

Armstrong Creek School is central to fast-developing Geelong community

An accommodating new school for Geelong, *ET staff*





Geelong, 50 minutes along the freeway from Melbourne, has had more than its share of business failures and manufacturers leaving town in recent years, the most recent being Ford.

But despite 'the sky is falling' predictions by assorted Henny Pennies in the media when Ford's engine plant closed, Geelong is doing very nicely, thank you, with good employment opportunities and affordable housing attracting new residents.

15 minutes south of the city's CBD, 2600ha of farmland at Armstrong Creek is one of the state government's six designated growth areas [the others are Wyndham, Hume, Casey-Cardinia, Melton and Whittlesea].

The eventual population is expected to be 55,000 to 60,000 living in 22,000 new homes. As many as 22,000 jobs are forecast, with a focus on high tech and developing synergies with Deakin University.

The Andrews Government is spending up big on education across the state, including \$291m budgeted for the PPP Project which is building 15 new schools across regional and metropolitan Victoria.

And Armstrong Creek's Education Precinct is receiving a handy share of the money. The inclusive education setting combining primary and special education provisions under the one roof opened for Term 1 this year.



It will be followed by a secondary special education learning community on the campus in 2019, then the 1100-student Secondary College in 2021 when Oberon High School moves to the precinct.

The school has been designed by ClarkeHopkinsClarke, the architectural partner in the nine entities contracted for the PPP Project. Partner Simon LeNepveu heads the practice's 40-strong education team which has been working on the Armstrong Creek Precinct since 2015, when cattle were still grazing on site.

He said: "The Department of Education has laid down very specific education

principles for schools; learners and learning is at the core of community, diversity and wellbeing.

"Typically, the department assesses special needs children based on intellectual capacity but within that there are children with different levels and there are physical aspects as well. Armstrong Creek has an inclusive special needs program where, quite often, the line between what is special needs and what is mainstream can be quite blurred.

"This allows children with special needs to be accommodated in the one school. Some may need a higher level of

supervision and support and others can function perfectly well when the school adapts learning spaces to meet their needs.

“We have included many multi-sensory elements ... sensory rooms, sensory gardens and so on in the school. This component of design has been considered primarily as being for children with special needs but they are also fantastic facilities for all children.

“In a traditional approach to special needs education, sensory facilities are necessarily carved out in a discrete destination where you go to ‘do things’. At Armstrong Creek, we have taken the approach ‘how do we disperse them and make them integral in the buildings?’

“To do this we used multi-sensory

materials in the walls in the general areas and provided niches and small nooks where students could retreat if they need time out.

“When students need to self-regulate, the pressure poles invite them to get physical by squeezing through the gaps to make them turn.”

The school’s five learning communities [including the special needs community], the administration and resources area, and the multi-purpose building are sited around the landscaped Central Plaza and linked by covered walkways.

In line with the Education Department’s principles, the wider Armstrong Creek community will share the sports fields, netball and basketball courts and,

after school hours, the multi-purpose building’s stadium, performing arts area and community hub.

The learning communities – the largest can accommodate 100 students and the smallest 50 – can be opened-up for group activities or closed-down to block out noise for quiet activities. Each has a dedicated wet room and its own toilets, and there are outdoor learning spaces to use when the weather is right.

Founding principal Evan Savage has been involved in the project from its inception. He was a member of the education team that interviewed and hired ClarkeHopkinsClarke and worked with the architects through every stage of the conceptual development. This process included community forums where groups interested in having access to the sports facilities and the multi-purpose building were encouraged to make suggestions, and meetings with prospective parents wanting to know how the school’s integrated model would work.

Savage has been involved in special education for most of his teaching career, starting in autism-specific schools where he developed a concept of a base room at a mainstream school where children on the autism spectrum could be taken to support their integration.

Over several years as a leading teacher and later as assistant principal at Manor Lakes College in Wyndham Vale, he led the school’s thinking on how best to ensure that students with additional needs would receive the learning opportunities and support that they needed within the general classroom.

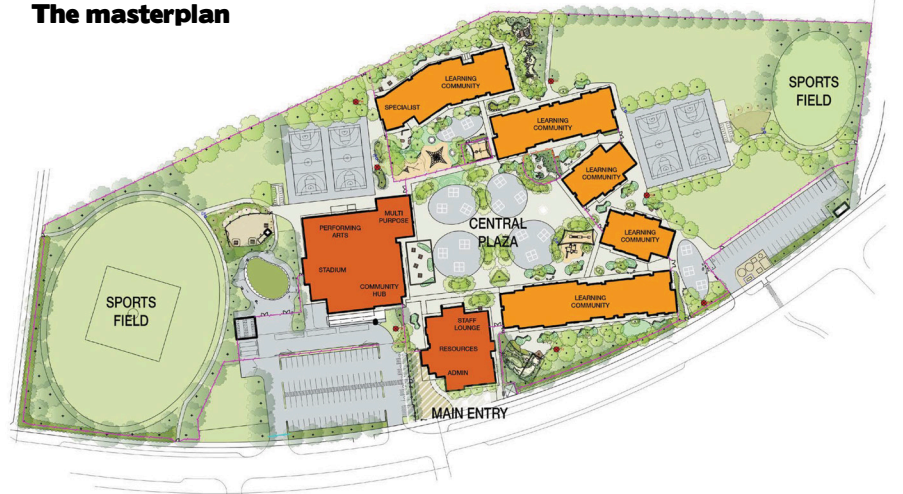
Eighteen months as principal at Melton Specialist School followed, and led to his appointment at Armstrong Creek.

“I had 12 months to prepare to open the school – not all principals get a year – so that was a bit of a luxury and a great opportunity to get really clear about the vision and direction of the school,” Savage said.

“I had time work on staffing, school registration, school naming, developing the logo, organising the uniform. There was plenty to do but nice to have the time to do it all.

“Because of the school’s unique model, it was important to be a visible presence within the developing community and to be available to people that were interested to

The masterplan



Exploded learning settings



help them to understand what this model would look like.

“The Geelong area is very attractive, particularly with the new school and we were inundated with applications when we advertised for staff. We had 300 applications for the first eight jobs,” Savage said.

“There was a lot of excitement when we interviewed, we showed the bird’s eye view of the school with the roof off to applicants; we asked them what they thought and how they would use the spaces.

“Given the contemporary design and the inclusive model, we put our focus on more experienced teachers. We were looking for generalist teachers that would be able to co-teach and collaborate with special educators and teaching aides day by day,” Savage said.

This year children with a mild intellectual disability (IQ 50–70) make up around 18% of the total enrolment and there are a few more with an autism diagnosis or other learning disability. As revealed in an Attitude to School Survey of Year 4 to 6 students early in the year, Savage is proud that 100% of the students thought that it was ‘OK to be different at Armstrong Creek’.

“You know what ... the children are the most understanding of all. It’s not just the child with a learning disability, it’s the student with some quirkiness or complex behaviours at times. We are constantly surprised at how the students are so



accepting of each other,” he said.

“The belief that a student with a learning disability might be disruptive in class, in our experience is rarely true. We have seen so many benefits from our model in peer relationships and care and support for each other.”

The school opened with 170 students and this has increased during the year to over 200 across all years. For now, Armstrong Creek is very much an Anglo community but Savage expects, and is looking forward to, seeing the ethnic mix change over time.

The May NAPLAN tested Year 3 and 5 students, and after only 14 weeks, Savage

commented: “We can’t take a lot of credit for the good or the bad that came out but it will be very useful baseline data to measure improvement and certainly for individual students to support them in their future learning.”

As the end of the school’s first year comes close, what is Savage’s take-away?

“For all the bumps along the way, we are really happy with what our students and our staff have been able to achieve in a really short time.

“We are looking forward to the local high school’s relocation so the opportunities don’t stop when our students finish primary.”



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