What goes on in today’s classrooms? Dominic Ciconte spoke to those in the know, one month into the new school year.

Photographs by Ted Kioszynski.
For up to 200 days every year, parents place their trust in schools, and more importantly, teachers, to provide a key community service — the education of their children.

Teachers have the responsibility to educate, uphold values and inspire their students. More than 1600 years ago Greek conqueror Alexander the Great said about his teacher, the philosopher Aristotle: “I am indebted to my father for living, but to my teacher for living well.”

Someone who certainly knows the ins and outs of a school is Bayswater Primary School principal Ian Michelson, 54, who has been involved with education since 1977.

A teacher and education consultant prior to his first appointment as principal nine years ago, he has a wide knowledge of what it takes to make it as an educator. Running a school is no easy task — but Mr Michelson does it with a smile.

“I start the day with a to-do list,” he said. “That typically involves getting stuck in to administration, writing out applications, seeking funds and programs that will benefit the school.

“At the end of the day, after I’ve caught up with parents, staff, council and media, I usually have the same to-do list sitting in front of me,” he said with a chuckle.

Mr Michelson makes a point of getting out of his office, meeting students and being involved in extracurricular activities — “I think it’s really important that students and teachers feel comfortable in approaching me”.

Now entering his 34th year as a principal and teacher, Mr Michelson is excited about the changes that technology and a new mentality have brought to the industry.

“I have noticed a change — a good change. I think there has been a greater focus put back on teaching and learning for all staff, including me, which can only benefit students.”

One of Mr Michelson’s most important tasks is employing the right people to fill his classrooms.

“There are a range of capabilities I look for in a teacher,” he explained. “The first is passion — they have to love what they do. Good teachers describe their work as a vocation more than a job. It has to be a calling.

“Then you look at their capability to teach, to learn and for student welfare. It is a big package to ask for and a very demanding role.”

Robyn Geake of Rowville Secondary College said teaching was in her blood.

“It’s something I always wanted to do. My mother and grandmother were also teachers so I guess I had my inspiration from them.”

Mrs Geake, a visual arts teacher, looks at her role with as much enthusiasm today as when she started more than 25 years ago.

“Teaching isn’t just about results, it’s about the relationship we forge with students. We spend so much time with the kids, we have an incredible responsibility.

“We really have to focus on instilling the right values and develop skills that will help them achieve their goals later in life.”

Mrs Geake said all the enjoyment of her work came from students. Seeing them learn, develop and mature is why she goes to work every day.

“When they’ve achieved something that they didn’t know they were capable of, those are fantastic moments for me.”

She has high hopes for the direction of teaching and passed this advice on to new teachers starting their careers.

“It’s not always about what’s happening in the classroom. Often your focus should be on where the students are heading in future — look at the bigger picture.”

Scoresby Primary School’s two newest teachers represent the new generation of teachers. Meagan Walker, 22, and Aaron Palmer, 22, kicked off their teaching careers just a few weeks ago and, so far, they like what they see.

Mr Palmer outlined the long road budding teachers have to make to find employment.

“I completed year 12, attaining the ENTER score necessary to partake in the bachelor of education course at RMIT University. During my four years at university, I undertook 120 days of supervised teaching rounds, and a further six weeks spent teaching English abroad in Thailand.”

Once he finally made it, Mr Palmer’s first day on the job had a few hidden surprises.

“My first day on the job was extremely enjoyable,” he said.

“My main role was to help around the school with all of the prep students that were arriving for their very first day of school. I spent most of the morning taking photographs for proud parents. “Later in the day I was called upon by two female prep teachers to ‘help them out.’

He was then put on the spot and asked to take all of the prep boys and explain to them how they should use the urinal — “they don’t teach you how to explain that at uni”.

Ms Walker always knew she wanted to teach at a primary school.

“The students’ natural excitement, coupled with their curiosity towards new and unknown information, inspires me as a teacher to create fun, engaging learning experiences that not only the students enjoy, but I also enjoy.” she said.

Now that she’s where she always wanted to be, she couldn’t be happier.

“Making an impact in the lives of children is one of the most rewarding ventures one can attain in life I highly recommend that if you’re interested in pursuing a career in education that you fulfill your aspirations, as I have found it to be one of the most gratifying experiences I have undertaken.”

And what do students think of teachers?

Nielson Del Rosario, year 12 student and school captain at Rowville Secondary College, believes modern-day students are incredibly lucky.

“The teachers at this school are all dedicated. They love what they do. We very lucky to have them,” he said. “Students now have the luxury of better facilities and a wealth of knowledge available on the internet. There are no excuses any more.”

What do Nielson and other students look for in a good teacher?

“Someone who really knows they’re stuff. Someone who tries talking to students, not clown to them. A sense of humour is important as well.”

Teachers in Knox aren’t as famous as Aristotle or Alexander the Great, but their zeal for leading their students to know how to live well is as evident today as it was in ancient times.
New teachers Aaron Palmer and Meagan Walker