

Financial Review Focus | Boarding schools guide

Flexibility the answer to parents' new demands

Adapting to change

Agnes King

Sydney girls' school Loreto Normanhurst has popped the bonnet on its digital learning management in a radical overhaul of how it delivers student feedback and performance updates to parents.

It is inviting them into the inner sanctum. Parents will still get a report at the end of each semester, a requirement by law. But their significance will be enhanced by Loreto Normanhurst's decision to give parents access to its learning management system so they can track their daughters' performance and feedback in real time.

"We know that's what parents are looking for – that authentic partnership piece," says Kieryn Bateman, director of learning at Loreto Normanhurst.

"It can be difficult to do in traditional structures of education, but most schools are realising that it's necessary and that it's actually healthy for the students and parents to be working in that way in partnership and to have that visibility."

The decision was based on research and consultation with parents and students.

The program, still in its early days, is particularly valuable for the boarder families, giving parents another way to connect with their daughters and leading to healthy conversations at home, says Bateman.

This growing involvement also stems from the different values emerging in society, such

as same-sex marriage and the anti-Trump and #BlackLivesMatter movements, as parents take a greater interest in what their children are being taught to check it aligns with their moral code. This is one of the most important questions that parents should ask when selecting a boarding school, says Geelong Grammar School principal Rebecca Cody: do the school's values, philosophy and culture align with our family's beliefs?

Schools are adapting by injecting a level of flexibility in their structured programs to address current issues, such as the #metoo movement and the recent petition on consent, with students in an age-appropriate way.

"We want our students to feel safe to discuss these issues but also be informed so that they can develop their own opinion," says Kylie McCullah, head of academic care at St Catherine's girls' school in Sydney.

Boarding schools have their hands full adapting to new demands from parents, who want more of everything and less of nothing.

That is the upshot of a recent parent satisfaction survey conducted by The King's School in Sydney: more academia, more sports, more Christian values, more creative arts.

As part of a new student wellbeing model, Geelong Grammar middle school and senior students engage with a learning coach three times a week to identify and pursue personal wellbeing and learning goals.

"Parents are more mindful of adolescence and mental health. This has been the most noticeable shift in the last four years," says Dr Paul Hine, principal at



Aligning values. Geelong Grammar School principal Rebecca Cody, above, and Loreto Normanhurst's Kieryn Bateman.



Sydney boys' school Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview.

"Parents appear to have adjusted their expectations of their sons' potential and have broadened their views beyond a specific focus on academic performance."

"Parents and carers are expressing a heightened interest in better understanding their sons' abilities, challenges and skills in the school context, [and] also expressing a greater desire to collaborate and problem solve where required with our pastoral care and teaching and learning educators."

Compounded by the community fragmentation experienced through COVID-19, McCullah says parents want wellbeing programs that explicitly teach skills including resilience, self-care, celebrating gratitude and navigating difficult situations. This is coinciding with a

shift away from the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) emphasis.

"They haven't disappeared yet, but the pandemic and distance learning experience has really escalated that conversation in terms of what we actually value, how do we redefine success," says Jackie Camilleri, The King's School deputy head of academics.

Also driving this is universities making early offers. More than half of The King's School boys were accepted into a university or scholarship program before sitting their Higher School Certificate last year.

"That is a significant shift from even five years ago," says Camilleri.

The age-old question of whether co-ed or single-sex schools produce the most confident, well-rounded young adults continues to plague parents. Learning how to develop healthy relationships with the opposite sex can be tough for boarders in single-sex schools where the opportunities for interaction between boys and girls are often limited.

St Catherine's McCullah says there is growing demand for authentic opportunities for boys and girls from single-sex schools to mix in a safe environment.

St Catherine's connects with a number of local independent boys schools for musicals, music concerts and cadets to facilitate this.

Says Dr Hine: "Education is a landscape of constant change and evolution. We seek to listen, continually learn and actively communicate with our staff, students and community. As trends change, we need to be agile while making informed decisions." **AFR**

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