

# St Albans Secondary College

Melbourne, Victoria (2014)

## *St Albans Secondary College: Success Breeds Success\**

Imagine a school where a year 12 student leader says to a visitor, 'Our teachers aren't here for the pay, they're here for us'. Or where a relief teacher says, 'This is such a great place, you can really teach here'. If a school's success can be defined by how students and faculty feel about each other, and about their joint mission, then St Albans Secondary College well and truly deserves the attention it is now attracting.

Located in Melbourne's western suburbs, St Albans is a Years 7-12 government high school that caters for a culturally diverse student body of over 1000. Principal Kerrie Dowsley has to ration visits from those wanting to know 'How did you do it?' I'm not surprised because it's such a great story. Though not a heroic one, or a particularly dramatic one. Those looking for quick wins won't find a tale of a snappy three-year turnaround. But for thoughtful educators and bureaucrats who are interested in our most significant challenge – how we achieve a *system-wide* lift for all our schools – it's hard to go past the lessons contained in the transformation of learning at St Albans. It has been a gradual, sustained effort, one that has evolved over a twenty-year period and has been driven by three different principals.

St Albans proclaims its success in every way imaginable. I visit the school in April 2014, just after the Easter break, and on display in the school reception areas are the inspired fashion creations that saw the school pick up awards at the L'Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival in the schools category. One student, My Tran, won Best Student Award for a harlequin creation that has the flair of a Catherine Martin design. Portraits of school leaders and high achievers adorn the walls, as do pictures of significant school events. But it's the stories of academic success and individual student growth that really grab attention. Over 90 per cent of Year 12 students at the college now further their studies at university or TAFE, with over three-quarters receiving offers for their first preference. Four years ago, the dux of the school, Joanne Ha, received the perfect Year 12 score in eight VCE subjects (the requirement is five) and is now studying medicine at Monash University. In the challenging PISA tests for 2012, St Albans was on par with other participating schools in reading literacy and ranked above average in the area of problem-solving.

Most impressive of all is what St Albans does with whom-ever walks in the door. Its primary to high school transition program is remarkably effective in addressing significant underperformance. Each year, St Albans takes students from five local primary schools, 'a cohort of huge variability' according to Dowsley. In any year, up to a third of the new

Year 7 students are assessed as being four years behind in basic literacy and numeracy. But intensive and differentiated programs mean that by Year 9 St Albans shows solid progress in all areas, with the exception of writing. Impressively it's the rate of student improvement compared with other schools that is the real achievement. It is over and above the state average.

Major changes in the pedagogical practices of staff, together with the provision of a rich and comprehensive curriculum program, have helped make the college the destination of choice for many local families. A central feature has been the way the school has genuinely embraced the views of students. No mere add-on, the concept of 'student voice' is an embedded feature of the school, with structures and regular meetings with the school leadership team. Matters raised are acted upon, whether it's an issue over facilities (toilets and lockers loom large in discussions) or, in the case of one of the student representative leaders, a concern over limited teacher feedback in a Year 11 class.

Teachers at St Albans all talk about the motivation of their students as being 'almost off the chart'. Dowsley backs this up, saying that 'students here take learning very seriously. They demand a lot of themselves and of their teachers. So, the constant question for us is how we further develop our students as self-regulating, self-evaluating learners who seek and demand feedback. If we can prepare students who are constantly asking questions, have a sense of where they are going and can articulate the next steps in getting there, then that's our job. That's what we need to do'.

## Making a Big Call

Kerrie Dowsley is the first to admit that this kind of approach is a huge shift for St Albans opened in 1956, the year Melbourne hosted the Olympics. Apart from a brief period spent at Prahran High School and a stint overseas, Dowsley has been at the school ever since. It's the same for many of her colleagues, who are happy to say they have spent twenty to thirty years of their professional lives teaching at St Albans. They all say the same thing: 'The kids here are lovely. Always have been'. But Dowsley, along with her deputies, Ian Croker, Craig Jennings and Mario Orsini, also agree that in the bad old days, the school managed to fit the disparaging stereotype of a *westie* school – a tough place with poor attendance, low performance and almost zero expectations about doing better.

\* From "St Albans Secondary College: Success Breeds Success," by Maxine McKew in Class Act, p. 81-99, 2014, Victoria: Melbourne University Press. Copyright 2014 by Maxine McKew. Reprinted with permission.

It was never a violent place, but the atmospherics of kids moving around the school in gangs was enough to intimidate some of the younger female teachers. Sloppiness around rules for students had a knock-on effect, with some teachers regularly turning up late for classes. It was the eighties – the world beyond the classroom was wild, fragmented and laissez-faire. For young teachers at St Albans, it was much the same.

Craig Jennings arrived at the school straight from the University of Melbourne with a science degree and a Diploma of Education. He remembers 'the terror of facing a group of teenagers, with no support what so ever. You were on your own. When I think back to the eighties, no-one spoke much about teaching. There was no common language. It was a case of being thrown in and off you go. I knew my subject well but didn't have the tools to be effective'. Dowsley has similar memories, recalling that 'for beginning teachers there was nothing like the preparation there is now. There was no documented or shared curriculum, or much emphasis on assessment. So you invented things on your own. A lot of work was done in isolation without shared systems or agreed structures'.

With a few exceptions, this was the norm across state jurisdictions at the time. Arguably an entire generation was short-changed by this, but it was a particular disaster for students from families with limited social capital and small horizons. The suburbs around St Albans, places like Sunshine and Brimbank, are tight tribal places where even today a trip to the city, for some children, is a rare event. Quite recently, one St Albans student, who'd been taken on a school excursion and had glimpsed the CBD towers from the West Gate Bridge for the first time, stunned his teacher by asking 'Sir, is that New York?'.

The big shift to a place that put a premium on pastoral care but far less emphasis on academic achievement was facilitated by two previous principals. But a major impetus for change came when St Albans applied to be part of the Leading Schools Fund. An initiative of the then state Labor government, it promised extra funding, resourcing and partnership opportunities, and led Dowsley and her colleagues to take a hard look at their school's data. In particular, they noted how students themselves rated both their own performance and overall performance of the school.

'We were all shocked by it', says Dowsley. 'Whether it was their competence, motivation, their learning capacity, expectations, their perception of the quality of teaching, even how safe they felt, it was all very low. When we presented these findings to staff, I remember the shock and it was a real cause for reflection'.

It was the lightbulb moment for Dowsley, who by this time had taken over as principal of a school that was rapidly changing – a large influx of Vietnamese students together with other new groups of international students were being accommodated. She made an important call – that so much of what the students complained about was fixable. She then made a bigger call and asked the students themselves what a different, *successful* school might look like.

## Listening to Students

The results were confronting, particularly for those teachers who were resistant to changing what they'd been doing for years. The college ran a series of forums where students from Years 7 – 12 were specifically asked to nominate the features of a high-expectations learning environment. They came back with a precise list of wants – teachers who are organised, who are on time, who don't let you get away with not doing any work, and who provide specific comments about how you can improve. In another environment this might have caused an industrial relations meltdown, but Dowsley's insistence that the school had to do better was tackled in a collegial way and with support from some significant friends. Among them was education bureaucrat Katherine Henderson and a group of regional leaders who worked with schools across Melbourne's western suburbs. The mix of strategies Henderson helped engineer across a range of schools resulted in a student growth rate higher than in all other Victorian regions.

Dowsley says, 'There's no doubt Katherine and her team created a mandate for us. That was the catalyst for change. It was certainly the first time we approached things from a research base. That was new for us and it meant that we had to follow certain processes. At the heart of it was the idea of a school where students are learning to learn. We were very influenced by that'. To that, Ian Crocker adds that a big part of the transition has been attitudinal. 'We started to say why aren't our kids capable as any other given the opportunity'.

## Changing Classroom Instruction

Classes at St Albans now follow a set pattern, and it's a world away from what students described in the derisory surveys that forced Dowsley's hand. There's now no excuse for anyone making it up as they go along, as agreed practices are all documented in the school's 'Learning Cycle'.

Classes start with students being greeted by name at the door and with teachers creating a relaxed yet purposeful atmosphere. The learning intention for the day is stated clearly on a whiteboard, but classwork begins with a brief review of the previous lesson. Students are asked to write down what they recall, with questions asked and problems posed. The next phase covers new information, which is offered in short, digestible chunks, with explanations tailored to the students' concentration span. Language that is technical in nature is explained, with repeated checks for comprehension. Summaries are offered and note-taking is encouraged. The heart of the lesson involves the processing of new information, and this is where the art comes in. St Albans teachers are encouraged to use more 'wait time'. Instead of allowing only a second or so between posing a question and demanding an answer, the college is finding that allowing students extra time to reflect on a problem invariably results in more students volunteering a response as well as more complex and better answers. Students are required to verbalise their understanding with an emphasis on re-creating rather than simply reproducing the new information. The final lesson block is devoted to a review, with students being asked again to write down what they have learnt and any questions they are still considering. Classes finish with a preview of the next lesson.

All this puts a premium on lesson planning, and St Albans has formalised this through the work of dedicated Professional Learning Teams in all the key subject areas. It's a process that demands precision and clarity from teachers. The college calls it *turning teachers into lifelong learners*. Everyone knows what it looks like because planning revolves around a key set of questions, among them: What's the 'hook' for the lesson? What is the essential academic vocabulary? What are the strategies for helping students retain information? How to check for comprehension? How to check for comprehensions? What connections can be made to other learning contexts?

Underpinning all this is John Hattie's central proposition that the best student gains are achieved when a school's teachers operate to the standard of the very best in the school. With ninety-four teachers on staff, educated at different times in different institutions, that is quite an ask. Open up a discussion about what constitutes *good teaching* and you're in for a long argument. Even with a solid body of research around this topic, there's often a significant disconnect between what the evidence shows and what actually happens in the classroom. The school has taken on this challenge. And with no apologies. As deputy principal Craig Jennings says to me, 'Most teachers teach the way they were taught. We consciously set out to break that mould'.

A major influence has been the very specific cause-and-effect gateways, Dr Robert Marzano has identified as a model of instruction. The American researcher's best-known work, *Classroom Instruction that Works*<sup>1</sup>, highlights certain high-yield strategies – cooperative learning, the importance of note-taking and homework, the provision of feedback, the testing of hypotheses and the setting of objectives. Marzano claims that on his Learning Sciences International website that his model 'puts student achievement at the forefront as a non-negotiable goal for instruction...an effective teacher is not only one who continues to grow in his or her craft, but also one who can consistently help students grow'.<sup>2</sup>

Extra funding initially through the Leading Schools Fund, then through National Partnership loadings<sup>3</sup>, proved to be the crucial investment that lifted St Albans out of the ruck. Dowsley has spent wisely. Over the years she has drawn extensively on the coaching expertise of Dr Jane Pollock, who works with schools across the world on long-term projects aimed at boosting students learning via improved teaching practices<sup>4</sup>. Applying the Marzano gateways method, Pollock worked, both one-on-one and in groups, with the entire faculty of St Albans – a major enterprise in itself. New recruits to the school also spend time with her as part of their induction. Dowsley credits Pollock with a major shift in the way teachers tackle their jobs and applauds her central focus: 'Jane's work is all about the students. About how engaged *they* are'. Or as another teacher puts it to me: 'Jane converted me. You can put on a great show, but has anyone learnt anything?'

## What Success Looks Like

The results are impressive. And while there is not triumphalism, there is tremendous pride in knowing that the high-achievement goals, which seemed so unrealisable a decade ago, have now been surpassed. VCE results are a case in point. St Albans hit a high point in 2010 when 7.6 per cent of its students scored in the top band of performance; it pushed the school above the state average of 5.9 per cent. Tertiary entrance scores are constantly improving, with the 2013 results showing that fourteen St Albans students achieved in the 80s, with fifteen in the 90s – figures that put those students among the top 20 per cent of performers. The college has also seen exceptional outcomes in helping students transition into TAFE or university – the Pathways program, discussed below – with over 90 per cent of students continuing their education beyond Year 12; again, a figure that is above the state average of 77 per cent.

But it's the stories behind the statistics that are truly eye-popping. Teachers speak with empathy of the struggles of many of their students, with comments like: 'they deal with all sorts of things at home'. One bright student, who always seemed exhausted, confessed to having to do her homework in the family car late at night; her parents worked in a restaurant which doubled as a domicile, and that it was too noisy for concentrated work. Refugee children, many of them parentless and living in residential care, nonetheless manage to put exceptional trauma behind them and apply themselves with rigour to their subjects. The school's 2010 dux Joanne Ha – described by everyone as an 'exceptionally clever girl' – lived in a tiny one-bedroom unit with her mother, who was a home-based garment pieceworker; she helped her mother in the mornings and evenings, then tackled her own homework at midnight. Many other students have parents who work in low-paid, high-stress jobs from six in the morning, leaving them little time for parental oversight. The parents are described by the teachers as very supportive and ambitious for their children, but lacking in time or ability to help their children academically. This deficit is addressed by a teaching faculty that pulls out all stops in ensuring that students don't fall through the cracks for want of extra help.

A case in point is maths teacher Robert Krynski, who turns himself inside out to ensure that his Year 12 students 'don't walk into their final exams feeling scared or unprepared'. To that end, he covers the course work as efficiently as he can and leaves a maximum time for test pracs – so many he's embarrassed to tell me. No-one is allowed to escape. Noticing that four of his students were absent on one test day, he hopped into his car and made straight for their homes. He found a couple still in bed and other still getting their act together, but quickly rounded them up and frogmarched them back to school to sit the test. When the VCE results were published, two of these recalcitrants scored top marks.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering and Jane Pollock, *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, McRel Publications, 2001

<sup>2</sup> Learning Sciences International, 'Introducing Dr. Marzano's Teacher Evaluation and Leadership Evaluation Modes', 2014, [www.marzanoevaluation.com](http://www.marzanoevaluation.com)

<sup>3</sup> The Leading Schools Fund was an initiative of the Victorian Government in 2003 that provided specific allocations to 162 secondary schools. Resourcing was directed towards improved teaching practice and the boosting of student learning. To the same end, additional funding to the states was provided in 2008 by the federal Labor government through a series of National Partnership Agreements.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Pollock was the co-author of *Classroom Instruction that works* and takes her research into schools. She conducts workshops with teachers that emphasise successful ways to increase student engagement.

There there's the work of Cathy Armstrong and John Kortuem, who appreciate the difficulties that many St Albans students have in negotiating the world beyond school. They run the Pathways program, now a strong feature of the school, which provides individual student planning for post-secondary training. It offers a deep level of support, everything from ensuring that the students study the right pre-requisite subjects for their chosen courses, to helping with enrollments. Both note that not all universities make this easy, but Victoria University gets a bit tick for a streamlined process that seems to understand that not every student has a helpful parent who can guide their eighteen-year-old through an institutional labyrinth.

Overlaying all of this is a whole-school literacy philosophy whereby every subject teacher is required to work on enriching student vocabulary and improving writing skills and reading comprehension. Among the teachers I spoke to, some voiced a preference for a return to 'formal grammar', but admitted not all their colleagues were converts. They said that when children leave out the definite article – as in "Can I go to toilet?" – some teachers don't offer a correction.

Mary Adamou is not one of them. 'There's a view among some teachers that grammar is boring. It's part of the idea that everything has to be exciting and you don't tackle the basics', she says. But Adamou is a stickler for things like verb-noun agreement. Good for her, I say.

Another teacher, Marlene Cassar, has the job ensuring that students who begin their high school years at St Albans are able to do so from the best possible starting position. Her work as Transition Coordinator involves regular contact with neighboring primary schools, running familiarization programs for students and parents and overseeing a mass assembly of the school where the new recruits are formally welcomed, or 'clapped', into their new world. The latter is a ritual organized in large part by the student leaders, one that has become more elaborate over time. Special memory capsules are written by the new Year 7 students and put into safe keeping for their graduation.

Then there's the pointy end of the process. All the beginning Year 7 students are assessed by the St Albans teachers, with up to a third of the new students in any given year requiring additional tuition in reading and maths. It's intensive work, undertaken in small groups with explicit coaching. For those who are above-average performers, there are opportunities for accelerated learning. Hence the high learning growth rate in Years 7-10 that the school has achieved and manages to sustain.

Again, it's the structures, effective processes and clarity at every level of the school that is notable.

Equally, what can't be ignored is the culture of St Albans. Newcomers quickly realise they are working in a place where it's considered 'cool' to learn and achieve. Student leaders I spoke to were busy planning special motivating videos for their younger peers. When I asked them about the content, they

were all very clear that it wasn't about cutesy psychobabble. The information would be practical: tips on time management, dealing with exam stress and the like. One student, Nicolina, summed things up by saying: 'This is a public school that is like a private school. It's strict, but in a good way. We're proof that the stereotype of schools in the west, as tough places, is just wrong. We go for success here, and that's a matter of pride for all of us'.

There are the same expectations for new teaching recruits, with an established induction procedure taking in the school's philosophy, programs and aims. Kerrie Dowsley's employment priorities now centre on subject expertise. 'We want people who have deep knowledge in their disciplines, be it maths, history or languages', she says. To this end, one of the school's most enduring partnerships has been with the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE). St Albans, as one of the original partner schools for the clinical practice model that MGSE pioneered, draws many of its new teachers from the program and has been delighted with the results. Dowsley says, 'They tend to be more intellectual and very committed. It's a relationship that has worked well for us and directed some great teachers our way.' The deep immersion that blends extensive classroom practice with university lectures explains the plaudits the training program attracts – the Master of Teaching program places trainee teachers in a range of partner schools, like St Albans, right from the beginning of their training. The maturity of the students is also a big plus, as the course attracts a diverse group of academic high achievers, and more often than not they are students who, before deciding in teaching, have had some broad life experience in other fields.

## Critical Friendships

A feature of transformed schools is the recognition that the school itself can't exist as an isolated entity. St Albans is no different and over the years the school has acquired an impressive list of partners. Apart from MGSE, there are the organisations that provide specific help with education and pathways support, such as The Smith Family and the Beacon Foundation. But Kerrie Dowsley has also tapped additional expertise via the Australian Business Community Network. A philanthropic move by corporate Australia, the network builds links between schools and business. In some cases, it gives children from disadvantaged communities their first taste of urban commercial life, ushering them into company boardrooms where they're addressed by executives. A central feature of the program is the way it connects corporate leaders with school leaders. Dowsley's 'partner in learning' is Kate Temby, the managing director of Goldman Sachs. They have regular get-togethers, at least once a term, either in the city or at school. Dowsley talks about the richness of a mentoring relationship that is 'outside the system and outside the jargon'. She mentions in particular the way that 'Kate can put me on the spot and make me feel uncomfortable. That's good because she is prompting questions I might not consider myself'.

# Teaching Others

The St Albans change story has been an evolutionary one. It has taken time, money and a network of expert leaders willing to show the way. But there is one sour note. In 2011, in one of those bewildering decisions that cause head-shaking all round, the state government dismantled the system of regional leaders. Overnight, a group of dedicated people who were all vital in achieving a lift in overall performance were declared ‘surplus to requirements’. What was lost was the collective knowledge that was shared *across* schools.

Kerrie Dowsley doesn’t mind spelling out what this has meant for many of her colleagues. ‘The sense of being on your own is increasing. We are trying to fight against it but it’s an uphill battle. It worries me that we have principals all the time coming here and saying, “How do you do this” We shouldn’t be reinventing all the time. For new principals, there should be support on the ground, and clear frameworks about what’s valued and structures for how to get there. Instead, there is

very little of this at the moment. If we are to lift the whole system, we need to learn from the work that has been done. It’s work that has been refined and refined and it needs to permeate the whole system’.

The St Albans success story is replicable. A school that has addressed its deficits, exceeded its goals and obviously happy, congenial place for students and teachers should not been seen as the exception – a solitary case to be reviewed by bureaucrats and interested academics. Other schools in the western metro region, perhaps at different points of the change trajectory, are also showing that a determined approach based on proven practice models can transform learning environments for disadvantaged students.

## In Addition to the Published Case Study: NAPLAN DATA 2008 to 2016

TABLE 1: NAPLAN RESULTS 2008 – ST ALBANS SECONDARY COLLEGE

Source: My School website, ACARA

	READING		NARRATIVE WRITING		SPELLING		GRAMMAR & PUNCTUATION		NUMERACY	
YEAR 7	508 499 - 517		528 518 - 538		540 531 - 549		503 493 - 513		530 521 - 539	
	SIM	ALL	SIM	ALL	SIM	ALL	SIM	ALL	SIM	ALL
	507 500 - 514	536	502 493 - 511	534	512 504 - 520	539	495 486 - 504	529	513 505 - 521	545
YEAR 9	543 535 - 551		551 540 - 562		559 550 - 568		543 533 - 553		574 566 - 582	
	SIM	ALL	SIM	ALL	SIM	ALL	SIM	ALL	SIM	ALL
	547 540 - 554	578	530 520 - 540	569	548 540 - 556	577	534 526 - 542	569	547 540 - 554	582

TABLE 2: NAPLAN RESULTS 2016 – ST ALBANS SECONDARY COLLEGE

Source: My School website, ACARA

	READING		WRITING		SPELLING		GRAMMAR & PUNCTUATION		NUMERACY	
YEAR 7	<b>522</b> 515 - 530		<b>522</b> 514 - 531		<b>550</b> 542 - 558		<b>533</b> 525 - 542		<b>551</b> 543 - 559	
	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>
	<b>516</b> 508 - 523	<b>541</b>	<b>496</b> 487 - 504	<b>515</b>	<b>522</b> 514 - 529	<b>543</b>	<b>513</b> 504 - 521	<b>540</b>	<b>523</b> 515 - 531	<b>550</b>
YEAR 9	<b>566</b> 558 - 573		<b>542</b> 532 - 551		<b>589</b> 581 - 597		<b>564</b> 555 - 572		<b>600</b> 593 - 607	
	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>	<b>SIM</b>	<b>ALL</b>
	<b>553</b> 546 - 560	<b>581</b>	<b>523</b> 513 - 532	<b>549</b>	<b>555</b> 547 - 563	<b>580</b>	<b>541</b> 533 - 550	<b>569</b>	<b>561</b> 554 - 568	<b>589</b>

### HOW TO INTERPRET THESE CHARTS

- SIM** schools serving students from statistically similar backgrounds
- ALL** Australian schools' average
  - Student population below reporting threshold
  - Year level not tested

SELECTED SCHOOL'S AVERAGE IS:

- average of schools serving students from statistically similar socio-educational backgrounds (SIM box)
- average of all Australian schools (ALL box)