



# Bacchus Marsh Grammar in a sweet spot

*ET Staff*



**E**very day at three, Bacchus Marsh Grammar's (BMG) bussing program swings into place with military precision; 1200 students loaded and dispatched to all points in western Melbourne in under 15 minutes, remarkable.

Looking on, Principal Andrew Neal admits that logistics planning takes up a good part of his time, more than he'd like, but as far as problems go it's a good one to have.

"We're fortunate in that our catchment is directly within Melbourne's two growth corridors, there's no shortage of children," Neal says. Obviously not, the school is thriving; there are 1800 Prep-12 students of every shape and size, new facilities completed and running and an exciting 200-acre land acquisition down the road which will be home to a natural science focussed learning program.

It wasn't ever thus, when Andrew Neal arrived in 1999 BMG was stumbling, down to 300 students, struggling revenue wise and casting about for a way forward. Bacchus Marsh Grammar's Board had to ask some probing questions of itself.

"A decision had to be made as to what we were doing and how we were going to go forward, that meant making some decisions about facilities and investments which would attract students. The hard truth was that we couldn't win students without the appropriate programs. The first 10 years were challenging.

"Our strength was that there needed to be a school here given the demographics. The decision was made to extend our reach beyond Bacchus Marsh and into the western region of Melbourne, down into Altona, Point Cook, Deer Park, the whole expanse of western Melbourne

really, our bus program has been instrumental," he says.

Fortunately, BMG was relocated across town to a hilltop location in 1991. It's a favoured position from which the Macedon Ranges are viewable on a clear day, with a cool breeze that drops down from the Ballarat plain regularly blowing through the campus. It's also elevated enough to provide the school's astronomers with fabulous views of the cosmos from BMG's observatory on clear nights.

The buildings on the site had been many things in the past, including a military barracks and a grain threshing facility. Some of the original buildings remain, repurposed.

A year ago BMG bit the bullet and updated the campus' landscaping, and built two new facilities, preceded by an extension of the indoor sports building.

"We have always kept an eye on costs, the kind of arms-race-like facility building you see isn't really for us. At some stage it has to be paid for and we're conscious of keeping our fees at a reasonable level," Mr Neal says.

Case in point is the school's indoor sporting centre. An existing aluminium clad building was extended, adding high-end basketball/netball court, which now stands alongside the original.

"We decided that it was better to leave the facade on the existing building as it was and put the money indoors, the effect is quite tardis-like," Mr Neal says.

The interior houses a gym with a full complement of equipment as well as the two courts, which are used by the Bacchus Marsh community and the local pro netball team.

"The facility does generate a bit of revenue but we're more concerned

with fostering our relationship with the local community, opening the courts for everyone to use is one of the ways we do that.

The new buildings were constructed from similar materials to the existing structures as BMG's architect Peter Thompson and builders sought continuity in the campus' appearance.

The final landscaping touches are currently being completed and then the current building program on the school's main site will be done. BMG now has a brand new junior school facility, replete with environmentally friendly features like a louvre system to manage air temperature down to the rows of cheerful multi-coloured lockers.

BMG have also built a new hospitality building as the school teaches a lot of vocational subjects and is strong on home economics. Students can complete courses from William Angliss at BMG with a view to attending after leaving high school.

Next up for the school is the new facility down the road at Staunton Vale, the 200 acres BMG has acquired there was formerly a sheep farm and still has an orchard on it.

"We plan to keep some of those farming attributes, it will be a place where kids can go and do outdoor things, and we'll seek to integrate that with our teaching of natural history."





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Transport has been a huge part of BMG's success, the school commenced with a single minibus, which has since snowballed into a fleet of 27 provided by Bacchus Marsh Coaches who, understandably, are very well disposed towards BMG.

"The transport program began in earnest in 2001 and it has since blossomed, its been a huge contributing factor to our growth," Neal says.

That, and a focus on a quality generalist education combined with an accommodating approach. The school is big on pastoral care, which

is non denominational and counselling focussed.

"We're open to everyone, our focus is on supporting the students into anything they might want to do, whether it's university or a trade. We provide a quality generalist education, priced reasonably. Fees range from \$5000 to \$8000 per annum.

"There is a constant war on expense, we constantly ask ourselves what is going to deliver the best value? Will this improve educational outcomes? A lot of expenditure in education is along the lines of 'they've got one

so we have to get one", Mr Neal says.

Chromebooks were rolled out across the school this year, once again to keep costs under control. The computers have ample processing power for the tasks they're used for at a price point of around \$400 as compared to the \$1000 price tag that laptops with slightly more functionality command.

"We've only lost one since the beginning of the year." Mr Neal says.

Overall BMG's approach to learning and the school's culture has hit a note with parents looking for an education that is child focussed and inclusive.

"The fee schedule is itemised and very transparent. Our parents want to see what they're facing up front, and again it builds trust.

"Culture comes down to having a clear idea of the nature of the school that you want to end up being. We seek to be a calm, structured school. It comes from the way that teachers interact with students and the way students interact with each other. By concentrating on those little things we find it spreads into a wide acceptance of these values.

"Some of the best advice I've received was 'Worry about the little things constantly and the big things have a way of resolving themselves'", Andrew Neal says.

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