Independent Perspective

Independent schools reflect on what makes their school distinctive

Andy Callow
Principal

School:
Belgrave Heights Christian School

Location:
Belgrave Heights Dandenong Ranges, Vic

Year Range:
K-12

Enrolments:
740

Teaching Staff:
52

School Website:
www.bhcs.vic.edu.au

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From modest beginnings and near closure, to a thriving community focused school

Belgrave Heights Christian School (BHCS) is a K- 12 co-educational school in the Dandenong Ranges near Melbourne. Set in bush surroundings, BHCS was founded 1983 by two local mothers looking for a school alternative. It had an initial enrolment of 20 students and strong growth for several years. However, enrolments later decreased to just 5 students in the mid-90s and the school was facing closure before a nearby Christian school stepped in to temporarily locate excess students at BHCS. This provided time for fresh enrolment growth and in 2002 BHCS added a middle school and later a senior school. In 2013 they also added a purpose-built Kindergarten (3 & 4 year olds). Today BHCS has around 740 students.

Can you tell us how BHCS came about?

BHCS is possibly unique in that it was started by two mothers who lived locally. Their passion was to help grow a school that would work in partnership with parents in developing children educationally with a strong spiritual foundation.

What are your school's greatest strengths?

From its earliest days the school has always had a strong community focus. We are very much a local school and reflect the culture of the Dandenongs with an emphasis on Environmental Education, Hospitality, Community Service and Sport. However, our greatest strength is the wonderful staff team that combine superb skills with a strong sense of calling and a love of laughter.

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

That many of them are exclusive, elitist and expensive. Conversely some believe that low-fee faith-based schools are insular and ineffective (below standard). The reality is very different!

What challenges has the school faced?

It nearly died! After many years of struggle the little school faced imminent closure. Numbers dropped until the whole school (staff and students) could fit into a 7 seater mini-van! Then came the miracle phone call from another Christian School who were struggling to keep pace with their rapid growth. This led to an arrangement where a bus load of students and two staff members travelled up to be schooled at Belgrave for the next two years. Not only did this keep BHCS alive, but it provided the momentum to enable it to flourish and grow. Over the last twenty years the school population has increased twenty fold.

Where do you see your school in five years time?

The last few years have been crammed full of adding buildings, exciting programs and talented staff members. Now we face the challenges of maintaining a wonderful culture while steadily continuing to improve educational outcomes and innovative practises. The school leadership team is involved in an exciting partnership with Project Zero, from Harvard University, that is encouraging us to maximise "lifeworthy learning" at BHCS. It will be fascinating to see where this leads over the next five years!

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

Our school motto is profoundly challenging – "Act Justly, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly"

It calls for a head, heart, hands approach to learning and living. Part of that is something we are calling the "Partnership Project" where we are actively seeking to assist other schools (where invited) to help them grow and prosper. So far we have been able to give practical support to over twenty school communities locally, interstate and overseas. Our passion for this comes from our deep gratitude in being rescued by another faith-based school when hope was nearly gone.