



# Learning in the fast lane

St Helena Secondary College accelerates learning with ACE, *Annie Facchinetti*

An air of purposeful concentration pervades the Science lab as I enter to talk to Year 9 students in St Helena Secondary College's Accelerated Curriculum and Enrichment (ACE) Program. Since Year 7, this group has attended core subject classes together, and although I am told they are not the most cohesive cohort in the program, I am struck by the diligence and attention that students are giving to their investigations. A quick conversation with some of the pupils soon confirms my suspicions that although they have reached the time in their high school careers that is often the peak of disengagement and bad behaviour, these young people are genuinely motivated to wring all they can out of their secondary education.

St Helena is located in Melbourne's outer northeast, somewhere between suburban Greensborough and semi-rural Yarrambat. Now in its 10th year, its well-regarded ACE Program was established to cater for the needs of high performing students, offering a pathway that supports and encourages their interests and talents. Students typically work at a year

above their current level in the fundamental curriculum areas of English and Maths, while receiving extension in other domains such as Science and Humanities.

ACE Program Coordinator Brian Daniells explains that to successfully apply for the program, students must first and foremost want to attend the school, nominating it as their top preference on their secondary school enrolment forms. Students are put through a multi-faceted selection process, which includes the Higher Ability Selection Test and assessment questionnaires from both their primary teacher and parents. All students who sit the test are offered a 20-minute interview at which parents are present. Daniells emphasises that more than one factor is considered when deciding who will enter the program. "We try to choose students that will form a great class," he says.

The program accepts 26 students each year, who form an ACE class that remains together for core subjects through to the end of Year 10, although as electives increase, the number of common subjects for the group decreases.

In 2012, the new ACE Class is one of 10 Year 7 classes. Far from being an elite and isolated group however, the students mix well with the rest of their year level.

Loretta Marazzato's son Matthew is in his first year of the ACE Program and has settled in quickly. "There have not been any social issues in terms of integrating with other Year 7s for my son... in fact [he] has friends in the other classes," she reports. One of the reasons for this is that students are mixed in with their peers from outside the ACE Program whenever practicable. In Years 7 and 8, they attend subjects such as art, music and design and technology with the rest of their cohort, while in the later years, electives give the opportunity to mix with a broad range of people. Indeed, Daniells identifies the fact that the students work as a class as a highlight of the program. "One of the strengths I've observed is that the students are together. There are conflicts, but students learn to resolve issues and deal with problems."

The students themselves also seem to like the way the program is organised. Year 9 participant



Harry, who aspires to be a vet, explains that he was not pushed enough at primary school and he believes the ACE Program is giving him better educational opportunities. Of being with the same group each year, he says, “I don’t always get along with everyone, but it removes the ‘making new friends’ period. We work harder and faster from the start.”

The expectations on ACE students are high, but it is evident that they relish the challenge. Annie, another Year 9 student, recalls that in primary school she used to talk a lot because there was nothing better to do. Being in the ACE Program has changed her view of school. “It’s an interesting idea to try and get more challenge to a point where we want to do better... we all know each other and all want to do well so we don’t stuff around,” she says.

From the time that they apply for the program, students are made aware of what being an ACE student involves. According to the 2013 Information Booklet, “Placement in the program is a privilege, *not a right* – students will be expected to make a genuine commitment.” Marazzato reflects this view when describing her experiences of the program as a parent. “Being involved in the ACE Program brings with it responsibilities. The expectation of the students is that they are committed to the program, that they are involved in many enrichment opportunities, competitions, extra-

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curricular activities and college community service activities.” Students need to maintain solid academic results but are encouraged to be involved in endeavours such as the college musical, the rock eisteddfod challenge, sporting teams and student leadership. Years 7 to 9 students also have the opportunity to compete in maths, science and language competitions.

As a general rule, once students enter the ACE stream, they stay there until they reach Year 11. Daniells suggests that it is rare for students to opt out unless they are relocating to another area, or they move on to private or selective schools. This does not, however, mean that they are equally talented in all areas of the curriculum. Although students are expected to work hard in the ACE Program and to maintain satisfactory results in all subjects, the school recognises that students have different strengths. Pastoral care is a big focus and if students are struggling in a particular area, they are given assistance to ensure that they keep up with the course. “Every teacher is willing to help,” explains Year 9 Annie. “You don’t have to be perfect at all subjects; there’s support when help is required.”

When students do leave the program, the vacancies are offered to other pupils at the school who have demonstrated high aptitude. Emma and Lauren, for example, have recently joined the Year 9 cohort. Emma felt her regular classes were too easy and wanted to “push education further”. She concedes that maths has been the most difficult area for her as she hadn’t done the pre-work, but she found her new classmates welcoming and she believes that the ACE Program will better prepare her for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).

Lauren recently arrived from Ireland, and started off at St Helena in mainstream classes which she says, “didn’t push as much as in Ireland.” When she moved into the ACE class, she initially found it difficult to break in. “They are like a family. They look out for each other,” she asserts. Now that she has settled into the group, she is enjoying the challenges that the courses offer. She hopes to pursue a career in criminology so her VCE subjects will have a science bent, and the inquiry based learning approach used in science classes will provide a solid foundation for this.

Students who have participated in the ACE Program follow a variety of pathways. With a slight restructure of the course next year, the Year 10s will have access to at least one VCE or Vocational Education and Training (VET) subject as well as continuing accelerated subjects such as pre-VCE English. When they leave the program at Year 11, they are ready to undertake Unit 3 and 4 VCE subjects in addition to the standard Unit 1 and 2 subjects, which puts them ahead of their mainstream counterparts, and by Year 12 they may be able to study a university subject. The school has strong art and technology programs that appeal to many ACE students, but others choose a breath of subjects to keep their options open.

The popularity of the ACE initiative is evident in the number of applicants it attracts, with 54 students vying for the 26 places in this year’s class. Daniells also explains that there are many “returning families” who have more than one child in the program. Loretta Marazzato has five children, and while oldest daughter Jessica chose not to apply for a position, she is sure that at least one of the younger children will want to join Matthew as an ACE student. The school has a strong reputation in the local area, due in large part to the presence of the ACE Program, and it has proved a drawcard for many parents. “The fact that the school had the ACE Program on offer did influence my decision as I knew my children would be eligible to apply for it... as a parent, I think we are very privileged to have the ACE Program operating at St Helena. It is a very beneficial program for those students who need the accelerated learning and [speaking as] a parent of a child or children who will benefit from being in this class, it has been a wonderful experience for my son and he enjoys every element of it,” says Marazzato.