New world
by the time
Class of ’31 graduates

Michael Anderson

About 70,000 students will start kindergarten in NSW this week. By 2031 most of them will pop out the other end of the education system into a world with widespread autonomous transport, artificial intelligence embedded in most things, healthcare that will make present approaches look medieval, and radically changed ways of working, doing business and being a citizen.

Are the roughly 10,000 hours students spend at school good value and are they preparing them for this brave new world?

If we want to avoid our schools becoming museums – packed with approaches from the teaching past – what changes can we make?

In 2017, politicians and leaders began taking this challenge seriously. The Department of Education released its Education for a Changing World strategy, to begin a much-needed discussion on the back of rising fear about the impact of technology.

One of the questions it didn’t address explicitly is whether a NAPLAN and HSC-driven system is best for a world that is shifting before our eyes in almost real time. This conversation is critical.

Some schools have begun the difficult, slow work of transformation. At Casula Public School, among others, teachers are working together to explicitly teach and embed creativity, collaboration, critical reflection and communication (the 4Cs) across ages and subjects.

This shifts learning from being only about content delivery to making subjects flexible, dynamic and interconnected. Teachers are also working to build learning dispositions such as grit, teamwork and influence that equip students to deal with complex problems in learning and life.

In a world where knowledge is readily accessible, schools cannot rely on being dispensers of it. Students need to verify, interpret, adapt, apply, synthesise and create knowledge.

The issues our children face now and in 2031 are complex and cross disciplines. Food security, climate change and population growth aren’t confined to science, English or history. We need to prepare our students to be agile and wise as they face these complex and shifting problems.

If we can harness the skills of our educators, the energy of our young and the consensus of our community we can make schools relevant and effective for those starting school now and emerging in 2031. This will benefit all of us.

Michael Anderson is a professor of education at the University of Sydney.