

Specialist Teachers for Specialist Learners

Annie McGuire, Head of Middle School

As I stroll through the Middle School building, it is amazing to consider the changes our year 5 and 6 program has undergone over the past six years.

Not so long ago the entire year 5 and 6 cohort was in the main Middle School building, along with years 7 to 9. It is hard to imagine!

In 2011 the Year 5/6 Centre was added to the St Leonard's landscape, providing a more flexible space and true home for this particular age and stage. Students and staff in this area have thrived in the new building, enjoying the break out spaces and flexible classrooms, led by our Head of Years 5 and 6, Anna Adams. Her understanding and knowledge of students at this age, and her openness to new ideas enabled this large shift to be a great success.

The winds of change began to swirl again in early 2015 as we entered our third year of iPads for every student in Middle School and developed an increasing understanding that students in years 5 and 6 learn differently. Children at this age have a real thirst for knowledge, driven by the wealth of information

available to them instantly and at any time online. The life of an 11 year-old now is very different to that of their parents and teachers at the same age, and accordingly the old ways of teaching are unable to meet modern year 5 and 6 students' potential abilities and understandings. We quickly recognised the need for a change in both the structure of this age and stage and the model of teaching.

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Principal Stuart Davis began exploring the idea of introducing specialist teachers across all of years 5 and 6. Why couldn't we have mathematicians at the front of year 5 and 6 Maths classes? Our students love to be challenged in Maths, Science, Literature, History and Geography; why wouldn't we encourage a greater depth of understanding by providing an expert to lead the learning?

Anna Adams embraced this opportunity and quickly began to discuss and debate this with her team of



teachers, while other stakeholders within the College were also given the opportunity to discuss the organisation of this sort of model and the impact it would have on the teaching in this area and the rest of the Middle School curriculum.

As planning continued, the search for specialist staff commenced. We knew what we were looking for: teachers to lead change in each learning area across years 5 and 6, as well as teachers who had an absolute passion for their subject areas and a love of this particular age and stage. The search was conducted both internally and externally, and the calibre of applicants was simply amazing.

Five key appointments who have had significant positive impact on the initial successes of the model are Anna Adams as Head of Humanities, Siti Kim as Head of Primary Science, Christina Klopfer as Head of Primary English, Daniel Mackay as Learning Support and English Teacher, and Merrilee Jongasma as Head of Primary Mathematics. These leaders meet with their curriculum teams and Heads of Learning to coordinate the scope and sequence of teaching and learning.

This planning is based on informed contemporary understandings, such as the implementation of visible thinking routines covered as a part of the Project Zero program from Harvard University. One goal is to ensure our children are critical thinkers and problem solvers, rather than rote learners with little understanding of the learning process. In pursuit of this, two new subjects added to our year 5 and 6 curriculum are Critical Thinking and Head, Heart and Soul. Mark Hodges designed and teaches Critical Thinking within years 5 and 6. "In a world of rapid technological change, critical thinking is crucial for the future career prospects of today's children," he said. The course encourages the development of intellectual independence and equips our students with the ability to reason with precision. Our Head, Heart and Soul course explores the ideas of ethical understandings as well as personal and social capabilities. Both courses challenge our children's thinking and require them to evaluate other perspectives.

Under the previous year 5 and 6 model, students spent the majority of their learning time in the same classroom with the same teacher. Now our year 5/6 students move around the College for specialist

classes; they learn Science from a specialist Science Teacher in a science lab, and Maths from a specialist Maths Teacher in a maths room. Liam Murphy (year 6) comments, “The enjoyable things of the new system are not having one teacher all day and even moving classes makes it more engaging.” As well as easing the transition into secondary school, this allows for the delivery of a deeper curriculum, providing access to specialist educators and equipment and challenging students to actively engage with their learning in a way that better meets the educational needs of today’s year 5 and 6 students. Sara Milenkovic (year 6) was in year 5 at St Leonard’s last year and was asked her perspective of the new model. “I think the new model is great; we have new teachers for each subject and because that teacher is amazing in that field it is much easier if you have really specific questions,” she said. Her thoughts reflect the overall response from our students, which has been positive and upbeat.

In addition to curriculum changes, the organisational structure of years 5 and 6 has been reimaged to



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provide greater pastoral care, delivered by mentors. Mentoring in years 5 and 6 is organised by Houses, with one year 5 and one year 6 mentor per House. This has allowed for a real sense of community to develop, with one mentor describing their House as their own “little family”. During mentor time year 5 and 6 students work side-by-side, breaking down barriers between the year levels and allowing new friendships to be established outside of regular class groupings. As each mentor works with a small group of students, strong relationships have formed between mentors and children. Newman House mentor Daniel Mackay commented that “the students know where my office is and often come in during recess and lunch or at other times throughout the day to have a chat or ask questions.” This feeling of connection and belonging is a significant part of the new model in years 5 and 6, and essential to the wellbeing and success of students at this age.

The joy our teachers experience with this wonderful age and stage of Middle School is evident as you walk into the Year 5/6 Centre. Conversations about the next lesson, homework or what students are having for lunch fill the corridors and the energy is incredibly positive. A spark has been lit within this section of our Middle School and we look forward to the learning and growing we will see over this first year and into the future.