



Calm, flexible and adaptive

Students are actively engaged in their learning spaces at St Mary of the Cross MacKillop Catholic Parish School Epping North, **ET Staff**

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Geraldine Dalton is one of a select group of educators that have enjoyed the professionally satisfying task of opening a new school. Following six years at St Michael's Parish School in Ashburton, Melbourne, she was appointed Founding Principal of St Mary of The Cross MacKillop Catholic Primary Parish School Epping North, moving in mid 2012 to get the school staffed, equipped and ready to open for the 2013 school year.

Having identified the near-future need for another school in the area, Melbourne Catholic Education initiated the project in June 2011, appointing Henderson & Lodge Architects to develop the four-stage masterplan, design the school and supervise construction. Building works commenced in March 2012 and Phase 1 was delivered on time in January 2013.

Stage 1 included six learning studios; six more were added in Stage 2; Stage 3 is under construction now and Stage 4 will add the final six.

The design responds to the comprehensive brief developed by the Steering Committee '...to create non-prescriptive learning spaces which support, encourage and enable a spirit of curiosity, independence and learning,' an



amphitheatre, administration and resource facilities and a multipurpose hall.

The learning studios are a series of spaces which facilitate learning on a variety of levels with small stages and window seats for intimate, incidental learning opportunities. Larger spaces can accommodate full classes and break away groups can be accommodated in the withdrawal rooms.

The fully insulated nib walls dividing the

studios provide structure to the area while allowing the spaces to operate collectively and can be manipulated by moveable furniture to accommodate whole school gatherings.

"The building copes beautifully, the half walls separate the studios and there's lots of soundproofing, we have never felt that the noise level is conflicting the learning process," Geraldine Dalton says.

Environmentally sustainable design



Interview room

initiatives include thermal chimneys with automated high level windows for cross ventilation and heating / cooling. Thermal break double glazing to external windows and doors and extensive insulation to walls, ceilings and roof spaces ensure the building's thermal efficiency throughout the year.

The orientation of the building and extensive covered areas allows for sheltered play and facilitates indoor-outdoor learning opportunities.

The three-hectare green field site has several historic stone walls from the original farm and stones from the walls were reused in landscaping the play areas. A heritage protected bluestone farmhouse and barn have been integrated into the overall site design as a performing arts and community space and play area while maintaining a level of visual and physical separation to allow it to operate independently.

Leafy Epping North, 38km as the crow flies from Melbourne's CBD, is close to the Northern Hospital, a major Victorian teaching hospital and its satellite medical services. And this is reflected in the school's family profile; English is not the first language for 63% of students and in many families both parents work, often in medicine or allied health fields. Their early starts and late finishes are made easier by the school's active 6.30am open and 6.30 pm close before- and-after school care program.

The school opened with 58 students across the six years, including a class of one in Year 6 and three full-time teaching staff. Year-on-year growth since has seen enrolment reach 370 this year, of whom 92 are in Prep and 17 in Year 6.

Catholic Education Melbourne anticipates that the total could grow to as high as 600 before settling at around 400 when further new schools planned for the area are ready to accept students.

"We have had many teaching positions to offer over the last three years and we've been fortunate to attract staff that are creative 'risk takers', that are excited and challenged by the school's flexible and adaptive learning concept," Dalton says.

"Current pedagogy is telling us that this is the way to go. This learning environment works so well because it is calm, flexible and adaptive. To manage such an environment, educators need to build in organisation, structure and routine; all the staff need to be collaborative and own the pedagogy. The students are engaged in learning all of the time, school leaders, learning support officers and parents are 'on the floor' and part of the learning."

She points to the 2014-16 NAPLAN student gain graphs as confirmation that – bearing in mind the school's short history and the 63% of students for whom English is not their first language – Reading,



Studio window



Studios



Multipurpose Hall

Writing and Numeracy are trending up nicely. She's confident too, that the 2017 data will see the school performing well in the Similar Schools comparison.

Counterintuitively, the school's dozen or so children on the Autism spectrum are at home in the open plan but quietly purposeful atmosphere. "A visitor to our community would not be able to spot them, these students are equally engaged in their learning."

"We love our building, Dalton says. "There are no unused spaces or spaces that are used solely for one purpose. We can move groups of students around without compromising the learning of other students. The interactive technology can be accessed anywhere in the building and the flexible space allows for students to make choices about where they choose to complete their learning task."

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Geraldine Dalton Founding Principal of St Mary of The Cross Mackillop Catholic Parish School Epping North which opened in February 2013.



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