



Ars est vita – ‘the arts is life’

Bill Minnis



For a Year 6–11 student with a passion for dance, music or visual arts, and wondering about secondary school choices or a place to finish their education, The Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School (VCASS) website would be a good place to start looking.

Of the thousands of Australian school websites www.vcass.vic.edu.au is a standout. It's beautifully designed, easy to navigate and lays out in great detail what a prospective student will experience – and be expected to achieve.

The website's 'Entry' tab is the first hurdle. Prospective VCASS students will soon realise that this is a serious commitment – it's not at all like trailing around the local high school with parents on Open Day. Of potential students who do work their way through the online application process, around 450 will be invited to audition in August (visual arts applicants must submit a portfolio of work and are interviewed). And no more than 60 will be offered a place.

While VCASS is a Victorian government school, all Australian residents are eligible

to audition and there are up to 20 places for international students. Bi-partisan government funding of \$6000 per student pays for tuition for 100 dancers and 120 musicians. As well, students from the Australian Ballet School, Gymnastics Victoria, Diving Victoria and the National Institute of Circus Arts attend the school for their school studies, adding yet more energy to the creative mixing pot.

Colin Simpson, a 14-year veteran of the school and principal since 2004, says: "The school was established in 1978 to feed students



into the Victorian College of the Arts. At the outset it was a funny little school with no building of its own.” That changed in 2008 when the school became independent of the VCA and a year later moved into a purpose designed building in Miles Street, Southbank, in Melbourne’s arts and entertainment precinct.

Sited close to the off ramp connecting Princes Highway to busy Kingsway, the school’s slightly Art Deco Showbiz façade is separated from the car parking spaces by a narrow grass strip dotted with a few little trees and there’s an uninspiring patch of undeveloped land across the road. But it’s a different matter inside; this is a building ideal for its dual purposes of conventional learning in tandem with the performance spaces, practice rooms and workshops necessary for the students to develop their artistic talents.

Is VCASS a school where conventional school takes second place to dance, music and visual arts training? This earns an emphatic ‘No’ from

***‘I have a school of happy, busy children’
Colin Simpson***

principal Simpson. He says: “Our academic results are right up there with Melbourne’s better performing state schools like McKinnon Secondary College, University High School and Balwyn High School.” [All four recorded near perfect results in terms of secondary school certificates awarded in 2012 and similar outcomes in combined university/TAFE further education destinations (MySchool; accessed 23.4.14)].

The School’s ICSEA profile is, not unexpectedly, skewed towards the upper middle (27%) and top quarter (57%) but Simpson emphasises that talent is what counts at audition time and there is no weighting for academic progress.

“We are looking for commitment and talent,” he says. “We have the poorest and the wealthiest.

We take all types... even the child that may have behaviour issues; most settle down and work hard because they are doing what they want to do in an environment where they feel comfortable. Our NAPLAN scores indicate that many of our students do better here than they might do at a more conventional school.” He adds: “It can come as something of a shock for a student coming from a school where their dance or music talent shines to discover that at VCASS they have to work hard to stand out.”

It’s a very long school day for everyone at the school, especially for the dancers who often start at 7.30 am. After the standard nine school periods, three periods of dance, music or visual arts finish at 5.30 pm. And for many students there is significant travel time to make the day even longer. One group takes the 60-minute train ride from Geelong, while a Year 11 girl who lives in Traralgon copes successfully with a two-hour commute. With dance and music



students often performing at weekends, parents are also deeply committed.

For Simpson, one of the privileges of heading a small school (current enrolment is 341) is knowing the students personally and being in a position to mentor and guide their artistic training, school studies and wellbeing, the latter calling for sensitive handling when reality collides with a dream.

He says: "From time to time a student will come into my office to tell me that they have 'lost the passion' and don't really want to carry on with their training. When that happens we do everything we can to help find a school where they will fit in."

"Because they sacrifice so much and work so hard, it's particularly difficult when we tell a dancer that she or he can't expect to have a career in dance."

Recognising from the get go that a student may turn out not to have sufficient talent to be a professional dancer or musician, the school guides its pupils to think of their education and artistic training as two streams so that if the Plan A dream doesn't work out, they are prepared for an alternative tertiary course, a Plan B, if you like.



Colin Simpson

Colin Simpson (B. Ed, Melbourne); (Grad. Dip.Ed,Deakin) is one of Australia's leading arts educators and school leaders.

He is the co-author of the 'Art Now'series of books and has worked

extensively developing visual arts education and the teaching of contemporary art in Australian schools. As a freelance writer and consultant he has worked for The University of Melbourne, Monash University Gallery, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and AXA.

During the late 1980s he had two one man exhibitions. "I sold quite well," he says, "but I had to recognise that I was going to be good and I wanted to be better than that, so I decided to explore other passions and move on." Later, he worked as a community artist at the Redletter Press and dabbled in fringe fashion.

He has worked at the National Gallery of Victoria, The Asialink Centre at The University of Melbourne and was a visual arts writer for *The Bulletin* magazine during the mid 1990s.

He was appointed Assistant Principal of the VCA Secondary School in 2002 and Principal in 2004. He is a leading Department of Education Principal and has been ranked as a High Performing Principal. In 2009 he received the Outstanding School Leadership Award for his work in the school.

In 2012 he was nominated through The Australian Awards for Outstanding Teaching and School Leadership as Australian Secondary Principal of the Year.

