

Top-performing school principal reveals risk-taking success recipe



By Sarah Duggan

Published March 13, 2019

There is no doubt in Jeremy Stowe-Lindner's mind that he leads one of Australia's 'golden nuggets of education'.



The principal of top performing Bialik College in Melbourne talks to Sarah Duggan about taking risks, international PD excursions, school-led research and why his 'cross-communal Jewish Zionist' school has been the top VCE performer in the state for the second time in three years.

You've just farewelled your Year 12s from 2018 who topped the state in their VCE - what does that achievement mean to you and the school?

I think the question is more about how many students got their first preferences for further study. So the VCE is one measure, and we are very proud. Just for background, this is the second time in three years [Bialik has topped Victoria], which is unheard of in the non-selective sector. And 22 of the last 23 years (we've been) in the top five, which is unrivalled.

So it is very humbling, and we're also very realistic that it is a combination of factors that leads to academic and wider success; it is schooling and teaching and learning and resources, it's parenting, it's balance - and we know that our highest achievers are not kids who are slaving away 100 per cent of the time, they work

Get unlimited
access to
education
news &
magazines

EducationHQ

Find out more 

very hard but they are also the kids who are in the sports teams and in performing arts, in leadership groups and mentoring younger kids. We can prove that balance leads to success.

Is this 'balance', as you put it, your key ingredient in the academic success pie?

I think there are a few different factors, we have a very strong 'culture of thinking' in the school, which is the product of our relationship with [Harvard University Project Zero]. The Cultures of Thinking is an approach to learning and thinking which is in hundreds of schools now, but Bialik was the research base for that, and is still a worldwide leader in the development of that approach.

We host a conference every two years at the school on the Cultures of Thinking ... We attract 400 to 500 educators from around the world every two years to that conference, which is also very humbling.

Is there a danger that you become known to the public only for your academic merit and not for the well-rounded education that you strive to deliver at Bialik?

Yes, I think that is a danger for those enrolling and also for our teaching staff, as well. The students and the teachers that we seek to be a part of our family are those that contribute in lots of different ways. We have graduates every year who receive an unscored VCE and the range of attainment here is far wider than I think many give us credit for.

How do you go about countering this kind of perception?

Well, in a few different ways. If you look at my VCE letter, the first page doesn't even mention academic results, it mentions how much was raised for charity, and how many kids were mentoring Preppies. It lists that wider involvement, and then it says 'oh, and by the way, these are the spectacular achievements in VCE.' Look, it's done a little bit tongue in cheek, but it's also intended to send a very strong message about that.

We invest very heavily in the non-academic side [of education], we employ, for example, four informal educators in the school, and we have an informal education team, which is very unusual in the sector. They do not teach formal classes, but they are involved in relationship education, they are involved in leadership, they are involved in volunteering. And they support all that side of the school, so that's a significant investment on the part of the college.

We also invest very heavily in teacher professional development. So since I have been here, we have committed to sending six staff overseas every year. We sent staff to Harvard and to Reggio Emilia in Italy and to Israel ... and the reason for that is not just offering amazing professional development opportunities for colleagues.

Melbourne is a wonderful place to live, but it is at the end of the train line - nobody passes through Melbourne on their way to somewhere else (laughs). So because of that isolation, there can be a parochialism, and if you are successful, that can also contribute to an arrogance. So it's really important that our staff go out, go overseas, go to other places, and be inspired by what other people do and bring that back to our community.

How have these international PD experiences changed what you do at the college?

In lots of ways. Our early learning centre was the first Reggio Emilia inspired building in Australia. We sent our architect to Italy before he submitted his plans for the ELC. We talk about the centre as the 'third teacher'; the environment is the third teacher.

So even something as simple as that brings in excellence from overseas. When colleagues go to Harvard, they are really learning about the latest research that is impacting on thinking.

We had a delegation of four colleagues going on an environmental tour of Israel, for example, this year, and they are leading environmental projects at the school on their return. So it is not a 'no strings attached' commitment when we send out colleagues on these opportunities, and they come back enthused and excited about their pedagogy and about the school.

Bialik is Melbourne's oldest Jewish school, how do you be progressive in what you do but also hold onto your heritage?

That's a very good question. Look, it's old in the context of being a new country; the school I went to in the UK as a student was founded in 1552, so a school that was founded in 1942 is a real newbie in that context!

The college has always had a reputation as a non-denominational Jewish school as being 'edgy' in its curriculum and its programs, because it is not tied to any stream of Judaism ... at times it's slightly frowned upon because of that - but that has also given it a freedom to think outside the box, and to be entirely independent.

So even though we are a Jewish school, by constitution we have no religious authority within the school, so when we choose to do slightly odd things - like for example, we are the first school in Australia to have

dogs as part of a mainstream curriculum experience, on an almost daily basis in the school.

So people look at that and go 'ah, yeah yeah yeah, that's Bialik doing something interesting again.' But when you consistently get the academic results that we do, it verifies those risks. And from a leadership perspective, that gives a little bit of cover for some risk-taking as well, because if the results weren't as strong as they were, things that look a little crazy would be frowned upon a little more.

You've said before that the college is one of the 'golden nuggets of education'. What makes it stand out from the school crowd?

I think in terms of its size, so it's a Goldilocks size - we have 70-80 children [per year level], so it means we know everybody and we know everybody's name, and that's really important.

We are all on one campus, which physically gives us the opportunity to be really creative. We can partner up our Year 11s with our Preps, we are building a crèche at the moment and that might be integrated with some of the VET provision.

We are really adventurous in our relationships, so the first school in Australia to have a relationship with [Harvard University], the first school to have a Reggio Emilia inspired early learning centre in the community ... we were featured [by] Channel 7 a while ago because they were doing research on the poor quality of school dinners. They came across our menu for our school canteen, which is a zero sugar, zero salt offering that has things like quinoa salads and made-to-measure sandwiches and salads everyday. So we try and do things that are a little different but make an impact - and we are very focused on 'what is the impact of that?'

We are increasingly becoming interested in data: aware that data informs, it doesn't instruct, but at the same time we are able to measure things through output, through achievement, through survey...

How important is it to foster a strong Jewish identity in your students and staff?

That's central to what we do, as a pluralistic school, we are one of the few schools in the community who are inclusive in who we take in, so we don't have an orthodox definition of who is Jew. So our range of students is very broad, and because we are non-denominational, our mission is unashamedly for children to experience a range of beliefs and practices. And if we have graduates who are practicing orthodox or progressive or secular, we don't have a view about what is right or wrong, as long as they have an informed choice.

And that is really refreshing, because it's not expecting our graduates to fit into a blueprint of what is right and wrong from a religious practice perspective.

What are some of your goals or plans for the college this year?

We have got some very exciting things going on. We are building a crèche, so we are expanding our provision from three-year-old down to three months ... we are developing a new strategy on resilience through the school, and that's resilience for our parent body as well as our students. We've done some analysis of the kind of kids in senior and middle school who show anxiety and our question in our research was 'were there any early signs of that when they were in early primary school?'

We came up with some interesting hypotheses, which we were able to test. One of which was kids who were reluctant to attend camp in Year 3 and kids who were reluctant to attend swimming galas [were at a greater risk of developing anxiety by Year 9].

And now that doesn't mean that if you don't attend camp in Year 3 and you don't attend swimming galas you are going to be an anxious child in Year 9, but there was a correlation among some children.

[So] this year we are introducing a Year 2 camp in school, and we are saying to our Year 2 families, 'this isn't just about attending camp, this is about overcoming uncomfortable situations - not everything can be brilliant all of the time' ... because if we can work with our youngest children on overcoming discomfort then as they get older they have got a stronger skill-set. We did [the research] ourselves. About 70 per cent of our graduates have been with us since Kinder, so we are able to track behaviours and nuances over a significant period of time.