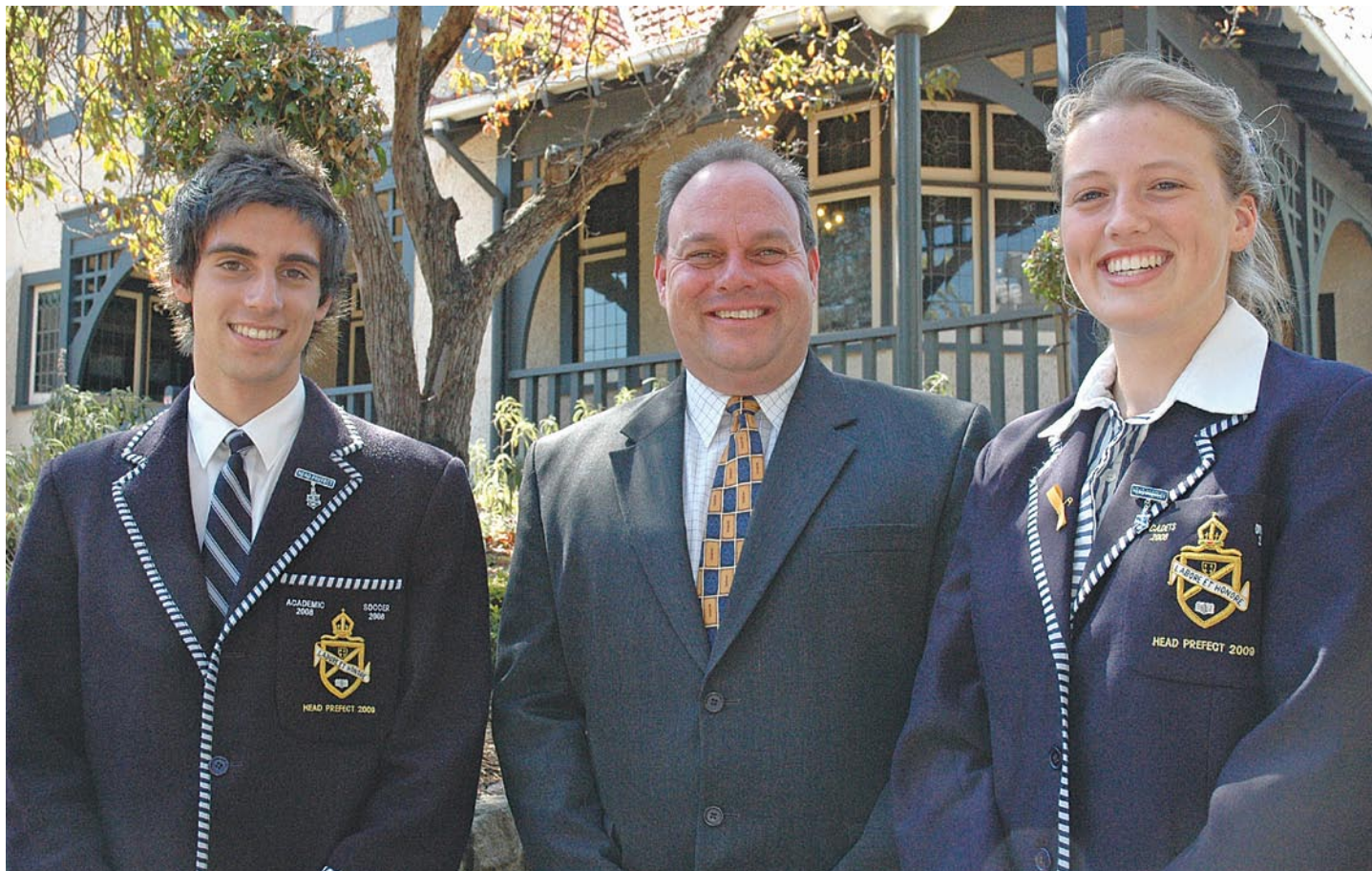


Together – Apart – Together: Mentone Grammar's successful coed model

Mal Cater on taking his school coed



Mal Cater with Head Prefects Andrew Salvo and Katie Yates

In January 2004, Mentone Grammar commenced a coeducational structure for students. After 82 years as a boys' school this was a significant decision.

The Board believed that if the school were to continue to provide infrastructure and teaching resources of a high standard for all children in the school's community, and maintain a competitive fee structure for parents, the number of enrolled students would need to increase. Enrolment numbers for boys had shown minimal increase over past years and would prove insufficient to accommodate contemporary teaching needs and current fee levels.

Following considerable research into educational model options, together with a review of the local demographics, a coeducational model was confirmed.

While focussing on the development of facilities to accommodate girls and boys together

on the one campus, developing a school uniform for girls and educating/recruiting staff in teaching girls, the most important initial consideration was the educational model to be implemented.

This article reflects on two aspects of the "coeducation" model decision – the model of education adopted and the management of school culture.

Our model of coeducation

The model adopted by the school is known as the "Together – Apart – Together" model. Our students learn in a coeducational environment in Kindergarten to Year 4 then, during the middle years of schooling, boys and girls are educated in gender based single-sex classes. Classes revert to the coeducation structure in Years 10, 11 and 12.

The rationale of this model is based around the development of an adolescent and the

associated learning, social and pastoral needs the students have at different times in their lives. Separating boys and girls during the middle years delivers a focus on their learning and on the gender-based needs of the student.

For example, we have some common texts in English and also texts which are biased towards either boys or girls. In Health Education, the students' needs are also more clearly articulated by gender, as are their learning styles in a subject like Maths. We have also modified our camping program so that boys and girls remain in their separate classes and that the program reflects their gender learning needs.

We have ensured that the social needs of the students are accommodated, making sure that they are in a setting where young men and women co-exist. Students are not separated on the campus during breaks, this allows students to interact in a normal manner suitable to the

development of young people with a suitable values system. The school has continued to develop both active and passive recreation areas within the campus.

The selection of staff is also tailored to accommodate the gender being taught. Some teachers prefer teaching boys and others girls. This can be accommodated in the model on offer. The critical person in a classroom is the teacher and having this model in place provides a chance to match up classes and students more appropriately, based on their individual strengths. For some teachers, the allocation of gender-based classes is not so important.

The feedback we receive as a result of implementing this model has been very favourable. Parents, staff and students have provided positive feedback about the model and the way in which it looks attends to the “whole child”.

Management of school culture

Following the announcement that the school was going to enrol girls in 2004, there was, as one might well imagine, a great deal of excitement amongst the male students! This subsided on reflection because of the pride the boys had in “their” school. The realisation that the school might change with the introduction of girls had to be managed carefully. The boys needed reassurance that the culture of the school would be maintained and that the values, of which they were so proud, would be retained and built on.

An education program was undertaken for the boys to ensure they were prepared to welcome girls into the school. There were large gatherings, mentor group activities and individual counselling sessions for students. These were designed to ensure the boys were well prepared for the arrival of girls on campus. Experts who had experienced such a transition spoke to both the staff and the students. Information sessions were held for all parents in the lead up to the transition.

The boys managed the inclusion of girls into the school community with genuine sincerity and commitment. Many of the girls enrolled in the early instance were referred to us by past and present boys. In enrolment interviews the new students, including now new boys and girls, were well briefed as to which House they would prefer joining.

It was important to ensure that the same standards applied to boys and girls. Providing opportunities for the girls in the “early days” was challenging as their numbers, spread across Kindergarten to Year 12, were relatively small. It was also important to make sure that girls were equally challenged by outdoor education programs, by sport and other co-curricular pursuits. Ensuring that the new students understood the values of the school, and the expectations that attached to being a member of this school community, was an important



element and that the girls felt welcome while boys did not feel “left out” was another of the initial requirements.

Through activities such as whole school concerts, we were able to manage the culture of the school effectively and an interesting benchmark of this is the number of Old Mentonians who now send their sons and/or daughters to the school.

The School now enjoys a “normal” coeducational environment. We have an increasing enrolment of both boys and girls who enjoy coming to school. In our fifth year of coeducation (next year) we will reach our first benchmark of having at least one-third of the school population who are female. Already our girls have posted outstanding results in the academic arena and in sport. Their involvement

in the Drama program has taken it to a new level of excellence.

Is the school a better place for the change? Based on the feedback we receive and the anecdotes which are shared there can be no doubt that Mentone Grammar has delivered a sound model which is endorsed, and applauded, by the local community of parents, teachers and students.



Mal Cater is principal of Mentone Grammar in Mentone on Port Philip Bay. This is his first piece for *Education Today*.