

# The Default is 'Yes'!

**M**ount Alexander College (MAC) is a small secondary school of about 350 students situated on Mount Alexander Road in Flemington. We have students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds with many countries represented.

In 2016, MAC embarked on an exciting new approach to schooling. **It is becoming a student-centred school with a focus on authentic student empowerment.** This has involved switching to vertically structured student-centred learning in all subjects, and the introduction of a large number of new classes including student-led electives. The ultimate goal is for students to be able to select subjects they are passionate about, regardless of their year level.

Every student has an individual learning plan catering for their passions, needs and interests. Under this new system, it is possible for a Year 8 student to do a VCE or pre-VCE subject if they feel they want to and are considered academically ready. All students are guided in their subject choices through individual course counselling.

## Negotiating Learning

**Student-led electives** are classes where students *negotiate* with teachers about *what* will be learnt and *how* it will be learnt. Students are involved in negotiating assessment and providing feedback to their teachers on both their own performance and that of the teacher. Every student chooses six subjects per semester.

Students are encouraged to work with their teachers on developing the curriculum and providing feedback to their teachers on their performance. For example, in *Writers Hub*, an English class of Year 8 to 10 students, the students discussed with the teacher the class novels and assessment tasks they would look at, as well as writing the student magazine together.

Some Maths classes had similar student-teacher discussions with students choosing Maths topics they are interested in. This has led to students learning more about the subject and choosing assessment tasks that are more

fun or interesting. In other student-led electives with less curriculum guidelines, students can choose the overall focus of the class and drive their own learning.

We have also introduced **Clubs and Societies** in 2016. This is run twice a week and all students can choose an activity that interests them. There are over 20 activities to choose from such as *Dice and Dungeons*, *Anime*, *Debating and Philosophy*, and *Primary Science*. In the second half of this year, a group of girls developed a proposal for a *Girls' Group*. They suggested a range of topics and activities, identified students who wanted to be involved and facilitated staffing and a room. This activity is a great example of how things can happen at MAC!

## Authentic Student Voice

Through this approach, the school aims to meet the diverse needs of all students and prepare them to be adaptable, curious, lifelong learners of the 21st century. A new **Leadership Team** of teachers at the school are driving this change through a commitment to authentic student voice.

Of course, these changes needed to be accompanied by the introduction of a new **Student Leadership Team** to promote more opportunities for a strong student voice and replace the old SRC system.

As part of the vertical structure, four new **Houses** were introduced: *Apollo*, *Artemis*, *Athena* and *Poseidon*; the House names were chosen by the students. Each house is broken into three or four mentor groups of about 20 students each with two **Student Mentor Leaders** elected from each group. **Student Mentor Leaders** are supported with pastoral care by their mentor teacher and work with their group to raise issues, facilitate student programs and encourage participation in House and whole school activities. The mentor group meets every morning for 10 minutes.

Two of these **Mentor Leaders** are then elected by the students of the House as **House Captains**. The students and staff all participated in a democratic election for the two overall **College Captains**. All students could nominate for these positions and had to write why they wanted it. They then attended an interview with the Assistant Principal and Student Engagement Leading Teacher. The nominees addressed the Assembly and then all members of the school voted.





This new structure was necessary because the old SRC system did not reflect the vertical organisation of the school. Although students were elected as SRC representatives, there was not the same sense of student empowerment and decision making. The new system fosters students' House identity and team work.

### Students at the Centre

While 2016 has involved some trial and error, especially around getting our new **Student Leadership Team** organised and understanding their roles and responsibilities, students at MAC are at the centre of everything.

Students participate in all sorts of things, including;

- **Facilitating Whole School Assemblies:** Assemblies begin with an *Acknowledgement of*

*Country* and the *National Anthem*. Students organise the activities for the Assemblies which often have different themes. Activities might include a musical performance, a speech from a student, a guest speaker or a House presentation. Points are awarded for House competitions including athletics, debating, poetry, swimming and the House tug-of-war. Points are also awarded to individual students as part of our school wide *Positive Behaviour Program*. Students who have received individual points are eligible to win prizes each term.

- **Running a weekly Breakfast Club:** Each House takes it in turn to organise breakfast each week.
- **Organising house activities such as Refugee Week:** For this special

week of activities, each House had responsibility for one activity. These included hosting the Assembly, developing a program of lunchtime activities, organising a dress-up competition and facilitating food stalls. We had a guest speaker and raised money for refugees.

- **Reporting to School Council on student-led activities:** Our two **College Captains** attend all **School Council** meetings and make a written report on student activities.
- **Participating in teacher interview panels:** Students involved in the interview panels for teaching appointments and student team selections had to go through the appropriate training prior to interviews.



- *Attending the VicSRC Congress and Conferences.*
- *Facilitating and hosting Information Nights.*
- *Leading school tours.*

The **Student Leadership Team** has provided the focus and organisation for all students to be involved in these activities. By having students representing every mentor group, students who attend leadership forums can gather volunteers from their Houses and involve the entire student body.

### Into 2017

Going into 2017, expectations of the **Student Leadership Team** have increased. They will have several new responsibilities including introducing and facilitating a *Buddy Program* for new Year 7 students and participating in a number of leadership workshops. The selection of the team for 2017 was organised by the current team and included encouraging nominations, describing their experiences this year and facilitating Election Day.

During each term throughout 2016, the **Student Leadership Team** held meetings (fortified with fruit and scones!!). Items on the agenda included reports from students who participated in *VicSRC Congress* and *Conferences*, reports on House activities and planning for new events.

### Challenges

A particularly challenging part of setting up the **Student Leadership Team** was the election process. We were keen to provide all students with the chance to go for a leadership role while ensuring that those who apply are there to help the school rather than just because they were popular. Students had to address their mentor group to persuade students to vote for them.



Students realised this year that there was much more expected of students who were in these leadership positions. Some students stepped aside from these positions once they realised what they had to do. As a consequence of their experiences this year, students have a much better idea now of what the student leadership positions involve.

The biggest change for students has been recognising that positions of leadership come with responsibilities. It has been fantastic for students to have more control over what we learn and how we learn it. It has also been great to be able to follow new areas of interest and build on our strengths. This doesn't mean losing sight of the new things that we need to learn.

It is also fantastic to have so much say in how the school works. **At MAC, the default position is: "Yes"!** If a student wants to introduce something new, we have to make a proposal, research what is involved and find students who are interested in pursuing this activity.

**Change is always challenging. Sometimes we are out of our comfort zone.**

We have to make sure that all voices are heard ... not just the loud ones. The mentor group allows us to encourage all students to speak. There are many opportunities for students to step up. Student-centred learning means that students who have not been confident in the past can become the leaders in the class that is tailored for their interests and skills. Students have more interest in class because we are actively engaged in our own learning.

MAC is a very different school in 2016 to last year. We plan to build on these changes to continue to strengthen MAC to become a truly student-centred school **where students are empowered to have control of our own learning and where student voice is heard.**

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