conclusion, this is a more extensive letter at this time because this event has caused many questions to arise over the past few years. I hope I have clarified many of the questions that you may have about the event. The finer detail will be worked out much closer to the event itself and we will bring you up to speed then.

Along with Adam Radke and the other Senior School staff, I am hoping that the Year 11 Formal is a significant event in the lives of our students. I am also hoping that you will be able to join in this wonderful celebration of emerging adulthood.

Yours in His service,

Narelle Sketcher
Principal

Adam Radke
Year 11 Coordinator