

Small is beautiful

For Judy Hilbig, nothing beats teaching in a two-room school



Judy Hilbig, principal of Halls Gap Primary School, in Victoria's spectacular Grampians Ranges, says that the arrival of a new toddler at the playgroup is added to the mental tally she keeps of likely enrolments in coming years.

"We're always keen to see the little ones coming up," she says.

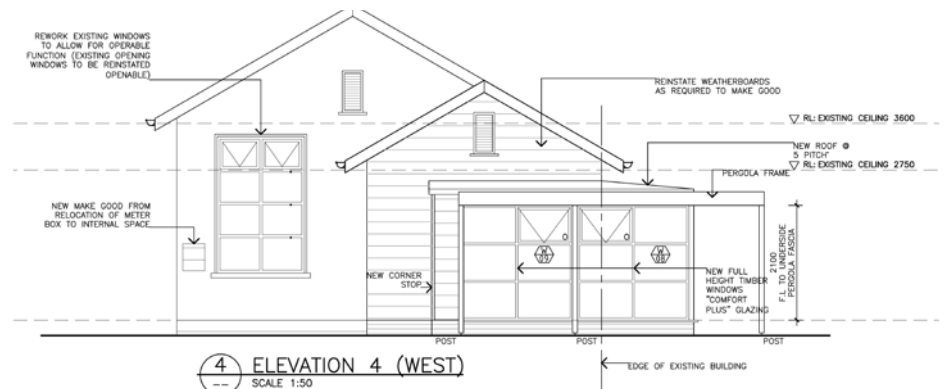
There are 24 children, from 16 families, in the school's two classrooms this year. In past years there have been as few as 22 and as many as 34, the changing total driven by the coming and going of parents working in the local tourist industry, for the Northern Grampians Shire or Parks Victoria.

A primary teacher by training, Hilbig has worked in large schools in Melbourne, Hamilton, Stawell and for three years in Kuala Lumpur from 2004–2006, where she was Head of Infants at The Australian International School. But her first love has always been small rural schools.

She had been principal at Concongella Primary School on the other side of Stawell for 15 months when the position at Halls Gap became available 18 months ago, and was thrilled to have the opportunity of "living and working in this wonderful setting and community."

"The environment is a rich resource which provides meaningful and relevant learning experiences and investigations," she says.

"Traffic is minimal so children can walk and ride bikes to school using the various designated paths. They train for cross-country events on tracks in the national park; they learn to swim in the local pool; and the surrounding bush is their science laboratory."



The school's proposed new look



She teaches the junior class for three to four days each week, usually reserving the fifth for administration work. Lloyd Kennedy teaches the senior class and Samantha Stoffel – 'Frau

Stoffel' to children and adults – shares the junior class and teaches German.

"In a mixed age group, each child is at a different point in their learning. Given that classes are generally smaller in rural schools, the class teacher can give each student a great deal of one-to-one time," Hilbig says. "You can focus in on where each child is developmentally."

"We take an individual approach to teaching – all of the children may be working on the same topic, but with different entry and exit points depending on the child's level of understanding and attainment."

"We quite often have siblings in the same class, so they learn from, and look out for each other."

Halls Gap Primary may be a remote school, but it's plugged in to the wider world, with good internet speed, interactive whiteboards in both rooms and close to one PC for each child this year.



Facing page: Judy Hilbig and Halls Gap students.
This page: students and the spectacular country around Halls Gap

The original school building, which July Hilbig agrees has been long overdue for a makeover, will be transformed when \$250,000 in federal grant money is spent. A tender was awarded in January and building work is due to start soon on the refurbishment and expansion project.

Architect Mark Grigsby says: “The goal of the project was to regenerate the existing schoolhouse building into a new place of environmental studies and general purpose usage.

“The original weatherboard building, which is a typical, one-roomed school facility, is a building type repeated throughout regional Victoria. We were charged with re-vitalising the old building into a place that could provide a flexible learning and community environment that sits in what must be one of the most picturesque and tranquil settings for a school, the foot of the Grampians National Park.

“Our design re-orientates the building and opens out the original entry porch area to provide views and outlook to the mountains and allow the future connectivity of the building to another new Learning Area building, to be constructed in the coming period.”

Funding from the School Pride program has been spent on restumping, tree maintenance, a new sandpit, and extensive fencing including a new entrance to the school grounds. A further application for state funding has been submitted to pay for replacement classroom, toilets and administration areas.

The school holds six craft markets each year, always well supported by the township’s 300 residents. The cash surplus generated, more than \$12,000 last year, was used to help pay for the school camps and excursion program, reading materials, an interactive whiteboard, and information and communication technology equipment.

The school is one of five primary schools in the Glenorchy schools cluster. Pomonal,



12 km south is closest. Glenorchy is 37 km to the north-east, while the drive via Stawell to Concongella is 36 km and Great Western is 13 km further on.

These schools work closely together, gathering several times each term. Activities include combined sports, focus camps, literacy and numeracy sessions and for 2010 the introduction of the ‘Out There’ program for Years 5 and 6 students. This program

is designed to support their transition to secondary school and to support the development of resilience, self-confidence and leadership.

“I love teaching in a small school. This is the children’s home community – where they come from, where they are nurtured, and where they belong until ready to take the next step into communities beyond Halls Gap,” Judy Hilbig affirms.