

From 34 to 400 students

Principal Matt Dodd relishes the task of growing his school, Balcombe Grammar

Each year, the NEiTA Foundation and the Australian Scholarships Group (ASG) supports the attendance of just one recipient from its National Awards program to represent Australia at the annual International Space Camp. This year Matt Dodd joined about 80 other teachers from around the world.

The head of the newly-established Balcombe Grammar School at Mt Martha in Victoria was invited to attend an international workshop on data logging in Sacramento back in 2004 and he was looking forward to meeting the expert teachers from a wide range of countries at Space Camp.

"The camp is set up for US Teachers of the Year along with international representatives from countries including the United Arab Emirates, Korea, Asia and Europe and that is most exciting. Not necessarily everyone attending is a scientist but everyone is passionate about education," Matt said.

He was clearly excited about meeting teachers from around the world and exchanging ideas and for him the experience was all about sharing knowledge. "While there will be many opportunities to enjoy rocket science, the chance to meet other teachers and discuss issues surrounding education, is the best aspect of the trip," he said.

And the dynamics of quality teaching is something which Matt knows a great deal about. He has worked for more than 16 years in state, catholic and independent schools.

Balcombe Grammar had 34 students in Years 4 to 7 in 2007 and has grown to over 160 students from Prep to Year 8 in 2008. Matt said while he relished the small community atmosphere, it was important to attend conferences and seminars wherever possible to acquire fresh ideas.

"In getting the school started, we had to start off site, we had to wait for planning to be approved for our permanent site so I caught the bus each day with the students to our temporary site at Casey Grammar, which gave me lots of opportunities to talk to parents and children and gave us the luxury of starting this year with a really solid, shared, vision for the school," he said.

"I got the opportunity to talk to children about how the school should develop and what sort of teachers they wanted.

"They said 'we want teachers who are professionally presented, have a sense of humour and a good knowledge of their subject' which is not a bad place to start really.



Matt Dodd and Balcombe Grammar Students

'The secret of any craft is getting to really know people!'

The students and their parents had a lot of input into the development of the school as well," he said.

Earlier this year, Matt participated in a trip with students along the Gippsland Rail Trail, meeting with children from a diverse range of other schools. The idea was to encourage the students to work together and to think for themselves.

"I think that children respond to things that are authentic," Matt says. "If you say 'do it because you have to', they will baulk but if you say 'we need to organise breakfast for everyone on a tight budget', then they get excited about it and become more self motivated.

"The children made many phone calls to local businesses and worked out where they could spend their money wisely – their clever use of the camp budget allowed them to organise several meals at restaurants after a hard day's cycling.

"I am very fortunate that in my own community I had the opportunity to start a new P-12 school; we can build culture from the ground up. When the Board interviewed me and presented their vision for the school, it was

in line with my own values and ideas. Hopefully I have added value and am giving flesh to the Board's vision.

"Our teachers have also had the opportunity to add to the vision for Balcombe Grammar School through their diverse range of skills and experience. They share the belief that forming productive relationships with students is the central element to creating a good school."

But if you want to know what really ignites enthusiasm on a professional level, Matt's heart felt passion is definitely igniting his students' love of learning. One tool Matt uses to inspire his students is through the clever use of technology across the school.

"I think that there are opportunities with technology to engage students in a medium with which they are familiar – students have become increasing reliant on visual forms of information and we should embrace this, but I do think that fundamentally education is still about understanding the child you are teaching and forming a significant relationship with that person," he says.

Matt's enthusiasm for Physics and Science has inspired his students and has also provided cutting edge technology and problem solving techniques and resources for fellow teachers.

His innovative techniques have resulted in several publications and led to his invitation to attend the international conference on data logging in 2004

Matt has also introduced cross-age tutoring between schools through programs to develop links and exchange teaching techniques. He looks forward to the rapid growth of Balcombe Grammar

"One of the joys of developing a school from Prep to Year 12 is the ability to use staff across all year levels," he says. "Quite often, one of our Senior Science teachers will visit a primary class to dissect hearts or use digital microscopes; the students love the chance to ask questions and explore scientific ideas.

"I am looking forward to the next stage of building and for me that means expanding Balcombe Grammar from 150 to 400 students next year.

"This expansion will mean we will be bringing in more staff and expertise into the school; it is very exciting.

"We can't predict the lives that our children might have in the future but we can ensure they have a range of choices and that they are comfortable and confident adults. As teachers, this is our role."