

EDITORIAL FEATURE

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS GUIDE



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EDITORIAL FEATURE

Scoring an A for parent satisfaction

Parents surveyed by the ASG report feeling quite positive about their child's high school, especially if they got into the one they wanted.

BY MAL CHENU

Independent schools scored the highest levels of parent satisfaction when compared with Catholic and government schools, according to a national survey.

The ASG/Futurity Parents Report Card 2019-20, to be released in early August, gauges parent attitudes to school choice, whether schools are perceived to be adequately supporting their children's academic progress and future success, and a host of other education elements.

About 2000 parents were asked to rate their schools on a range of issues, from academic performance and teacher quality to attitudes about religion, cyber safety and sex and sexuality.

Education savings fund
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Eyes on the prize: parents are searching for a suitable high school before their child starts primary school.

(ASG), which recently changed its name to Futurity Investment Group, surveys parents each year.

According to Kate Hill, a group executive at Futurity, academic performance and teacher quality topped the list of reasons for the high overall satisfaction result among parents surveyed, along with student care and wellbeing, personalised learning and curriculum coverage, and school leadership.

"The report card reveals a generally high level of satisfaction with these issues across the board, with independent schools faring best," says Ms Hill.

"Parents with children in the independent schools sector were either very satisfied (40 per cent) or satisfied (44 per cent) with the school their children attend. This compared with the Catholic sector which showed very satisfied (36 per cent) or satisfied (49 per cent)

and the government sector, which showed very satisfied (26 per cent) or satisfied (50 per cent)."

The report suggests a number of reasons for higher satisfaction rates. However, it seems those parents who were able to place their children in the school of their choice were among the happiest.

"To the extent that parents have been able to exercise choice in their selection of schools, their opinions are likely to be positively biased," the report notes.

"As with last year, we found high levels of parental satisfaction from our responders. Around four out of five were either very satisfied or satisfied with the school their children attended.

"But the parents of children attending independent schools were the most content."

VALUE FOR MONEY?

The survey drilled down on four key areas, asking parents to rate their child's academic progress and how well they thought the school was preparing their child for further study, future work and life.

"On each of these four measures, independent schools scored higher than Catholic or government schools," says Ms Hill.

Parents across all sectors agreed

"Contrary to the accepted urban myth ... most parents got into the school they wanted for their child."

schools were preparing their children well for life. Four out of five parents were satisfied or very satisfied with this aspect of their child's school. Parent reasons were varied, encompassing subject offerings, life skills development, extra-curricular activities, mental health and wellbeing, and values and behaviours.

Parents paying higher fees also reported higher satisfaction, indicating they may believe they're getting value for money.

"Parents were more likely to

report high levels of satisfaction the more advanced their children's stage of learning, the greater their household incomes, if they were highly-qualified or working in highly-skilled roles, and if their children were attending independent schools," the report notes.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

The survey also delved into parents' attitudes towards religion, sex and sexuality, cyber safety, health and wellbeing, and financial literacy. With the exception of religion, a majority of parents regarded teaching these things to be a shared responsibility with their child's school.

"When choosing a school, it is important parents ensure they have a common understanding with the school about their shared responsibilities in educating children about these so-called 'hot-button' topics," says Ms Hill.

"While we expect all parents to be actively engaged in their children's schooling, it is particularly important for parents seeking to maintain boundaries around certain topics to establish those boundaries up front and agree where they will assume the main responsibility."

CHOOSING STARTS EARLY

The survey found more than 60 per cent of parents begin their search for a suitable high school before their child starts primary school. Kate Hill says parents take a lot into consideration when choosing a school for their child's senior years.

"We asked parents to indicate what sources and considerations informed their choice of high schools," she says. "The top-ranked information sources were their own research, family and friends, and school visits or tours. Interestingly, information available on the My School website did not factor into many parents' choices."

"The top influencers of school choice were school performance, perceived reputation and the school sector - independent, Catholic or government - followed by location, cost, teacher quality, curriculum and facilities."

Perhaps contrary to the accepted urban myth surrounding the Sydney school scene, most parents got into the school they wanted for their child.

"More than three out of five parents said they experienced no barriers in getting their child into their first-choice school," says Ms Hill. "For those who did report barriers, the top three impediments were cost, zoning and waiting lists."

"The incidence of barriers encountered was greatest among parents of children in government schools, suggesting that, for some, the public system was not their first choice. The most prevalent barrier was cost."

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How a musical triumph lifted a school's spirits

Against tough odds, students rehearsed remotely to make music together.

BY PETER HANLON

As she prepared her students for the most unusual music festival Meriden School has ever staged, Jodie Spooner-Ryan returned regularly to the theme of resilience. For an exemplar, the girls looked no further than the legendary composer whose work they were celebrating.

"Beethoven knew what adversity was," Ms Spooner-Ryan says. "Despite everything in his life, he was still able to create great music. That was a bit of a mantra we told the girls – despite his loss of hearing and all of his troubles, he didn't allow that to stop him."

And so, when the coronavirus forced schools into lockdown, Meriden's orchestra set about learning Beethoven's 5th Symphony online. Put the dramatic heft of such an undertaking to music, and it might sound like the complex work's famous four-note opening.

Video was key – of the conductor and accompanist, of the strings co-ordinator demonstrating bowing techniques, of recordings that showed students what they were working towards, and, in turn, of students practising parts that would be sent to mentors to gauge how they were tracking.

"Just getting to that standard despite not being at school for so long was amazing."

"Initially, it was a lot of work," says Ms Spooner-Ryan. "We made them accountable – once they uploaded their videos, we'd be commenting on things they needed to work on individually."

With a return to school



Renowned Australian conductor Guy Noble oversaw Meriden's stunning performance.

imminent, the decision was taken to play "live" at the festival, which is held every two years, rather than follow a trend of each member performing their part separately, to be brought together in one recording.

Renowned conductor Guy Noble was enlisted, along with a host of other experts who helped prepare the 400 Meriden students that made up the choirs and concert bands of the five-day festival's line-up.

The original plan was a celebration of the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth in the City Recital Hall, but its temporary closure forced a switch to the school's auditorium. Noble

was involved in rehearsals and helped enlighten students drawn from three year levels, who made up the audience on the day, about Beethoven and the story behind Symphony No.5, before overseeing a performance that was live-streamed for parents.

The result was stunning, and moved Noble to wonder if they were the best school symphony he'd encountered. Ms Spooner-Ryan was just as moved by what will forever be a rich instalment in the story of a school whose alumni continue to do great things musically all over the world.

"Just getting to that standard despite not being at school for so long was amazing. Seeing the

discipline of the students, setting the bar at the same height as we normally would, and watching the students reach that bar."

The carefully managed event underscored just how vital music is to the Meriden community.

"The positivity in collaboration is very special," Spooner-Ryan says. "You can't capture that physically distanced or in an online environment. Music is about humans making music together, and being motivated by people around you is very, very important."

"For the girls' mental health, for the staff's mental health ... just hearing music in the last week of term two was particularly special this time around."

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EDITORIAL FEATURE

Building a bridge to lifelong learning

Carefully tailored early learning programs help prepare children for the rigours of school.



Pre-K programs are popular at PLC Sydney and The King's School's Parramatta and Tudor House campuses.

BY PETER HANLON

The overarching aim of pre-kindergarten is so apparent that The King's School coined its own moniker for this toe-in-the-water entry into formal education.

"We've called the pre-K program Kingsbridge – that's how we see it, this bridge we use to prepare our boys for the increased rigours of the school program," says The King's School preparatory head of school Peter Allison.

"It's very much about preparing them to grow in confidence, to build that bridge between a pre-school childcare experience and a more formalised academic program that starts in kindergarten," he says.

Play-based learning underpins Pre-K, tapping into the inquisitive nature of four-year-olds through activity that promotes social and emotional growth. Our youngest learners are encouraged to explore their world and embark on a lifelong journey of discovery and understanding.

While not necessarily outcomes-based in nature, Pre-K can subtly introduce children to structure that might not be as prevalent in a day care environment.

Even at the very beginning of their education, specialist lessons in music, woodwork and art, even languages, are the norm at King's, something Anni Sandwell, head of school at King's Tudor House campus at Moss Vale, believes is hugely beneficial.

"When they start kindergarten they are so much more prepared than they would have been if they came straight from a pre-school or day care centre where there isn't the structure or the expectations of change during the day," she says. "And neither is the expectation of them skill-wise as rigorous."



GROWING TOGETHER

Sandwell has worked extensively in single-gender schools, but since joining Tudor House when it switched from all boys to co-ed in 2017 she's loved the experience.

"At Tudor House, we have a lot of little girls coming to school who want to be able to do the things their brothers used to come home and tell them all about, and now they can," she says. "A lot of that is to do with the outdoors."

The learning environment and three-day week at Tudor House works well for families, many of whom moved to the Southern Highlands seeking a more rural way of life, and the time to enjoy it. Kite-flying, bonfires, cubby-building and 'Billy Cart Derby Day' are all staples of a Pre-K program that allows nature to take a lead in broadening young horizons.

"We've got 169 acres of play space – about an acre per child – and we really use the outdoors to teach the children," Sandwell says. "We have a paddock-to-plate program, and the children take it in turns to feed the chooks. They've grown carrots, green vegetables, potatoes to take home."

"It's very much a home from home in lots of ways – we're supporting what the parents are already doing at home."



A BOY'S OWN ADVENTURE

At The King's School Parramatta campus, blending the student-centred inquiry that underpins the International Baccalaureate program with the Reggio Emilia philosophy of exploring, taking initiative and being creative sits comfortably in a 130-hectare setting packed with different environments for the boys to explore.

The all-boys Pre-K program is deliberately limited to 20 students each year, who are nurtured in a setting that feeds off the surrounding bush. The creek is used as an introduction to the wonders of water, and there's a bamboo grove, an agriculture area, and cows and sheep whose calves and lambs are on site.

Peter Allison recalls a recent project that highlights what can be done when a classroom isn't confined to four walls. The boys embarked on a bird-watching mission in which they counted nine different types, then recorded how often they saw them through the following fortnight.

"It led to weeks of inquiry into the ibis, cockatoos, the two kookaburras who made their home there," Allison recalls. "Then that led to them creating their own little bird habitat. It was just lovely."

Testament to the program's impact is the regular presence of older boys from the school, who help out as buddies and share nostalgic stories of the cubby houses they used to build, and the cherished adventures that filled their Pre-K year.

When they graduate from year 12, a photo is taken with their very first King's School teacher. "There's a lovely connection," Allison says. "Those boys have felt that strong bond all the way through."



GIRLS FINDING THEIR VOICE

At PLC Sydney, junior school head Melissa Watters oversees young girls' social-emotional development and academic learning in a flexible environment through programs that are designed to suit each yearly intake.

Following the Reggio Emilia principles gives teachers flexibility to structure each day according to what the children are ready for.

"It really suits our philosophy, that every child is unique and has great gifts and talents, and it's our job to help them find those in the best learning environment possible," Watters says. "Reggio values not just the child but the teacher as well, and their environment."

The approach of Reggio Emilia founder Loris Malaguzzi runs through PLC's Pre-K program, including his conviction that children have "100 languages" through which they express themselves – in speaking, playing, thinking, marvelling and loving.

"Our teachers are very much in tune with the child, and plan activities that bring out their languages," Watters says. "Children interacting with the environment, with different staff, with community members, that's what the idea of 100 languages is about."

"To know they have voice, that they're being listened to – their learning just grows and develops from there."

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Starting in kindy can be a smart move

In junior schools with a high staff ratio, teachers get to know each pupil's specific interests and learning needs.

BY FRAN MOLLOY

Kindergarten enrolments are on the rise in NSW independent schools, up by 3.6 per cent between 2018-19, according to the Association of Independent Schools of NSW. And while annual tuition fees at private primary level are generally lower than the fees at secondary schools, the cost in kindergarten can range from hundreds of dollars to annual fees of more than \$20,000 a child.

A wealth of research backs the importance of early childhood education, be it at quality childcare centres or pre-schools. However, the transitions between stages of education matter, says Ben Barrington-Higgs, head of Newington College's Junior School campus at Sydney's Lindfield. "They are all important, but I

believe that first transition from early childhood into formal education is the most important and lays the foundation and building blocks for a child's literacy and numeracy. It's the key piece; it is foundational." He says the school puts considerable effort into catering for children in the first year of their schooling. "We feel that kindergarten is a really high-stakes year. We focus on that smooth transition from play-based learning into explicitly teaching the academic side as well. "If that first year of learning doesn't go well, that can significantly disadvantage the way little people perceive school. It's the start of a long journey and we want to make sure that that first step is really positive." Peter Grimes, the headmaster



of Mosman Preparatory School, agrees the research is emphatic. "Good experiences in preschool and early primary school has more impact on a child's academic progress than gender or family background," he says. Family tradition, school reputation, location and cost influence choices made by parents, and there can be high demand for

kindergarten enrolment at some schools. Enrolling from kindy can also be a path to high school entry at a K-12 school of choice. Transition programs between primary and secondary stages are often quite structured. For example, at Sydney's Ravenswood School for Girls, about half the students starting year 7 in any given year come from

Ravenswood's primary school. Ravenswood focuses on the transition to secondary during year 6, with visual arts, music and science classes taking place in facilities shared with the secondary school. As with many schools, older students work with year 6 students, mentoring and community-building as part of the transition.

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A high staff ratio at Mosman Preparatory School allows teachers to get to know each student on their learning journey.

EARLY YEARS' LEARNING

Peter Grimes says his school has an intensive focus on a child's interests "so that we can captivate and engage them, and help them to love learning in those early years". "If you lose children in the first few years of school because the style of learning you're providing is not engaging, then you can often lose them for life," he says.

Schools that also have pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds are designed to ease the transition to the kindy year. At Meriden School in Strathfield, co-ed pre-kind includes a school-readiness learning program with pre-numeracy and literacy, visits to the junior school library, music and other facilities.

EXTRA HELP

Mr Grimes says that if students go through primary schooling without picking up adequate literacy and numeracy skills, it can be hard for them to catch up.

He says there can be a tendency in larger primary schools to teach "to the middle" and children at either end of the spectrum can miss out. An estimated one in five school students struggles with reading, often for no known reason. Dyslexia affects at least 10 per cent of Australians, while around 10 per cent of children are considered to be gifted learners.

"Our school has extra staff dedicated to literacy and numeracy beyond the class teacher, and our staff-to-student ratio of one-to-eight means we can cater for children with higher learning needs, whether that's gifted and talented or learning support," he says.

Mr Barrington-Higgs says most children start out with a passion for learning. A focus on kinaesthetic learning (learning by doing) can see students moving between, for example, doing phonics on a whiteboard, engaging with visuals, group work and intensive, reinforced learning with a teacher.

"Because we are a boys' school, we can concentrate on the ways boys seem to learn best; in small groups with lots of rotation, plenty of connectivity, lots of movement time," he says.



Newington school's Ben Barrington-Higgs (pictured) says boys thrive "in small groups with plenty of connectivity, lots of movement time".

SMALL NUMBERS

Mr Grimes says Mosman Prep's small student body is a key attraction for the families that attend. "There's a real intimacy in a smaller school and this builds a deep connection to community and has a very positive impact on a child and their development," he says. "Parents are engaged with the school; they can see the

strength of the community.

"In a small school with a high staff ratio, teachers get to know each student on their learning journey. In kindergarten, we might have six-to-seven minutes of focused work and then the children change to another activity, so our kindergarten teachers do an awful lot of planning for every single literacy lesson."



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Why all children need school

Why can't we just let children learn by doing? Wouldn't that be more fun?



BY ELIZABETH STONE

I have the clearest memory of watching my two-year-old son exploring the back garden. A very thin twig was poking out from the hedge. He picked up a rock about the size of my fist and slowly, with infinite care, held the rock gently on the top of the trembling twig ... and let go.

The rock thumped to the ground and my son learnt something about gravity and the relationship between the diameter and strength of a tree branch.

The evolutionary psychologist David Geary described these basic ideas about material objects as 'folk physics'. Children learn folk physics easily, simply by playing and exploring the world. What goes up must come down. An object doesn't disappear just because you can't see it, and so on.

Similarly, all cultures have developed 'folk biology' (structured ways of observing living things and reasoning about them), and 'folk psychology' (how to understand and co-operate with other people).

It is easy to see why such knowledge would be essential to human evolution, and Geary argued that human brains have evolved so that such knowledge could be acquired rapidly and seamlessly from infancy.

Those things that would have been essential to the survival of early hominids are, to this day, learnt by children with little effort. Toddlers don't need English lessons – they acquire language by being spoken to. Children figure out how the material world works by mucking around in the garden. They learn about human behaviour and how to collaborate by simply playing together.

Knowledge that we learn naturally and without effort is, in Geary's model, 'biologically primary'. A great deal of knowledge, however, is essential in the modern world, although it was not required throughout human evolution.

Algebra is a basic tool of modern mathematics, technology and engineering but was unknown until a few hundred years ago. Even reading is only a few thousand years old, far too recent to have played any part in evolution. In fact, most of what we learn in school is 'biologically secondary' knowledge – which makes sense, because if it were biologically primary we'd pick it up without help, anyway.



Our brains are not inherently suited to this secondary knowledge, so the process of learning is much harder. In effect, we have to hijack cognitive architecture (roughly, 'brain circuitry'), which originally developed for 'folk' knowledge, and retrain it for new purposes such as reading.

We usually have to be explicitly taught secondary knowledge but even if we acquire it by ourselves, it is always an effort.

So what is the significance of the primary/secondary distinction?

Most people recognise intuitively that it has explanatory force. It explains why parents don't have to teach their children to speak, but do have to read to them every night for years before they become fluent readers.

It explains why lots of playtime is fantastic for pre-school aged children who are busy acquiring folk knowledge at an extraordinary pace with brains designed specifically for that purpose. It also explains why no ordinary child is going to acquire a solid grasp of trigonometry without extended, focused effort and a skilled guide.

Watching small children grow and learn is a daily miracle. It seems so effortless – it is so effortless – that we naturally want to replicate that learning process in school. Why can't we just let children learn by doing? Wouldn't that be more fun – and even more effective?

Why can't we just put them in a room full of interesting things, answer the odd question, and watch them emerge as confident mathematicians, historians, artists and writers at the age of 18? Geary and his successors have a somewhat deflating answer:



'Because the brain doesn't work that way.' The knowledge we are describing is biologically secondary and that means it's going to take good teaching and hard study.

The implications of this distinction are profound. Immersion and play are not effective ways of learning secondary knowledge. This explains, for instance, why 'digital natives' (young people who have grown up immersed in technology) are no better than us oldies in using digital technology for complex tasks. They have the same brains that we do, but less knowledge and experience. Their ape-like ancestors never needed this skill.

The model also explains why it is not enough simply to surround children with beautiful books and adults who love reading. They need explicit teaching over an extended

Children acquire many (biologically primary) skills instinctively, but secondary knowledge just has to be taught.

explicit pointers can help them get there faster. But we can still see that this is in a different category from, say, the rules of symbolic logic, for which no natural process of maturing will suffice.

The academic curriculum embodies biologically secondary knowledge. It's hard to learn. That's why we teach it within a clear structure, with skilled teachers carefully guiding students through a specific sequence of ideas which are explicitly introduced at each step.

There are opportunities to play with ideas and to explore in a much less structured way, but generally these are effective for advanced students rather than beginners.

We also recognise how important it is for students to learn to navigate relationships, communicate well and collaborate effectively. They will bring a certain level of skill with them, but these skills need to be enhanced and refined as they grow towards adulthood.

This is why a rich extra-curricular program, with opportunities to learn how to lead, how to follow, how to communicate and how to listen, has always been seen as equally important to a Queenwood education. When their intellectual development is matched by their capacity for leadership and service, that's when we have prepared them for life.

Elizabeth Stone is the principal of Queenwood School. This article was first published in *Queenwood News*.

“Children figure out how the material world works by mucking around in the garden.”

period and years of practice and correction to acquire this biologically unnatural skill.

It's important to note that our biological systems aren't perfect. We may acquire (biologically primary) social skills instinctively, but we don't acquire them all at once or at the same pace.

Some seem to have lower EQ than others; they take longer to mature into these relationship skills. It's possible that some



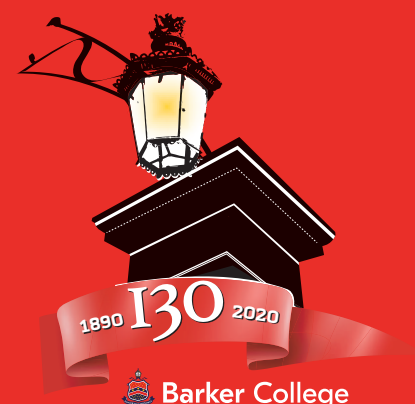
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EDITORIAL FEATURE

How FOMO drives higher year 5 entry

Enrolling a child in year 5 with an eye to high school is increasingly popular across the sector.

BY MAL CHENU

It's a truth universally acknowledged in Sydney private school circles that families with a keen desire to have their child attend the high school of their choice – and having the good fortune to cover the fees – often enrol from year 5 rather than wait until year 7.

Changing schools in year 5 can happen for a variety of reasons. However, data compiled by the Association of Independent Schools of NSW (AISNSW) shows year 5 has the second biggest intake of students transferring from other schools, after year 7, with new year 5 enrolments outstripping the growth in independent school enrolment across all grades.

While switching in year 5 has been the default setting for boys

entering Catholic high schools, enrolment in year 5 is becoming increasingly popular across the private school sector.

Fifteen year-old Samuel Stapleton transferred to St Ignatius' College Riverview at the start of year 5. The middle school arm of St Ignatius, known as Regis, runs years 5 and 6 only, and classes are filled with boys whose parents want to ensure their sons get into the prestigious North Shore high school in year 7.

'Fear of missing out' was the driver behind Samuel's parents' decision to transfer him in year 5 to Regis from local feeder school St Michael's Catholic Primary School Lane Cove, according to his

"It certainly helped that Sam had so many friends start with him."

mother, Nicole. The family knew moving in year 5 was likely to guarantee Samuel a place at St Ignatius in year 7. He is now in year 10. Looking back, the transfer was

the right move, she says.

"Moving Samuel ensured he would continue on to St Ignatius right through to year 12," Ms Stapleton says. "This was the main reason for our decision, but there were others. Quite a few of his mates made the same move. I think there were around 20 boys who transferred from St Michael's to Regis with him. It certainly helped that Sam had so many friends start with him."

The spacious grounds, organised sport and hands-on learning at Regis were also attractive to the Stapletons. "Sam is a very energetic kid and Regis offered a lot more opportunities for him to exercise."

"There is plenty of space to run around and the oval is huge. They teach the boys by engaging them physically. One day, they learned about drones by getting all the boys to lie on the ground to spell out the name of the school for an overhead drone photo."

"All of a sudden, Sam really liked going to school, which meant he started to enjoy learning."

"It's just my opinion but I think they just really know how to teach boys at Regis and St Ignatius. At least, that is our experience."



Samuel and Zara Stapleton, with mother Nicole: the Stapletons decided year 5

Ms Stapleton says the downside to the move in year 5 was that Sam lost the experience of being the 'big fish in a small pond' at his old primary school. "Sam missed out on potential leadership roles and all the other things that go with being a 'big kid' in year 6. He was one of the best year 4 swimmers at St Michael's but at Regis he was back in the pack."

Ms Stapleton says paying the fees can be a challenge and the household budget has had to be adjusted. "It is expensive, certainly

compared with staying in the government system but the sacrifice has been totally worth it. Sam is thriving at St Ignatius."

"Sam and his sister, Zara, who started at Monte Sant' Angelo Mercy College last year, are fully aware how lucky and privileged they are. I remind them of this constantly but so do the schools themselves."

WHEN TO SWITCH?

Many independent schools foster and encourage major intakes of students in year 5. Some schools,



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was the right time for moving schools.

such as Waverley College in Sydney's eastern suburbs and Loreto Normanhurst, cater only for years 5 and 6 at primary level.

Others, including St Andrew's Cathedral School in the CBD and Tara Anglican School for Girls at North Parramatta, are K-12 schools but have year 5 enrolment as a key entry point.

Waiting lists at some independent schools see parents keen on gaining access to the school of choice also consider the switch in year 5.

WHY GO IN 5?

Some parents make the move because they believe their child needs a new challenge and the expectations and rigorous structure at some independent schools may engender greater aptitude and resilience. There are typically more activities and requirements at independent schools so parents can expect their child to be busier, juggling multiple pursuits and interests.

Well-funded independent schools are likely to have diverse facilities, sport and cultural activities. That may include a swimming pool, tennis courts and high-quality Wi-Fi that won't just be used to play Fortnite.

Some parents believe year 5 entry smooths the transition to senior school and if a child already knows at least some of the ropes, the stress of finding their feet in year 7 may be reduced.

In the same vein, the switch to a single sex school before a child commences puberty – with all its inherent distractions and difficulties – may mean one less thing to worry about. Such students might find comfort and support if they are surrounded by other kids coping with the same changes.

On the curriculum side, Stage 3 of the NSW Education Standards Authority curriculum begins in year 5, with year 6 building on the previous year. Studying the International Baccalaureate middle years program is also offered in year 5 at some independent schools, making for a continuity of study into high school.

Board – and bring your horse

New co-ed, middle school boarding could be a game-changer for families.

BY MAL CHENU

The wide expanses of Scots All Saints College, Bathurst, are to be home for years 5-8 boys and girls as part of the school's new middle school boarding program.

The Scots School and All Saints' College merged in 2018. Head of college John Weeks says middle years boarding was partly driven by demand from parents.

"When the schools were merged, the new model had a junior school from K-year 4, middle school from 5-8 and senior school for years 9-12, which also catered to boarders.

"We had a lot of enquiries from parents in the area about the opportunity to bring younger students into boarding. People were sending their children to board in Sydney because there was no alternative."

Mr Weeks' CV includes more than 30 years in leading public and independent schools. He says he was thrilled to be invited to assist in establishing the merged college.

"It was an intriguing and exciting challenge because we were building a strong, co-ed, family-based,



Co-ed middle school boarding has been a boon for families.

independent, regional school on the western side of the Blue Mountains," he says. "Now, on one of the most beautiful sites in Bathurst, we have middle school day students and boarding facilities."

Mr Weeks believes many students are bored in their latter years at conventional primary schools.

"What we're seeing – and I've seen this at other schools – is that parents are wanting to start their children in year 5 rather than 7. They want to get them set up earlier. We can now cater to that and parents have responded really well to our expanded boarding opportunities for years 5-8," he says.

"That group of 11-14 year olds share a commonality of maturity. We are able to push these students and challenge them while providing consistency, nurturing them and still encouraging them to enjoy being kids.

"Our middle school boarding also means years 7-8 students are not thrown into an older adolescent environment too early. In addition, as a co-ed school, boys and girls learn to understand each other as they grow. They still have their own boarding facilities but they dine together and socialise on weekends. And, unlike most private schools in Sydney, brothers and sisters can be at the same school."

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Seamless IB education beckons

Offering four IB programs, from kindy years to the careers option, is an Australian first.



BY PAUL TEYS

Hunter Valley Grammar School (HVGS) is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School teaching the primary years program (PYP) for students in the early learning centre and junior school, and the middle years program (MYP) in years 7-9, which will extend into year 10 in 2021.

HVGS is the only school north of the greater Sydney region authorised to offer the PYP and MYP, and we've been doing so since 2015 and 2018 respectively.

Our commitment to the principles and practices of the IB to offer a teaching and learning framework that meets the academic, cultural, physical and social development of each student has driven our desire to offer the IB career-related program (CP) to students in year 11 from next year.

Furthermore, we have made an application to the IB to also offer the diploma program (DP) from 2022. This means HVGS students will choose to study either the HSC, the IB CP, IB diploma or carefully designed bespoke programs in their final two years of school.

The school will be the first in Australia to offer the full IB continuum (four programs aligned seamlessly to the IB philosophy) across all years.

Naturally, this undertaking comes with significant consideration. On arrival to NSW as an educator in 2006 and in the years that followed, reflecting on NESA curricula and the dense syllabuses that taught subjects in silos, I scanned international curricula for something better and more relevant that taught the whole child as part of a core curriculum.

While HVGS had made an in-principle commitment to the four IB programs, my decision was confirmed and affirmed following a research trip I took to several international IB schools in 2019.

The benefit of that experience was that I saw the IB outside the Australian context; as an authentic global program that genuinely produces graduates who want to make a difference in the world, graduates who are world citizens. I was able to see the IB across its entirety – the full continuum.

Any meaningful discussion or observation of the IB in the Australian context is usually infected with political machinations about state and national curricula. It is essential to step away from this and see the IB



Hunter Valley Grammar School is continuing to build on its successful adoption of the International Baccalaureate program.

in its fullest context.

The IB has been developed independently of government and national systems to incorporate quality practice from research and the IB's global community of thousands of schools. I could see that the four programs are highly desirable and will produce outstanding benefits for our students.

At our school, our junior students are living the IB PYP every day. They are questioning, curious and globally-minded, even at their young age. In the final year of the primary program, year 6 students undertake a collaborative, transdisciplinary inquiry process that involves them identifying, investigating and offering solutions to real-life issues or problems.

Students can access expert teachers from the senior school to assist in their projects, which creates an authentic whole-school experience.

Over the years, we've seen many remarkable displays and investigations that show depth of insight well beyond students' physical years.

Our year 7-8 students are fully immersed in the MYP with many benefiting from their immersion in the PYP in junior years. Our year 9 students will shortly commence their MYP personal projects, which involves a student-centred

practical exploration of the skills and attitudes acquired through the MYP while extending on an area of personal interest beyond classroom learning.

All students in years 7-10 will complete the MYP credential and at the same time meet all of NESA's (NSW curriculum) requirements.

IB credentials are valuable

“The four [IB] programs are highly desirable and will produce outstanding benefits for our students.”

currency for our students on an international stage. Our current year 10 students are now making decisions about whether to study the IB career-related program or the HSC.

This will be a student and parent choice, with prominent involvement by the school to ensure that each student makes appropriate choices for their future. In 2022, the diploma

program will also be an option.

We currently offer bespoke programs of learning for students who have particular interests that are not ideally suited to NESA or the IB. These programs are designed to be appropriate for different senior years students, who have differences in aspiration, learning habits, work ethic and career interests.

In a pre-COVID 19 world, we had planned to invite parents to information evenings so that the DP, CP and HSC options could be adequately explained and understood.

That plan was re-invented in light of social-distancing measures and took the form of a series of videos along with handbooks and FAQs so that parents and students could make good choices. To date, about 15 students are interested in studying the IB career program next year.

My visits to IB schools reinforced what we knew and understood about an IB education. Students in IB World Schools:

- Are given a unique education.
- Show a richer understanding and commitment to want to build a better world through intercultural understanding and respect.
- Are encouraged to think critically and challenge assumptions and prejudices.
- Develop into inquiring,

knowledgeable and caring young people who are motivated to succeed.

- Are encouraged to think independently and drive their own learning.
- Are encouraged to consider both local and global contexts.
- Develop multilingual abilities.
- Take part in programs of education that can lead them to some of the highest-ranking universities in Australia and around the world.
- Become more culturally aware, through the development of a second language.
- Are able to engage with people in an increasingly globalised, rapidly changing world.
- Engage with a much broader, liberal education than the state-based curricula because they study more than subjects – they study mandatory core courses that cut across subjects to the holistic development of young people of integrity and character.

I firmly believe that the programs to be offered to students in years 11-12 at HVGS will mean we are providing the absolute best we can for our students, setting them up for bright and fulfilling futures, long after they have left our gates and our influence.

Paul Teys is the principal of Hunter Valley Grammar School.

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EDITORIAL FEATURE

Finding a path to independent thinking

Getting to run your own race can prove a liberating approach to study.

BY PETER HANLON

When Annike Lindhout first thought about completing her secondary education at MLC School through its International Baccalaureate program, she knew little about a diploma that has been challenging young minds for more than half a century. She soon discovered its independent thinking and global focus suited her hand-in-glove.

"Because it requires you to learn subjects from sciences, humanities, languages and maths, it gives you a really broad depth of knowledge across a range of subjects, which I thought was very cool," says Annike. "Coming up with your own ideas for research projects and being able to communicate them in independent ways really suited me."

So much so that her diploma result – 45/45 for an ATAR of 99.95 – could not have been better. She laughs to think that made her the equal-top IB student on the planet in 2019; the experience has given her much more than quirky bragging rights.



Studying the International Baccalaureate turbo-charged Annike Lindhout's passion for learning.

Annike's subject choices – English literature, maths, biology, psychology, geography and Italian – has led to her studying psychological science at the University of NSW. Psychology would not have been an option had she sat the HSC; she also reflects that a shift from teacher-led structure to student-driven inquiry played a big part in her success.

"In my geography, biology and

"I found it useful to start developing timetables and schedules."

psychology courses there were internal assessments where you had to come up with your own topic from the very beginning," she says.

"It was a huge amount of freedom, and you could conduct the research in any way that you wanted that would specifically address your question. It was really cool to look at things I was interested in, and carry them through in my own way."

Geography underscored the IB's global outlook, with issues such as inequality and climate change overtaking an earlier-years focus on physical and Australian geography.

The IB experience taught her much about herself, too. The nature of the program is such that the very first lesson of year 11 could feature in final exams almost two years later; organisation, time management and planning became key skills, not least in tackling long-term tasks.

"I found it really useful to start developing things like timetables and schedules, even just in the short-term, like afternoon tasks. That helped to keep me motivated."

Her twin sister's experience of the HSC offered scope for regular comparison, yet Annike says that while her sister worked "incredibly hard", there was very little overlap in the material they studied. "I don't think the IB is necessarily better or harder than the HSC; it's just very different."

It has led to a part-time job tutoring current IB students, a role Annike relishes not least because it refreshes her brain and allows her to help others, "and they're both things I'm really passionate about". She sees herself as a lifelong learner, and will be forever grateful for the IB program's role in that.

"It's just having a sense of curiosity about the world, wanting to learn more all the time. It's very easy now – when I was at high school, and now university – to be interested in learning. I hope that continues even when I'm outside educational institutions. There's always more to learn."

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When success is developing a wider outlook

The IB pushes students beyond their comfort zone.

BY PETER HANLON

The paths taken by Lindsay McNeil and Isabel Binnekamp have diverged since they completed the International Baccalaureate program at Redlands School in 2019. Yet they will forever share an IB graduate's bond, underpinned by diligence, perseverance and the breadth of their studies.

Isabel's experience shows the unexpected places that being required to choose subjects from outside your comfort zone can take you. She confesses to having been "science, science, science" up to year 10, with medicine always her dream career. Her goal is unchanged, but now she counts poetry and economics among her passions.

"I had apprehension going in. I thought, 'I can't see myself studying economics or writing English essays all the time'. But, by

the end, English became my favourite subject and I ended up taking it to the highest level I could. And I found a new love for economics as well, which is kind of funny."

Isabel's double degree in medicine at Sydney University affords an opportunity to take English Literature as an elective, along with Indigenous studies and gender studies, "all these breadth subjects I would never have considered doing before".

"I feel informed and I feel connected to people and to topics that matter."

Lindsay is also grateful that, as she embarks on a law degree at Cambridge University in England, her lifelong passion for truth and justice has a wider focus.

She no longer views law as a discrete pursuit, but as a means of feeding her love of science,



Redlands' graduates Lindsay McNeil and Isabel Binnekamp thrived on the wider focus of the IB program.

geography, history and more.

"Seeing those links has been helpful for me," she says. "Because of the IB's global outlook, the way it helps you with open-mindedness, I feel informed and I feel connected to people and to topics that matter beyond simply a local or national sphere."

The pair were the top two IB diploma students at Redlands in 2019 (Isabel with a perfect 45/45, equivalent to an ATAR of 99.95; Lindsay 44/45 or 99.85), where the program has been offered since 1988, longer than any school in NSW. The duo thrived on the initiative and academic independence the program

fosters, coming up with, as Lindsay reports, "everything from the question of inquiry to the thesis, to conducting the primary research to forming original conclusions".

The collaboration with other IB students, who made up roughly half of last year's Redlands year 12 cohort, particularly in internal assessment, enhanced the all-round experience. "In subjects where there's a lot of discussion and debate, you feel challenged and supported and stimulated by your peers," Lindsay says. "It's definitely not a do-it-all-yourself experience."

Nor does it have to be all one-way traffic. To offset their studies, both represented the school in

debating, mock trials and basketball, while Isabel also participated in choir, drama, the school musical and theatre sports and Lindsay competed at athletics and cross country.

"I couldn't have gotten through such an academically rigorous program – whether the IB or HSC – without a bunch of extracurricular activities," Isabel says.

Lindsay notes people's surprise when she added cross-country to a packed year 12 schedule, but has no regrets. "For my physical and mental health that was important to me; it brought me joy, solidified friendships. The importance of balance can't be overstated."

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How to develop global citizens

The IB MYP encourages students to think big, both creatively and critically.



BY NICOLE CHRISTENSEN

In 2007, Monte Sant' Angelo Mercy College became the only Catholic girls' school in NSW to offer both the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (MYP) and Diploma Program (DP).

This decision placed Monte at the forefront of educational innovation and resulted in the 'IB Learner Profile' being embedded into teaching and learning approaches.

The IB Learner Profile clarifies our intent as a learning community to become inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring and risk takers. I am confident that the decision our college community made to become an IB World School has resulted in our graduates being truly global citizens who have benefited from learning alongside students from more than 5000 schools across 158 countries.

The IB MYP for years 7-10 is designed to ensure students participate actively and responsibly in a changing and increasingly connected world. At Monte, the MYP teaching and learning places a central emphasis on learners gaining conceptual understanding rather than amassing content knowledge.

Student-centred learning methods seek to support learners to be inquirers in their approach to gaining knowledge. Learning is contextual – both relevant to the young person through their personal experiences and



The IB MYP inspires students to become inquirers in their approach to gaining knowledge.

connected to the broader world and all peoples. Learning experiences, within subject areas, are designed to facilitate exploration of important global context and allows for students to think big, creatively and critically about issues and perspectives.

In 2019, one of the interdisciplinary units at the college involved students in science and English focusing on pandemics and dystopian literature. We weren't expecting or planning for a global pandemic, but our students had an extraordinary insight and this contributed to their thinking about the challenges of 2020, especially

“Never before has the need for shared knowledge and collaboration been so important.”

as they have been required to be resilient, agile and adaptable.

Students maintain a holistic academic program across eight subject areas which includes the continuous study of a language other than English, and study in the arts and design in every year.

Engagement with another language challenges students to consider shared and personal identity and gain deeper intercultural understanding. This understanding increases communication skills and strengthens their ability to be civic-minded global citizens.

Creativity and design thinking are critical skills for participation in the global economy. One such example is a project undertaken by year 8 Monte students to develop reusable packaging which is both affordable and desirable to business. This calls on students to address a problem through design, innovation and planning. Creative

personal expression is celebrated in the program as is risk taking and failure.

Academic expectations equip all students to be effective and capable global citizens. There is an emphasis on the development of 'approaches to learning' so that students have the opportunity to achieve their best and discover strengths not always evident or nurtured in traditional school curriculum. The development of skills in research, communication and thinking, in the social domain and in self-management, is anchored across all areas of the program. The application of these skills is consistently required both at school and, more importantly, in the workforce.

The IB MYP aims to develop empathetic and caring young people who help to create a better and more equitable world through holistic learning and intercultural awareness. Monte students have the opportunity to participate in immersions in Australia's Central Desert region and at a girls' school in Timor Leste. I have seen firsthand the profound impact these experiences have on them. It shapes them, changes them and drives them to champion a just and more compassionate world.

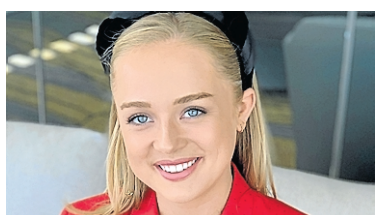
The MYP fosters learning environments and encounters where students are challenged to be outward looking, to come to a personal and profound understanding that "other people, with their differences, can also be right".

In MYP, a local perspective is never sufficient. Students are challenged to learn using examples, case studies and models drawn from across the world and the interrelationship and connectedness between things can be explored. Never before in our collective history has the need for shared knowledge and collaboration been so important or mattered to so many.

Mrs Nicole Christensen is the Principal of Monte Sant' Angelo Mercy College and a member of the World Heads Council of the International Baccalaureate Organisation.

IB study saw me start uni with confidence

The curriculum and tools provide and reward.



BY GRACE WESTON

I am a third-generation Kambala Old Girl who completed the International Baccalaureate in 2015. A bachelor of science (psychology) and commerce graduate of the Australian National University, I am currently working at EY Sydney in Financial Services Advisory.

My time at Kambala was long and fulfilling; a journey I started with a group of girls I still call my close friends today.

One thing I have learned, of which the IB first demonstrated to me, is that in choosing a similar path you find yourself among like-minded people.

It takes a certain mind and associated driving ambitions to shift away from the HSC towards

an alternative like the IB, and in doing so many friendships were made. Collaboration drove our cohort and it's what made the experience so fulfilling.

The curriculum the IB provides is well rounded in both subject and perspective. You are given the tools to develop a sense of thought leadership, a skill I believe fosters the most successful students, employees and world citizens.

With that independence, I was able to start university with confidence and purpose. The requirement to 'drive' many of your subjects is not dissimilar to the HSC in the realm of major works.

However, where I believe the IB differs is in the opportunity it

provides to collaborate with teachers on topics of mutual interest. The best example of this is the 'extended essay'.

At university, you are expected to collaborate with individuals of varying age, thought and experience. The IB provides you with skills that considerably reduce the gap between high school and university expectations. I left Kambala with a strong understanding of how to get the most out of my time and work independently.

The IB also rewards dedication and commitment. My first year was difficult; I was frustrated by results well below my expectations. However, with perseverance and dedication, I

improved. It tested my commitment but eventually enabled me to adapt to a new way of learning.

Now, when I am faced with adversity, I remember the benefits that come from committing to a challenge and find confidence in my ability to 'stick it out'.

I would recommend the IB to any young woman looking to push herself and learn more about her potential. The IB prepares you to be agile. It introduces you to difficulty, pushes you to your limit and demands you extend beyond it.

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A timely spread of community spirit

Remote learning has reinforced just how agile students are.



BY TIM BOWDEN

When reflecting on Trinity Grammar School's pivot to remote learning earlier this year, I don't point to information technology platforms, despite IT playing a massive role in the ease of delivery. I think about the community spirit that weaves its way through the school's teaching, learning and history. Creating a familiar teaching and learning experience was our primary goal. There was already enough change and ambiguity in wider society around the pandemic; we didn't want to add further stress to parents, staff and students. Delivering consistently on an already-familiar student learning

management system, remotely, was about our commitment to delivering consistency to our community. We had the odd luxury of being able to draw on an historical shared experience to buoy us, given that 2020 was not the first time the school had encountered a pandemic. Trinity started in 1913; in its early years, the community faced World War I, then in 1918 the Spanish flu. At that time, government schools were closed from January to May. The then headmaster took the entire group of boarders and boarding staff to live at Austinmer [north of Wollongong]. They established a small colony of about 30 boys filling two houses and two tents. Their lives there were an early model for what happens during Trinity's outdoor education program now. Being able to draw on that as an encouraging 'shared' history was beneficial for our community. This year, given video conferencing and strong IT partners, Trinity was able to maintain community spirit alongside academic delivery. Our teachers commented about how much of their energy and inspiration comes from engaging with students, and it might surprise parents and students just how much teachers' curiosity,



The pandemic has inspired new approaches to caring and supporting one another.

excitement and engagement with learning is sparked by those interactions. Remote learning reinforced Trinity as a learning community. Parents, students and staff amazed me in their capacity to support one another. It was a reminder that the boys are remarkably agile. They adapted to new routines and ways of learning with greater speed than we would have anticipated. By the end of the first day of remote learning, the school was

receiving feedback from parents. They embraced this unexpected world and stories began to flood in: one year 11 student ran a Quad – our daily assembly – via chat with a few of his mates. Parents set up remote learning agreements and 'F45-style' fitness areas. The ability for us to then share these 'remote learning hacks' encouraged our community and was a vital demonstration of growth, support and character among students. Without in any way

downplaying the tragedy wrought by the pandemic in so many lives, I am confident that the requirements of learning from home earlier this year has positives. In these times of tumult and disruption, we have had to be both resilient and agile, adapting to continually shifting circumstances and finding new ways to educate and operate. Tim Bowden is the headmaster of Trinity Grammar School.





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'Big sisters' step up during lockdown

Remote schooling invited a new kind of buddy program.

BY MEGAN WHITFIELD

When home learning began, schools had a short window in which to adapt to new methods of teaching and classroom dynamics, balancing education with maintaining connection.

For Ravenswood School for Girls, what resulted was a student-driven 'big sister' buddy system that fostered such a sturdy sense of community the school is continuing the program now that it has re-opened its doors.

During school holidays before home learning, some students involved in the big sister program had been working towards an idea for the annual youth global problem-solving event, the Community Problem Solving Program International, which sees teams of children at schools around the world select a local or international challenge and build a response.

Faced with the prospect of a term without their peers in class, temporary closure of extracurricular activities and socialising needing to take a new form, they realised they had an



'Hey, sister!' For students at Ravenswood School for Girls, staying connected was important.

opportunity to reach out and help their own community.

Supervising teacher Sharon Shapiro says the key to the program's success has been letting students drive it.

"The students were concerned that girls around the school could become isolated," she says. "They wanted to be able to offer support like an older sibling could ... I'm just there to offer suggestions and guide them if they're stuck."

Meeting at least once a week, the project sees volunteer years 8 and

9 students paired with students in years 5 and 6 based on similar interests and strengths. From there, it is up to the students what they discuss and how they approach sessions. Originally, there were 10 big sisters; this has since grown to 23.

The benefits were demonstrated immediately. "We set up time each week [with the big sisters] to discuss what has worked well and what the students had been up to," explains Ms Shapiro. "After only two weeks, the feedback was the

girls were loving it."

Activities included online quizzes and games. Some started baking together [virtually], and a couple started 'isolation activity books', but what was particularly special was the strong connections students shared, building a safe environment to broach more vulnerable topics like mindfulness, emotional resources for coping in uncertain times and how to reconnect with friends despite distance.

Ms Shapiro says parents noticed

a shift in the participants as a result, with one parent, Sarah, noticing excitement return to her daughter.

"Big sisters could not have arrived at a better time for my year 6 student," says Sarah. "Isolated from her wider family circle [and] her friends ... I watched my strong and vibrant daughter withdraw into herself."

"Big sisters matched my daughter with a year 8 student. Right from the get-go I saw a change in my daughter's demeanour. After each call, my daughter excitedly told me of the new things she had learnt, the new books she planned to try and when she would next get to speak to her 'big sister'."

If the school needed any more confirmation that the program was working, it came from the students opting to maintain the online sessions as classes resumed.

"Even back at school, some students were finding it lonely," says Ms Shapiro. "We're back in classrooms, but we're still physically distancing. Classes look different [to pre-COVID times]."

"We have lots of counsellors around who can help but, being students themselves, the Big Sisters thought they may be more approachable."

"We've decided to continue online, to keep it a really special time for everyone involved."



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The other learning essentials

The characteristics and qualities that helped schools to thrive during the COVID-19 crisis are those that need to remain in focus.



BY PHIL LAMBERT

It is interesting how a common word can suddenly be elevated in its importance and impact in the common lexicon. This happened about a decade ago in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis when the word “austerity” soon became code in many countries for the harsh economic measures that were about to be imposed by governments on their people.

The word to achieve new status in 2020 is “essential”. The first sign of its enhanced usage, which virtually occurred overnight, was the result of the stockpiling of toilet paper, rice and flour as a result of home isolation orders. These items became known as essential goods.

Then frontline health workers and those whose ongoing employment at their worksites was crucial for survival in the midst of the pandemic, such as supermarket staff and long-haul truck drivers, were deemed essential workers.

Who qualified as an essential worker beyond the obvious was contestable. Cogent arguments could also be made why it might be essential to have your child learn at school rather than online at home. Teachers have always been – and, one suspects, always will be – considered essential.

The need for a focus on essential learning then emerged as remote and in-school responses became



The pandemic has provided an opportunity to reimagine the core elements of the school curriculum.

both strategic and time-sensitive. This was followed by the state’s curriculum and registration authority granting schools “flexibility” to determine what and how to repackage and prioritise syllabus content, thereby signalling what many have recognised for a good while now – some syllabus dot points are more essential than others.

It is important to point out here

“The COVID-19 crisis with all its challenges presents a unique opportunity.”

that essential learning is not a new concept. Tasmania explored a curriculum framework structured around the concept in the early 2000s.

More recently, the report on the review of NSW curriculum proposed that a “paring back” of content was required and that a focus on what is essential was needed to address the state’s overcrowded curriculum. The

word “essential” appears no less than 89 times in the report.

Determining what is essential in and across curricula is not as easy as it sounds when specifying what needs to be retained, what can be comfortably jettisoned and what “new needs” are to be added.

One stakeholder’s essential is different to another stakeholder’s essential. Education has possibly more advocacy groups than any other field and lobbying is intense when curriculum reform or revision processes are under way.

There are some principles that can help us distinguish between the essential and the non-essential, but that is for another time when COVID-19 is consuming less of everyone’s time, energy and effort.

However, the COVID-19 crisis with all its challenges presents a unique opportunity. The emergency response in April-May placed the governing bodies of schools, their teachers, their students and their parents/carers in an unprecedented high-pressure situation.

It also brought into sharp focus the “other essentials” that are more often and explicitly identifiable in school values, mottos and vision statements than in syllabuses.

The extent to which students successfully exhibited or demonstrated essential competencies, beliefs and dispositions such as trust, resilience, respect, hope, diligence, reliability and agency during this time should provide valuable insight into how well-equipped our young people are for life beyond school and home.

Before we snap back to what was, or transition to a new normal, let’s consider the attention we give to and the value we place on these other essentials. The opportunity to do this won’t last for very long.

Dr Phil Lambert is a curriculum adviser to the OECD Education 2030 initiative and Adjunct Professor at the University of Sydney. He is an internationally recognised school education expert. This article was first published by the Association of Independent Schools of NSW (aisnsw.edu.au).

How Pymble navigated the pandemic

Staying home meant reaching out at this Sydney girls’ school.

A car park is the definition of ordinary. However, during the NSW stay-home COVID-19 months earlier this year, car parks were sites of community outreach; central drop-off and pickup points for supplies.

Volunteers cooked meals and delivered groceries; educators ferried equipment between vehicles and on to isolated or disadvantaged students, and many

families donated whatever they could spare.

During the April school holidays, at the height of ‘stay home’, Dr Kate Hadwen, the principal of Pymble Ladies’ College, could be found at her school car park, thanking people for donations and assisting in the turnaround of goods.

From Pymble, meals, groceries and treats were dropped to the doorsteps of the housebound, including a Sydney women’s community shelter network.

Volunteers undertook similar forms of assistance in suburbs and regions nationwide. However, when you have a student, staff, parent and alumni network as



Pymble’s Dr Kate Hadwen.

Keeping moving was a priority ... Siblings and parents joined in at home.

large as Pymble’s, size really helps.

With 2200 students from kindergarten to year 12, Pymble is the largest private girls’ school in the Southern Hemisphere.

In the early stages of the pandemic, at public, Catholic and independent schools, teachers moved learning essentials online, sharpened their video production skills and prepared to pivot to live-streaming classes.

Pymble was well-prepared for the switch to learning from home, said Dr Hadwen, and while schools remained open for students whose parents needed to work outside the home, some also had hundreds of boarders to support as they headed home or to stay with guardians.

Alongside virtual classes, schools’ creative arts and design courses went online. Innovative virtual sports also encouraged students to maintain training regimes during lockdown.

“At school, our girls usually average 4000 to 5000 steps each day just walking between classrooms and engaging in active play,” says Pymble’s coaching development director Simon Pennington, so keeping moving was a priority.

Siblings and parents joined in at home, with sessions regularly attracting hundreds of participants.

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THE
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Emotional rescue beyond lockdown

Students, staff and parents are learning to better navigate uncertainty and worry.



BY DANIELLE EINSTEIN

Following the NSW lockdown earlier this year, Julie* returned to school to find her friends had expanded their group through online chats. She wasn't comfortable with the larger group.

Her father's work was threatened and she hadn't kept up with maths online. Her teachers liaised with her mother when Julie performed poorly, but she didn't feel comfortable talking about financial worries at school.

Julie's mother, Emily*, upset by the inability to visit family in the UK, was running through scenarios in her mind, calculating financial and health risks. Her natural inclination had always been to head off problems by anticipating and planning.

As a clinical psychologist researching and providing interventions around anxiety and depression, it became apparent during the first NSW lockdown that, despite a flood of information and tips, many of us do not grasp the psychology behind worry, uncertainty and the unexpected.

One issue with managing uncertainty is that, as humans, we prefer shortcuts. We would rather distract ourselves and rely on others than think for ourselves.

For many years, schools have sought to increase certainty in response to anxiety in students. This has not augured well; before COVID-19 appeared, students completing their education reported their primary emotional concern being a tendency to worry.

Now, when facing renewed instability, school leaders, parents and teachers may believe it is their responsibility to provide reassurance. Yet, for those troubled by worry, an overreliance on reassurance can be shown to exacerbate anxiety.

This conundrum is the reason 'Chilled and Considerate' was developed. The initiative is based on research projects into managing uncertainty conducted with schools in NSW and the ACT.

Chilled and Considerate programs target the wellbeing of teachers, students and parents. The overall aim is to create systemic change in the way the community speaks about and responds to uncertainty and adversity; becoming educated in the language, model and traps which lead to panic contagion,



increased worry and compromised wellbeing.

Schools that have taken up the programs say it is refreshing to see the 'language of the unexpected' transform school culture and provide students with the sense that they can comprehend, select and flex their strategies. They are no longer swept away by their newsfeed.

The program's underlying model of uncertainty was published in 2014 and has been widely cited by international experts. It assists students, staff and parents to manage uncertainty rather than relying on reassurance from others. Each strand teaches participants to 'catch out' and tame one another's thoughts, while leaving individuals to better manage their own emotions through self-regulation.

Key learnings are delivered using separate elements which cater to each audience: a two-hour teacher wellbeing module, a program delivered by teachers for years 5-6, programs for senior students, and a 90-minute online course for parents.

TEACHER WELLBEING

Early in her career, Caitlin*, a wellbeing lead teacher, received

cognitive behavioural treatment for anxiety. Despite already undertaking a master's degree in wellbeing, she felt the information in the Chilled and Considerate program transformed her understanding of uncertainty and worry. She learnt for the first time about the subtleties of our reactions to uncertainty, now had the resources to teach these concepts to her students, and

“Chilled and Considerate programs target the wellbeing of teachers, students and parents.”

enjoyed the home-room discussions that emerged from the program.

Robert, a school director of wellbeing, says he couldn't help but smile when students later used program terminology they had learnt to explain the reactions of characters in a text. He felt it showed a depth of understanding.

At his school, boys had begun the program independently during lockdown in term two, then face to face. He says they are well prepared for term three.

YEARS 5-6

Using Chilled and Considerate with years 5-6 helps them learn to think clearly and develop emotional literacy. Students compare worries to 'bubbles emitted from a bubble machine' (akin to social media and the news). Using this analogy, we can choose to jump up and pop the bubbles, although we usually choose the wrong one and come back to the ground with a thud.

SENIOR SCHOOL

'Uncertainty bombs, berries and weeds' dominate the metaphors in these programs. Students learn to discriminate which problems to prepare for and which to leave. They follow specific strategies to train themselves to ignore the latter. They weigh up risks and catch themselves when prompted to act irrationally and impulsively to rumour, thoughts and social media.

These lessons apply to uncertainty in other areas of life, too. While anxious thoughts are

Programs are helping school communities deal with anxiety.

the topic of discussion, managing emotions is an individual, reflective task. Students use self-compassion, strengths, 'happiness muscles' and their 'go-to' neurotransmitters to reflect on how they manage themselves in times of stress and during lockdown. They also focus on the personality inclinations that compromise resilience and challenge them.

At a participating school, mention was made of a teenager prone to anger who commented that he "didn't really get emotions" or "other people's views", but had since realised that others "aren't like me ... I've learnt more about classmates from this experience".

PARENT AND FAMILY WELLBEING

After completing the online parent course, Emily says she's learnt about the 'thought traps' she fell into and recognised what she was looking for in conversations with family in the UK, family in Melbourne and her friends. She feels able to decide when to use specific meditations and exercises, and finds them beneficial – even though they had not immediately appealed.

Julie says she can now differentiate between anxious thoughts that are justified and those that are not. She has learnt to better regulate her feelings, questions how many hours she spent on Netflix during lockdown and is trying to balance screen use with other pursuits that can enhance oxytocin release. She also reports having altered her goals for 2020.

Dr Danielle Einstein is a clinical psychologist and leading expert in managing uncertainty. For more, see covid19chilledandconsiderate.com * The names of program participants have been changed.

Creating a different sort of show time

Students are having to showcase talents online to comply with restrictions.

BY ARIANNA LUCENTE

For performing arts students, the pandemic has done more than disrupt academic studies. At a time when they might be auditioning or rehearsing for end-of-term shows, the lockdown and social distancing measures have put a dent in such plans.

"All of our key performance events were postponed," says Eunice Chung Lee, head of school (operations) at the Australian Performing Arts Grammar School (APGS). "That's a big hit for creative kids because they really thrive and work diligently towards putting on a performance."

The school switched to learning via Zoom for their academic and performing arts program in dance, musical theatre, drama, visual art and music.

"When you're teaching a class and you don't have an end goal, it can lose that sense of momentum," Ms Chung Lee says. "We really wanted to put something on that was both thoughtful and authentic to our students."

The school put together an end-



The show must go on: students are performing for virtual audiences.

of-semester video showcase of dance pieces, drama monologues, music ensembles and other items that were professionally filmed and edited by a videographer. Instead of their usual end-of-term shows, they are planning four shows for the end of the year.

"What we hope to have is a slightly smaller, reduced audience if we are allowed to do that," she adds. "If not, the students will perform to a virtual audience."

Challenges during remote learning included technical issues

with sound, finding space at home to dance, and coming up with solutions for students without internet access. However, the additional time allowed students to step outside their comfort zones and explore other talents.

"It has stretched our students creatively because it forced them to adjust to a new way of learning and explore different techniques and skills."

Some students have started learning another instrument, exploring other performing arts

streams, and experimenting with songwriting and music composition software.

"If you don't take these sorts of opportunities and embrace them, you'll stay quite stagnant."

APGS took a staggered approach to returning to on-site schooling. While academic classes stayed on Zoom before slowly returning to the Glebe campus, getting the students back to performing arts practice was a priority.

"When the students came back, there was a great sense of

community because they were able to do what they loved best, which is creating together."

Ms Chung Lee says adhering to social distancing rules has been relatively easy. Students stand further apart when doing monologues or improvisation, are no longer doing partner work, and practice in larger spaces where there's better ventilation.

The school is no longer running tours or open mornings for prospective students, but have a virtual tour available online. The enrolment process involves applicants submitting two contrasting video pieces for the audition, and a Zoom or phone interview with the head of school.

"We already had an option for prospective students to either provide us with an online video audition so rolling that in to suit the current situation was actually quite seamless."

However, the online interview can feel a bit more intimate than an in-person meeting.

"They're looking into your life and you're looking into their home life. It can be quite confronting at the beginning but the plus side is that I've felt it was a lot more real."

Ms Chung Lee says the quality of teaching has lifted in recent months. "It's been a really lovely journey to see so many of our teachers invest more into the kids and I'd like to keep that going."

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Fine minds examine today's dilemmas

The first International Ethics Olympiad saw Australian students competing with philosophical mastery.



Santa Sabina "Olympians" (left to right): Sarah George, Rachel Frecker, Sophia Juarez, Andrea Murillo, Naomi Ghosen and Catherine Ryan.

BY FRAN MOLLOY

As hospital intensive care units across the world care for COVID-19 patients, medical staff have sometimes faced difficult moral choices, with reports of doctors weeping in corridors as they determined which patients would receive priority treatment.

Groups of senior high school students from three continents recently considered these dilemmas – pressed to allocate a ventilator to either a 20-year-old or a 70-year-old – in one of the scenarios discussed at the first International Ethics Olympiad.

The international contest, held via Zoom in June, saw students joined by subject specialists from nine time zones.

The event could not have come at a more fitting time: more than 500,000 people across the world have died so far from the COVID-19 outbreak.

The pandemic's broader consequences include mass isolation, economic collapse and severely restricted international travel, closing off many opportunities for collaboration. Yet global co-operation is more desperately needed than ever.

Dr Matthew Wills, the founder and moderator of the International Ethics Olympiad, says the contest emphasises civility, clear reasoning and teamwork as groups work together, building on each other's arguments to form the best possible response to an issue.

ETHICAL THEORY

How did the student teams choose which patient to save? The Canadians relied on the ethical theory of utilitarianism to choose the younger patient.

"Lives that can be saved more easily and have a greater possibility of being saved are worth more than saving someone

who is very old or very fragile with many symptoms apart from COVID-19," argued the spokesperson for Team Toronto.

Asked the Australian spokesperson, a student from Sydney's Santa Sabina College: "Would you consider changing your position if you considered the concept of 'deservance'? What if the 20-year-old was a notorious criminal and the 70-year-old a Nobel Peace Prize winner?"

REASONABLE FOLK

Three Australian schools – Adelaide's St Peter's Girls School, The King's School Parramatta and Strathfield's Santa Sabina – joined schools from China and Canada at the international meet.

Each of the Australian schools had competed in earlier rounds of senior student Olympiads held between Australian and New Zealand teams.

"Students defend whatever position they believe is right and win by showing that they have thought more carefully, deeply and perceptively about the cases in question," says Dr Wills.

At the June Olympiad, St Peter's won gold, Team Toronto took silver and King's was awarded the bronze. One of the US-based judges commented, anonymously, that they felt the format holds huge possibilities for strengthening the global community by "building a network of reasonable, thoughtful people in all countries".

For year 12 King's student Tom Cornelius, "the whole discussion around ethics and philosophy is intriguing because these two topics form the fundamentals for what we perceive as meaning in life".

"Questions of morality and humanity explored on a daily basis always have multiple perspectives that aren't necessarily right or wrong," he says. "As such, numerous opinions can be formed

which interests someone like me who likes forming a definite view to topics like these. Ethics requires you to be open-minded and consider all the possible viewpoints in the discussion, even ones that may seem extreme or crazy."

SMALL BEGINNINGS

Dr Wills began Australian ethics contests in 2013, which have grown to become national senior student events, with a separate national competition for middle-school students.



"Students get rewarded for respectful dialogue and building on each other's arguments."

Unlike the upcoming Tokyo Olympics, where videoconferencing just won't cut it, moral debates are tailor-made for screen-based contests. Australia's next Middle School Ethics Olympiad takes place in November.

Kathryn Fraser, head of academic enrichment and extension at The King's School,

has entered teams in senior and middle school Olympiads for the past two years.

"The opportunity for our boys to explore and solve difficult problems using thoughtful analysis and reasoning with students from other schools, and in this case across the globe, is invaluable," she says. "They are able to wrestle with real-life and timely ethical issues affecting society, hopefully giving them more experience and tools to deal with these difficult decisions in the future through respectful, creative and rigorous discussion."

MEDICAL TREATMENT

At 17, Cassandra Callender was legally a minor. However, her decision, supported by her parents, to refuse chemotherapy treatment for Hodgkin's lymphoma was not recognised in the US state of Connecticut, where she lived with her family.

In 2015, her case was debated by doctors and bureaucrats and a decision was made by a judge to remove her from her parents' care, have her hospitalised and cancer treatment administered.

Her decisions and those of authorities were among several complex dilemmas addressed by senior school students from Australia and Shanghai earlier in the year. That event marked the first time a school from China has participated in an ethics Olympiad with an Australian school.

"There was a sense throughout the event that we were involved in doing something pioneering and important," Dr Wills says. "Scores and medallions mattered far less than the possibility of bridging the geographical and cultural gap that lies between China and Australia," he notes, adding that the Chinese students at that April contest demonstrated skills in philosophy and ethics that would put many older students to shame.

CONTRADICTION BELIEFS

Santa Sabina College year 12 student Sophia Juarez, a member of the school's Olympiad team, studies philosophy as part of the International Baccalaureate curriculum.

It has given her a framework to analyse and shift some of her own beliefs, she says.

"I wanted to be able to hold a well-informed opinion on some of these global issues I was hearing about, but I didn't know how to [do that] on my own," she says.

Sophia is one of 30 students in the school's philosophy club. "Each week, we focus on a particular topical case study: for instance, the distribution of resources amid the COVID-19 pandemic; questions of what we eat, and interacting with prominent and contemporary philosophers like Peter Singer," she says. "Our teachers then lead us to consider multiple perspectives and critically discuss and analyse positions."

Year 12 King's student Daniel Gu says an understanding of philosophy and ethics are deeply important. "With so many varying perspectives and stakeholders in every scenario, having a broad mindset and understanding would facilitate one to make more informed and considerate decisions," he says.

Honing an ability to respectfully discuss contentious questions, consider viewpoints and make thoughtful decisions in a collaborative way is a lifelong skill.

Inspiration for the Olympiads came from the US 'Ethics Bowl' competitions, which have taken place at American colleges since 1993 and are highly competitive, says Dr Wills.

However, the competitions Australians participate in are gentler. "Students get rewarded for respectful dialogue and building on each other's arguments," he says.