

Victorian principal takes learning to a whole new level

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You won't hear any school bells at Mount Alexander College. There are no loud speaker announcements for assembly, no music to call students in from recess. Instead, teenagers check their emails; look at digital screens around the Melbourne campus or log on to their school network for the day's news. Principal Wayne Haworth says the quiet creates a "calmness" across the school.



Haworth with students at Mount Alexander. Photo: Supplied.

"In the world of work, university or TAFE, there are no bells to tell them to go to their next class or come back from lunch so students need to be mindful of what they're doing," Haworth tells *Australian Teacher Magazine*. "It's allowing them to step up and be more independent."

With just 300 students, Mount Alexander College is certainly no ordinary high school. Under Haworth's direction, it has done away with another education tradition and abolished all year levels. Students are instead placed in classes according to their ability and their interests.

The new "vertical" school structure is the brainchild of first-time principal Haworth. With almost 30 years experience in education, he came to Mount Alexander in April 2015 with a vision to "rebirth" the school.

"For too long, in too many schools, education has been done to students rather than them being a part of education," Haworth says. "It's one-size-fits-all and potentially their needs and their passions are not being met ... so, to change things and be quite innovative in our approach, we've made it all about the students."

From Year 8 onwards, students can choose to study any subject on offer at the school, including those in VCE.

"We do that in consultation with parents and the students and we're tapping into the students' passion but we're also tapping into the students' point of need," he says. "So if the student is gifted

and talented within mathematics then there's no reason why they could not access a much higher level of maths."

In any typical class at Mount Alexander, you can find Year 7 students sitting side by side with Year 10s. While it might seem strange, Haworth insists the workplace beyond school is not divided along age lines.

"Grouping students according to their age is a convenient way of doing it, but it's not necessarily the best," he says.

Under the new system, students in Year 7 are referred to as "entry" and Year 12's "graduates". Those in between are simply called "above entry".

"We want to remove the labelling and ... the potential stigma of being in the class with younger students or older students," Haworth says.

Around three quarters of the student population at Mount Alexander are also of refugee or migrant background. Haworth says the vertical system allows students with interrupted learning to progress at their own pace.

"We have 39 different nationalities represented in the school and that makes it a very enriched and diverse learning community. That's one of the reasons why I selected [Mount Alexander] as a school that I wanted to be the principal at."



Of course, Haworth admits implementing such a radical change has come with its challenges – and the biggest of all was convincing staff.

"Obviously, any successful transformation involves up-skilling staff and getting them on board," he says. "I think that schools ... are a very conservative, traditional industry and people often move quite slowly."

Fortunately, parents are very supportive of the change.

"They're excited about the fact that we are removing the glass ceiling for students at the school and not holding them back," he says. "When schools talk about personalising learning, they do their very best and schools do a good job but this model that we're implementing takes that personalised learning to a whole new level."

The results were on display at a recent school Open Day, where Haworth says students had a chance to express their thoughts on the change.

"They've just said that they feel more connected with school this year, they're enjoying it a lot more because they have a lot more say in what they do."

But the student voice also extends beyond subject choice. Students regularly conduct tours and information nights and even sit in on interview panels to select staff. Since Haworth's arrival in 2015, students have helped choose two teachers at Mount Alexander along with the assistant principal. Of course, unlocking potential is something of an expert area for the principal. Before joining the school, he served as assistant principal at Nossal High School, which caters to gifted and talented students.

Haworth says the experience has helped him set a more "aspirational" agenda at Mount Alexander. But his next big challenge is "changing negative perceptions of the school in the community".

"We're working towards creating a school of about 550 to 600 students and we really want people to come and to share in the learning opportunities that are here.

"I will not stop until I see students being at their best and achieving their best."

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