

Independent Perspective

Independent schools reflect on what makes their school distinctive



INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS
COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA



Phillip Heath
Head of School

School:
Barker College

Location:
Hornsby, NSW

Year Range:
Pre-K - 12

Enrolments:
2200

Teaching Staff:
270

School Website:
www.barker.college

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Maintaining heritage, embracing the future

Founded in 1890, Barker College is an Anglican school located near the top of Sydney’s Northern and North Shore railway lines.

Barker has a student population of 2,200 and nearly 800 staff. While traditionally a boys’ school, it has been coeducational in the senior years (10, 11 and 12) since 1975. Barker has now commenced a transition to full coeducation for all years, which will be complete by 2022.



Barker also has a small campus, called Darkinjung Barker, for Indigenous children on the central coast of New South Wales. Darkinjung Barker has around 30 students (K-Year 6) and has been specifically designed to address current concerns about the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners in regard to attendance, performance, achievement, standards and school morale.

Can you tell us about Barker’s history?



It was established in 1890 by the Reverend Henry Plume, the vicar of the local Anglican church in Kurrajong in the lower Blue Mountains. As a clergy school with less than 20 students, its chief purpose was to prepare students for matriculation to the University of Sydney.

Reverend Plume moved the school to its current location in 1895, naming it Barker College after the third Bishop of Sydney, Alfred Barker. The site was chosen because of the confluence of the two railway lines and because, strangely enough, it has the same altitude as Kurrajong. In those early days they regarded altitude as commensurate with healthy air and an escape from the soup of the city.

Barker was purchased by the Anglican Diocese of Sydney in 1919 and has been an Anglican diocese school since that time.

What are your school’s greatest strengths?

It’s a very strong school, academically and in sport, and both of those things are important to us. But, if you were to ask generally, “What is Barker known for?” I think it would probably be the combination of a warm and effective pastoral care program and the diversity that senior coeducation has offered.





What are some challenges that the school faces?

I think like all schools of lineage and a strong sense of heritage, holding that heritage in trust while being innovative and progressive is an interesting and exciting challenge. How do you deal with that? How do you celebrate what has been, while embracing the future's possibilities?

I mean that around such things as the classroom, the ways we do our formal occasions, how we adapt ourselves to disruptive learning, and the need to keep the common room fresh and fluid with new ideas and new people.

A second challenge is adapting ourselves to the exciting vision of full coeducation.... from pre-kindergarten to year 12... which will roll out systematically from 2018 through to 2022. That's a very exciting challenge which will involve reconstructing the curriculum, reviewing pastoral care programs, and making sure the master plan and capital works are fit for purpose and affordable.

I think a third one is making sure we don't look inwards. It's a beautiful campus in Sydney's very pleasant north shore, but it's not OK to be self-referential. We must look to the world into which our students will step, and that means taking on some of the big challenges that the whole of the nation, even the whole of the globe, experience. In our view, that's especially the case around the pursuit of justice for our First Nations people.

What are some of the misconceptions people have about Independent Schools?

That they're only populated by the wealthy. And that the wealthy are self-serving. That they are out of the reach and out of the purpose of "ordinary Australians", if there is any such thing. That is a serious misconception.

The other is that they are cultural enclaves that serve only the vestigial part of Australian society, which is passing away. That is not true either. We have 40 different faiths, and cultural community traditions that support those faiths, present here in our school. And we have a percentage of hardship, and access and diversity bursaries, to make sure we are reaching out to people that can't otherwise afford to be here.



Can you share some recent school achievements that you are particularly proud of?

We are a top ten world school in robotics. We are part of the FIRST Robotics Competition, an international competition held in the US. We made it through to the semi-final playoffs in that competition earlier this year. That's a pretty cool achievement.

Darkinjung Barker is a very significant achievement. You put your money where your mouth is by not just talking about reconciliation, but doing something about it. And you don't pretend you're going out there to *serve* other people because a *servicing* relationship implies that they need something that you have. We want to be involved in a two-way reconciliation so we are as open to learn from Indigenous cultures as we are to share access to European education.

A third is the warm way the community has responded to the decision to extend coeducation across the entire school. It has been very warmly welcomed right across the whole community, and for an old school that's a big deal.

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

There are many that come to mind. I'd love to see extending the Indigenous education vision; I'd love to see smarter penetration of IT, not just screens in front of every student but something much more imaginative; and I'd like to see academic tracking and data used more wisely in order to assist student motivation.

But I think the number one at the moment is the continued de-privatisation of the classroom. And achieving that by making sure every teacher is observed by a critical friend/ colleague twice a year at least. Getting the closed door open, getting everybody inside each other's classrooms and feeding back on what makes great teaching in a changing environment.