

Richmond High School: filling the hole in the donut

A much needed inner-city Melbourne school opens, **ET Staff**



When the Kennett Government came to power in a landslide in Victoria in 1992, it was confronted by a budget deficit of \$2.2 billion and swiftly instituted swingeing cuts across the public sector. State education was high on the savings list and in short order 350 schools were closed and 7000 teaching jobs terminated.

Richmond Secondary College was on the list and, despite spirited opposition by parents, staff and the local community, it was closed at the end of the school year, mothballed, and then reopened with a fanfare of political trumpets as Melbourne Girls College in January 1994.

Closing the school left Richmond families needing state secondary places for their boys with nowhere closer than Collingwood High, 3km as the crow flies from Richmond Town Hall. And that's how it's been for the last 25 years until Richmond High School's first Year 7 intake in February.

"Richmond schooling was like a donut, a circle of primary schools with a hole the middle where there should have been a co-ed secondary," Founding Principal Colin Simpson said.

His appointment was something of a homecoming, he's a Richmond native and completed Year 12 at Richmond Secondary in 1977.

Principal of The Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School from 2004 (*Education Today 2014 Vol 14 (2) Term 2*), Simpson said: "I could have done another comfortable 10 years, but when Richmond was announced I saw it as an opportunity to do something new and creative for the next decade; an opportunity to apply the lessons that I had learned at VCASS to a general school."

Long a gritty area of factories, warehouses and cramped worker's cottages, inner-suburb Richmond is gentrifying

rapidly, with real estate prices to match. And the change is reflected in how the school's students arrive in the morning.

"We have children that walk to school from the Housing Commission blocks and others dropped off by Tesla-driving dads; we have a mix of parents that need a neighbourhood secondary and others that could afford to go private but believe in state education," Simpson said.

This year's 76 students – the ratio is 2:1 boys to girls – have the Gleadell Street Campus to themselves during school hours. It's a striking multi-purpose building with four competition-grade netball courts, general purpose teaching spaces and community facilities.

The building backs onto bowling greens and Citizens Park while the Richmond Recreation Centre's eight-lane 50m pool is two-minute stroll along Gleadell Street.

Meanwhile, construction of the four-level Griffiths Street Campus is on track for completion in time for Term 1 next year, when Simpson expects around 100 new Year 7s, then 100 year-by-year until the school's anticipated 660 total across Years 7–12 is reached.

For father of four, Justin Naylor, the driving force behind *Richmond High School Choices*, the school is the successful outcome of "more than 10 years of toil and frustration."

Simpson worked to build community support through 2017, backed by an energetic school council of parents nominated by the high functioning primary schools in the area. He fronted three public meetings during the year, followed with a fourth for potential parents.

"Richmond had forgotten about what having a secondary school should mean in a community so residents that came along to the meetings were welcoming, but they asked a lot of hard questions; one that came up was 'What

are you going to do about the boys problem?’, Simpson said.

“My answer was ‘boys are never a problem’, curriculum is not gender defined and society is co-educational.”

This is reflected in the school’s ‘reasonable test’ approach to punctuality and dress. “A boy turning up late for school is never rebuked, because we don’t know what might have happened at home overnight, but he’s reminded to make it on time tomorrow,” Simpson said. “It’s much more important to encourage refusers than confront them.”

The school’s uniform collection – a smart grey shirt, with an embroidered school crest and an accent of orange at the collar and wrists, can be worn with a tie, tucked in or loose; black pants; a dress; black socks and shoes; and a baseball cap – gives students a choice of how they want to look on the day.

And a school beanie is on the way in time for winter, or if a student just feels comfortable with their hair covered.

“It’s all about wanting to make the students feel unthreatened and welcomed,” Simpson said. “We have an autistic student who needs to wear a hoodie to function and a couple more that wear earphones to keep noise to a level they can handle... and that’s OK too.

“We want school life to be a rewarding, challenging and enjoyable experience. Our ultimate aspiration for our students is that they be a force for good in whatever endeavours they choose to follow ... to make a difference.”

What he wants the school to be and how he plans to get there is laid out in his Richmond High School Brand Positioning statement. This takes a marketing approach to define what the school stands for, its values and what is expected of the students, with *Be the Best you can Be* and *Making a Difference* the key objectives.

The school crest blends five elements: leaves to represent nature; a circular mandala for community; an open book for learning; an outline of the area is used for innovation, to reflect Richmond’s industrial heritage and today’s creative start-ups; and a stylised R to bring it all together.

Though there’s only the Year 7 student cohort this year, Simpson has developed the school’s Curriculum Framework and Stu-



dent Learning Outcomes Policy through to Year 9 and Year 10 is outlined but not yet formalised.

“We will be very controlled in Years 7 and 8 to sharpen them up,” Simpson said. “Learning in Year 9 will be based on seven Projects. For example, the Inspiration Project covers English and the Humanities; Maths, Science and Invention are in the Universe Project; and the Life Project takes them through physical, personal, and social learning.”

Chinese is the school’s second language and an enhanced program is in place for highly able students.

“We will not have a traditional Year 10 structure,” he added. “The students can launch into VCE and do one and two units, it’s an opportunity to experiment and choose what interests, it doesn’t matter if a unit is failed because they can go back and do it again next year or the year after, but then highly able students can rocket ahead.”

On top of their academic learning, from Year 10, every student will be required to have a paid job or volunteer, with their work documented and monitored.

“If we want young people to grow up and contribute in the community, they need to be involved ... a job in the local fruit shop, at Maccas, or helping older folk. By connecting children with adults, they grow,” Simpson concluded.

\$43m school is Melbourne’s first multi-storey secondary co-ed

Project architects Hayball have designed the school’s Academic Campus on Griffiths Street to be an accessible and inclusive place for school families and the wider Richmond community.

The functions that invite participation – the library, the performing arts spaces, science spaces, outdoor learning and spaces for sharing food – are on the ground floor and visible from outside the school.

The main entrance on Griffiths Street leads into the atrium lobby with seating steps looking over to the café and dining area and through to the West Court where there will be facilities for outdoor eating with space for food trucks, pop-up exhibitions and events, and an amphitheatre for performances.

Specialist space is available all levels of the building and Arts, Science and Technology spaces are located on the central level, with equitable access to the learning environments above and below.

