



Learn, row, dance, fly

Melbourne Girls' College sets high academic and sporting standards

When the Kennett Government came to power in a landslide election in Victoria in 1992, it was confronted by a budget deficit of \$2.2 billion and immediately 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, sited on prime riverfront real estate in inner city Melbourne, was on the list and in spite of spirited opposition by parents, staff and the local community closed at the end of the school year.

While many school sites were sold off to developers, the Richmond complex was retained

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in government hands and mothballed until Term 1 1994, when it reopened as Melbourne Girls' College. The initial enrolment of 300 was, for the most part, made up of girls who had been attending Richmond Girls High School, Malvern Girls High School or Richmond Secondary College, all three having been closed.

As word spread about the high academic standards that the school was setting, the number of students increased swiftly; Term 1

this year saw the total reach 1250.

Judy Crowe joined the school as principal in 2002, moving from Warrnambool where she had been principal at Warrnambool College for six years.

Born and raised in Hamilton, and having worked in western Victoria throughout her teaching career, she says moving to Melbourne was her "city change" and an opportunity to lead a vibrant and diverse government girls' secondary school.

The 2011 statistics on *MySchool* confirm that the academic standards are indeed high – 196 Senior Secondary Certificates awarded; 65 per cent of Year 12 leavers going on to



*Melbourne Girl's College keeps its students busy with a range of practical learning, sport and defence programs available.
Top right: Jonathan Rundell (Director of Rowing), Judy Crowe (Principal),
Tonia Douglas-Scarfe (Director of Rowing)
Photographs by James Laurtiz*

university; and close to or above similar schools' scores in Years 7 and 9 in the five NAPLAN domains.

"We're on a roll," Crowe says "but we are not complacent."

The school is not one of Melbourne's designated selective government secondary schools, but demand for places far exceeds capacity. Girls interested in enrolling but whose families live outside the catchment area, are required to respond to a number of questions explaining why they want to come to the school and what they hope to achieve.

"We want girls who are keen to take advantage of our co-curricular opportunities. We want them to do well educationally but at the same time to participate in a wide range of co-curricular experiences."

"Roughly half live outside the designated boundaries and many students were born overseas.

"Students come from all over Melbourne and some make quite long journeys every day. We also have girls from rural Victoria and around 50

Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai students who are studying in Melbourne through the International Student Program."

Outside school hours and on weekends, the school's double court gymnasium, performance area and auditorium are busy up to 11.00 pm on most nights. Boys' and girls' basketball, Tai Chi, karate, a church group and a language school are ongoing users... and a useful source of facility hire income that is spent improving the school's programs and facilities.

Crowe points to the gym as an example of the school's enterprising approach to getting the facilities it wants. Originally funded by government for a single court, the school took out a co-operative loan to build a second court – and paid it off with hiring fees.

The same approach has been used to fund the school's cavernous new three-bay boathouse. The school occupies one of the best sites on the River Yarra, and rowing has grown in popularity as facilities have improved.

"I could see the potential," Crowe says. "We started off with second



hand boats and boat storage out in the open. The construction of a pontoon was the first major improvement. There are now around 95 girls in the rowing program and we are winning races. Rowing has become one of our three big programs along with Air Cadets and Aerobics.”

The opportunity to build a boathouse came about when \$4 million was approved as part of the state government’s Building Futures Program, to fund projects in the school’s master plan, which included extending the school’s food technology program.

“We went to the Department with a scheme to build two new food technology rooms, one of which would be to industrial standard, sitting on top of a boatshed. The proposal was approved provided we could fund the extra \$1 million we needed for the boatshed component.

The food technology rooms are expected to become an income earning facility

“We had paid off the gym loan and we had \$100,000 in internal funds to pay for the upgrade to industrial standard for one kitchen so we were able to fund the balance through the extension of our co-operative.

“We also negotiated long-term boat storage leases with two independent girls schools, so the loan is being paid off on schedule and the boatshed is paying its way.”

In common with the gym and other areas that are used by community groups, the food

technology rooms, which open onto a balcony that reveals a beautiful stretch of the river, are expected to become an income earning facility, though respect for residents in the immediate area does preclude functions late into the evening.

Meanwhile, the industrial standard kitchen is used for food technology classes for students studying in the inner city VET cluster.

Architect Bruce Baade, director of Melbourne-based Baade Harbour Australia was appointed to design and supervise construction of the building, which commenced in December 2009 and was completed and handed over to the school in April last year. It has been named The Gillard Centre to recognise Australia’s first female Prime Minister.

