

Independent Perspective

Independent schools reflect on what makes their school distinctive

Independent Schools
Council of Australia



Barry Finch
Principal

School:
Port School

Location:
Hamilton Hill
Fremantle, WA

Year Range:
Yr 8-12

Enrolments:
100

Teaching Staff:
12

Total Staff:
25

School Website:
portschool.wa.edu.au

“Success is something our students have experienced very little of, but we believe that everyone is good at one thing at least. We work hard to identify this ‘one thing’, and nurture it into a success.”

Re-engaging at-risk students with hope, pride and a sense of purpose

Port School in Hamilton Hill, near Fremantle in WA, is an Independent school that aims to engage at-risk students in years 8-12 who have not been able to achieve success in mainstream school settings for a variety of reasons and circumstances. Operating a little differently to other schools, Port features small class sizes, hands-on vocational learning, personalised and flexible learning groups, community projects, excursions, individualised pastoral care and social support from a variety of networks and external agencies.



Can you tell us how Port School came about?



Port School was established in 1992. It was originally situated in the upstairs section of a commercial building in downtown Fremantle, later moving to a converted squash courts and some adjacent properties in Hamilton Hill. I was appointed at the end of 2009, making me the school's 8th Principal.

Port is one of Western Australia's "Curriculum and Re-engagement in Education" (CARE) Schools, specialising in working with adolescents at extreme social and educational risk. Students are referred to the school after encountering serious problems in mainstream schooling. These difficulties may arise from academic, social or behavioural issues.

The school has undergone many changes over the years, with Federal Government grants for significant upgrades and expansion. During this time we have moved from being solely an alternative academic school to one that works closely with adolescents at extreme social and educational risk.

What are your school's greatest strengths?

Firstly, I think our staff are our greatest strength. They have a real commitment to working in this environment, and we have developed a selection process to ensure they are well suited to the challenges they will face. Our staff all contribute to the management of the school through a collaborative approach to administration, as we believe that the classroom teacher has the greatest understanding of the needs of the students.



Also, our facilities, which have changed significantly. We have a great building with state of the art workshops, semi-commercial kitchen, gym and classrooms. Many other CARE schools are not as fortunate to have such a base.

Through the staff, the facilities and our educational and vocational offerings we aim to provide our students with a crucial sense of ownership and belonging.

What are some of the misconceptions you think people have about Independent schools?

The misconceptions we face tend to be more about the school itself. Most people don't even know we're an Independent, they think we're a government school. They tend to come in expecting it to be a really feral place, with these dysfunctional kids straight out of juvenile justice. But once they meet the kids they find it's not what they expected at all.

What challenges has the school faced?

Given the profile of our students, every day is a challenge. Getting them to school regularly requires constant work. Success is something our students have experienced very little of, but we believe that everyone is good at one thing, at least. We work hard to identify this 'one thing' and nurture it into a success, then use that success to develop success in other areas. To achieve this, class sizes are very small and every effort is made to avoid points of conflict.

We operate very much outside the normal curriculum of a mainstream school. Student support services are imperative, with onsite psychologists, counselors, outreach staff and offsite mental health services. We also have preferred doctors for students that don't have that level of home support to access those provisions.



Where do you see your school in five years time?



We are still growing in our transition into workplace training. We've now achieved the status of Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and we're adding more certificates. We're becoming best practice when it comes to finding vocational placements for students. It starts from year 8 and it is really psyching the kids into the fact that the workplace is a reality they have to prepare for, that they don't have to have lives of being on the dole.

In addition, our board is currently carrying out a strategic planning process to look at questions such as; are there gaps, what could we be doing differently, what would add value and enhance what we do? How bold do we want to be, what external

relationships should we pursue? Rural mental health retreats, or research into feasibility of other Port like schools in targeted geographic areas could be just some of the things to be discussed as part of that future vision.

Can you share a recent school achievement that you are particularly proud of?

There are many. Recently we successfully introduced a Young Parent and Early Learning Centre to support young parents to continue their studies in a positive environment. We also introduced an outreach program to encourage disadvantaged kids in the community to re-engage with the education system through direct engagement and positive mentoring with students and their families. Then there is our mobile classroom program which uses a customised bus to take students who are struggling to engage in the classroom setting out into a community setting, such as a park, for school lessons, physical activities, and instilling a sense of belonging and community.

There's also our annual trip to Malaysia. We take 8 to 12 of our kids, mostly 16 year olds. They raise money here and donate it to a school over there for kids with disabilities. The money we raise mainly goes towards tuition of orphaned students, but it's also gone towards things like playground equipment. The program has a huge amount of merit, it allows our kids to feel what it's like to be on the other side of charity. To be able to go on the trip, the kids have to demonstrate in advance that they can behave appropriately. Some really need to work to improve their behaviour, cut down on the drug use and be more cooperative... so it's a really big motivator.



What is an initiative you would like to implement in your school?



As our staff numbers grow we need to build on our existing professional development programs, by implementing more formalised trauma-informed training for staff. So staff can understand the kids, and also to assist them in their own capacity to cope... working with these kids can be a tough job.

From a student perspective, being an RTO opens up many opportunities across multiple trade and business areas. For students who all too rarely achieve significant high school outcomes, walking away with hands on work experience plus a certificate II or III in a specific area will be a big boost for them, and their communities.

And from a school perspective, developing an extensive range of certificate programs and levels tied in with school based traineeships and apprenticeships, as well as focusing on improving numeracy and literacy. That's the way forward for increasing our students' success.