



After the fire

*How Middle Kinglake Primary is recovering
from Black Saturday*

Just seven weeks after Black Saturday, when the worst fires in Australia's history destroyed their school and their lives, the school community of Middle Kinglake Primary was back together again in a safe learning environment.

In the last week of Term 1, the school's 124 students, seven teachers and various other valued staff members moved into temporary buildings right next door to where the school once nestled under gum trees.

The school was totally destroyed by the firestorm on 7th February and the school is now housed in relocatable units. There are six classrooms, a staff/office building and a library/music building which also doubles as the Before and After School Care room.

When *Education Today* asked Middle Kinglake Principal, Janette Cook, how the first week unfolded, she said the students, families and staff were all just so pleased to be back together again.

"That first week was certainly a time for rebuilding relationships, swapping stories and memories and re-establishing learning and classroom routines," she said.

After Australia's worst natural disaster, the Victorian Government's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development was committed to the reconstruction of schools in the areas of Middle Kinglake, Marysville and Strathewen and kindergartens at Marysville, Flowerdale and Kinglake.

Education Minister, Bronwyn Pike, said families wanted the option of schooling on the mountain as soon as possible and re-opening the schools destroyed by the fires was an important step on the road to rebuilding those communities.

"I have seen how important it is to provide options to keep the communities together, to help them draw strength from each other and rebuild together," she said.

Community support

For Janette Cook, principal at Middle Kinglake Primary since May 2007, there are many people to thank who helped the school get back to its normal routine.

She said the school was working its way to adding thanks and donations to its website, but this is a huge task.

Support has come in all forms, including counselling. Tradesmen donated their time, and there have been letters and cards from across Victoria, New Zealand and London. Donations for children in the school included teddy bears, stationery, books, bikes, quilts, games, drink bottles, pencils and backpacks.

"The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development moved extremely quickly to build the new facility for us, but the support from all levels has been incredible," Ms Cook said.

"As individual students, families, classes and



Top: Melanie Gibson, Brooke White and Mykaela Smith bottom: the school as it was

at school level, we have been overwhelmed by the extent of support and the diverse range of encouragement and assistance. The school community is most appreciative of the thoughts, well wishes, physical goods, services and warm hugs that we've received from everyone."

All of the school's musical instruments, along with those owned or leased by students and those belonging to its music teachers, were lost but

due to the generosity of the music industry, Ms Cook is happy to say many of the instruments have been replaced.

Settling in

On a local level, the Grounds Committee of the township's Memorial Park offered Middle Kinglake Primary the site to house its temporary buildings. The local football club is also helping



with rebuilding and a working bee was held recently to install playground equipment donated by children's charity Variety Australia.

"Eventually we will plant bulbs and vegetables in planter boxes around the area to make it look a bit more homely," Ms Cook said.

The first week of Term 2 was a busy one. A memorial service was held on Wednesday, 22nd April and ANZAC celebrations were held on Friday, 24th April... ironically the ceremony took place indoors when torrential rain made the planned outdoor ceremony impossible.

Even the threat of snow on a chilly Saturday morning didn't stop Middle Kinglake Primary students from returning to the school to attend the Lions Club Anzac Day service, something they have done for the past three years. Many of the staff, parents and grandparents were rugged-up, keeping warm in waterproof jackets sent from the Alpine School, and many of the school's students came straight from Auskick (AFL for juniors).

All of these community based activities serve as subtle signs that the healing process is moving forward.

"I noticed at least one girl was wearing her school uniform but still had on her football boots," Ms Cook recalled. "The weather was dreadful but the children all stood extremely patiently and respectfully, while they waited to sing the National Anthem."

As they hung their heads to remember the fallen, many Australians, not just those at Middle Kinglake Primary School, spared a thought for those who battled nature on Black Saturday.

Yet despite the tragedy and loss inflicted by the fires, a loss which one of the students says



From top: Middle Kinglake Primary rises again; students listen to an ANZAC Day presentation; school's in again

'broke them apart', the school community is looking to the future with optimism.

"The new classrooms are beautiful, brand new and bigger," said one student.

Another says: "The teachers are awesome!"

Other comments included: "Everyone is trying to make it back to how it used to be." "We didn't like the fires, but we are still very lucky." "It's a friendly community." And finally with a heart filled with hope: "There are lots of smiles." To follow the school's progress, read student's comments or thank you notes visit its website on www.mkpks.vic.edu.au