

# From dismal to Dandy — a school is reborn

A neglected high school is transformed with a physical makeover and a bold new philosophy. By **Denise Ryan**.

**W**E DON'T deserve this. It's like a private school." These are among the saddest words Dandenong High School principal Martin Culkin has heard from a student in his 19 years heading secondary schools.

When he came to Dandenong High School in 2000, the school had received no money to improve the buildings and grounds since 1977 — and it showed. While Mr Culkin improved the look of the 1918 period facade with elegant landscaping, students were still confronted with a motley assortment of buildings, some dating back to the 1940s.

Year 12 student Jack Taylor says there was a stigma attached to the school. "It was ageing and that affected how you felt," he says.

How things have changed. Since the school agreed to merge with two local high schools, attracting about \$45 million in state funding in the process, Dandenong High has become almost unrecognisable to its students. And it remains a work in progress.

No glimpse of the three new state-of-the-art buildings — representing a revolution in how classrooms look and function — can be seen from the school's busy Princes Highway frontage, but the new learning centres cannot be missed once inside.

Architects Hayball Leonard Stent undertook extensive consultation with the school

number of students per teacher of most schools."

Fellow year 7 student Raffaello Di-Domenico expected an old school. "I thought, 'Wow look at this'. It is so flexible and there is so much space. I thought with 50 students it might sometimes get a bit crowded, but the class is separated into groups."

Students can move to areas that are used for science and other hands-on work. Each has ethernet ports to hook up laptops, with smart boards (interactive whiteboards) replacing blackboards. Large sliding doors allow easy access for outdoor work. Fold-up tables and other mobile furniture mean spaces can be reconfigured.

Raffaello says his parents, who are architects, love the design. He doesn't find the four 75-minute lessons each day too long, because he says the activities change and he gets to move to other spaces.

Jack Taylor didn't expect to feel so proud of his school, or of the fact that he is its school captain. "The new buildings are a marvel. I like the colour-coded design. It is so modern and new that it makes you want to come to school. You feel like you are going to a prestigious school now."

Jack says people underestimate the school. "We are the most multicultural school in Victoria in a low socio-economic status area. But the diverse students make it interesting. I love living in Dandenong."

Students were concerned



stretching across all years.

Mr Culkin says he and his colleagues decided after a study tour of schools in the US, Britain and New Zealand that, while incorporating some of the best practice elsewhere, Dandenong High should develop its own educational model. The idea of schools within schools is being used in many big schools to make them less intimidating places for students. Dandenong is

City of Greater Dandenong to develop synthetic playing fields on the former Cleeland grounds for student and public use.

Architect Richard Leonard consulted with different interest groups for a year before putting a line on a page. "It was a bit of a labour of love in some ways but it was also a sizeable project that we thought was important."

Mr Culkin is pleased

must adjust to the public nature of working with two other teachers in an open-plan environment, with windows into every room. Students can even see into the staffroom.

"It seems rather voyeuristic watching staff interact but it has forced people to mix," Mr Culkin says.

He recently held a staff meeting with a consultant to allow the 248 staff to express concerns and devise solutions.

Two classes in one room at Dandenong High School (left). Two teachers work in tandem with groups of pupils.

Top right: Raffaello, year 7; Jack, year 12; and Milica, year 7. "Now everything is so modern and space age."

The entrance to the old building (bottom right). Pictures: Eddie Jim



community before designing edge, colourful — some would say groovy — buildings that have captured the students' imagination. This is stage one of an ambitious project that will give the school four more learning centres around a central plaza, and specialist buildings for language, design technology and arts, senior science and performing arts/physical education by 2012.

A new food technology building, with a hospitality facility, will be built next to the cafeteria. The new buildings have many environmentally sustainable features. Year 7 student Milica Beljic is excited about the new way of learning.

- "The school was really run down and the classrooms were not good," she says. "Now everything is so modern and space age."

- The new buildings are designed for three teachers to work collaboratively with classes of 50 students in angular open spaces, with room dividers allowing constantly changing use.

- Subjects are integrated. For example, maths and science can be combined to solve a problem in class, while a third teacher might help students undertaking English as a second language (ESL).

- Students at the school speak 66 languages, with some migrants and refugees coming to the school after an initial English language course at the nearby Noble Park English Language School.

Nooks with ottomans are used for ESL learning and general discussion. Other corners have mini-stages for presentations.

Milica doesn't find the open-plan areas noisy. "I thought having a class of 50 students would be tough but it's good. You socialise more and the teachers are great. There are three of them, so most of the time you are in groups of 17, with a teacher to each group. That's half the

when Doveton Secondary College's 170 students joined the school in November, travelling four kilometres by school bus. "Everyone thought there would be problems when

## Relationships are fundamental to learning at this school, so that was translated into the design.

JULIA ATKIN, independent education consultant

the schools merged because the new students would have different groups. But we enjoy their company," says Jack.

Cleeland Secondary College shared a boundary with Dandenong High, so its 500 students have not had to travel far. But for staff and students at both schools it has been emotionally wrenching to see their schools close. The Cleeland campus is being used by Dandenong High's year 9 and 10 students until more buildings are completed.

Jack says his school is calmer since the merger. He recalls occasional disputes between students of different nationalities. "But there have been no fights for six months."

Truancy is not tolerated, with teachers prepared to round up students at the local mall.

An individual learning plan for each student aims to keep students focused. It is hoped such tactics will raise VCE results, which are near the state average.

Independent education consultant Dr Julia Atkin worked closely with teachers and the school community to create a design that reflected their learning values. "Relationships are fundamental to learning at this school, so that was translated into the design," she says. "In a school of 2100 students, practices can become more about crowd control."

To overcome this, the idea of "schools within schools" was embraced, with students organised in groups of 300

slightly different in that there are students from every year group in the new learning centres. Mr Culkin says the school community decided, after much discussion, that this

was the best way to develop mentoring and leadership skills and to support younger students.

The school has also valued its strong links with the Sudanese and Afghan communities. Three school captains in the past five years were born in Afghanistan, with these students becoming successful role models for younger students.

The Victorian School of Languages uses the school's facilities on the weekend to teach languages to 1500 people. Plans are under way with the

Dandenong was allowed to develop its own approach rather than use designs developed at other Victorian schools. "When it went to tender there was no absolutely firm design around the space, which is why I take my hat off to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for backing us," he says.

Mr Culkin won their support when he agreed to the merger. As a result, Dandenong offers a broader range of VCE, VET and VCAL subjects, and these will expand when its year 9 and 10 students attend classes at a new federally funded trade training centre being built at the Chisholm College of TAFE. Five schools have joined with the TAFE to share the \$7.5 million centre.

Merging schools while undergoing major building has not been easy. Some of the 192 teachers now have to move between the Cleeland and Dandenong campuses. Others

His message was clear. "Curriculum planning must drive the school rather than the traditional model where timetables drive the school."

Despite some teething problems, this is the most enjoyable time in Mr Culkin's career.

He has previously worked in mainstream, largely Anglo-Saxon, schools. "The last nine years in such a multicultural environment have been wonderful. It's not a dream ride. It is taxing . . . but when you see the look on the students' faces, it's worth it. They've got a glow about them."

He believes the new school will raise his students' sights. "Dandenong kids have a very Dandenong horizon. They are not very self-confident."

But he, like his students, is feeling optimistic. "We can't believe our luck," he says of recent increases to Federal Government spending on schools.

Dandenong High School principal Martin Culkin.  
Picture: Eddie Jim

