

# This school is breaking all the rules - and the students are succeeding

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If your teen needs daily (maybe hourly) reminders to do the things that need to be done in life and would balk at the idea of sharing lessons with kids younger than themselves, then you might find the idea of student empowered learning (SEL), where school bells don't exist and mixed-age classes are the norm, a bit of a stretch. But one Melbourne principal says this is the education of the future.



Imagine, if you will, a school where the end of lunch and the start of afternoon classes is not heralded by a school bell. A school where there are no PA announcements to remind students that it's the swimming carnival the next day, or that, if they want to get their first choice in sport electives, they'll need to get their permission notes in pronto. A school where there is no such thing as a Year 7 newbie or a Year 12 'cock of the roost'; just groups of students of different ages, but with similar abilities and enthusiasm, studying subjects about which they are passionate. This is what's known as student empowered learning (SEL) and if Melbourne principal, Wayne Haworth, has anything to do with it, it could soon be coming to a school near you.

## **One size does not fit all**

Haworth, a teacher with 27 years of experience behind him, became principal of [Mount Alexander College](#) in Melbourne's Flemington a year ago with the intention, he says, of giving the local community "more than they were getting".

"Education has always been 'done' to students," explains Haworth. "That might have suited the needs of the 20th century but times have moved on and by empowering students to really connect with their education, we're giving them the skills that they need to thrive.

"Our students get a personalised experience because, as we know, one size does not fit all."



*Mount Alexander College in Melbourne where student empowered learning has been implemented.*

### **No holding back, no being left behind**

This 'personalised experience' includes the abolition of year groups. Entry level has taken the place of Year 7, while graduate level is what most of us know as Year 12. The children in the years in between are known as above entry students. Learning takes place in groups according to ability in a particular subject as well as their passion for it, and because students are ready to take on its rigours. This might mean there will be 13-year-olds sitting in the same class as kids two, or more, years older.

"They may be chronologically different but their learning needs are well matched," says Haworth. "We're aiming to stretch students so that no-one is held back and no-one is left behind.

"When they leave school and go to university or out to work, they'll be with people of different ages. They're not going to be valued any more, or any less, on their age but on their ability to do a certain task. That's what we try to underline here."

### **What about the social aspects of SEL?**

Socially, SEL seems to work for kids too. At Mount Alexander College, Haworth has implemented mixed-age mentor classes in which students remain throughout their time at the school.

"We're a small school with just over 300 pupils so the kids tend to know each other anyway but, with these mentor classes, any barriers between them based on age are broken down," explains Haworth. "They're really supportive of each other and aren't bothered about being in the same class as older or younger kids."



### **Can teenagers *really* cope without reminders?**

But can high school students who, let's face it, usually struggle to get out of bed on time in the mornings, *really* navigate life without being spoonfed reminders through such means as bells and PA announcements?

"You won't find bells and announcements at TAFE, university or work, so why have them at school?" says Haworth. "We want our students to develop independence and self-monitoring skills. Lots of students end up dropping out of uni, not because of the academic content, but because they can't cope with being an independent learner. That's something we want to avoid."

### **A 21st century take on education**

Mount Alexander College is part of a coalition of schools formed to discuss ways to implement SEL ([Templestowe College](#) is another Melbourne school which already has the system in place, while Haworth reports there are schools in Sydney's western suburbs that are exploring SEL too) and Haworth is delicate but determined in his response when asked if he would like this 21st century take on education to spread across Australia.

"I'm respectful of all the other great work going on but think that student empowered learning is the way forward in one way or another. The students are excited, the staff is too and there's no doubt that it creates a greater connection with a lifelong love of learning."

Student, teacher or parent, that outcome can only be seen as a good thing.

Watch this video from international education advisor, [Sir Ken Robinson](#), which explains brilliantly the reasons why many educators feel we need a revolution in education.

<https://youtu.be/y2Nz2X0AEXw>

<http://www.kidspot.com.au/school/secondary/real-life/this-school-is-breaking-all-the-rules-and-the-students-are-succeeding>