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The programs - innovative teaching is vital.

The Middle Years: Ideas at the centre

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The first and last years of school have long been a focus for educators and are undoubtedly crucial learning stages. But the middle years, generally considered to be grade 5 to year 8, are equally important. This stage of development, from the ages of 10 to 15, is a time of enormous change physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally.

During that time, behaviour and engagement issues can emerge as children explore and question their place in the world. If these students are not engaged, they risk losing interest in school and underperforming in their VCE. They are also discovering social media and navigating friendships, making pastoral care/well-being even more important.

Good schools navigate the middle years in innovative ways. Some have a stand-alone facility, while others use experiential learning that allows students to explore local communities. Projects are practical and engaging, often incorporating the latest technology.

MLC vice-principal Margaret Horton says students in this age group flourish when they are engaged in learning, challenged and supported, encouraged to make choices and take responsibility for their learning. "It's about different programs that are age and stage-appropriate, really rich, authentic and engaging learning," she says.

Methodist Ladies' College

Developmentally appropriate approaches to learning and teaching, and opportunities for students to learn to relate well and live with others, build self-awareness and independence underpin the middle years at MLC.

MLC has a junior school (prep to grade 6), junior secondary school (years 7 to 8), middle school (years 9 to 10) and senior school (years 11 to 12). Some programs start in grade 5, such as the sequential education outdoors program at MLC Banksia, an important part of the curriculum. This culminates with eight weeks at MLC Marshmead in the optional year 9 remote-site program.

From grade 5, leadership opportunities are offered through the student representative council, house system, peer support, sport, music, drama, social service, clubs and committees.

From grade 5, students choose co-curricular activities and local and international charities to engage with and support. As they move into high school, they choose elective subjects and can join educational exchanges in locations such as Vietnam (junior school), Tanna Island, Vanuatu (junior secondary school) and Tanzania (middle school).

Horton says "the middle years require a holistic approach that builds relationships, engages and supports students while keeping learning and progress on track and developing a global outlook".



Methodist Ladies' College.

Brighton Secondary College

Year 9 students have their own Discovery Centre at Brighton Secondary College. Principal Julie Podbury says the roaming-teacher approach in the common learning areas is unique.

There is no typical back or front of these classrooms, which keeps students engaged and allows teachers to focus on individuals. Students use the school's new da Vinci Science, Arts and Technology Centre to extend their learning.

They are also offered experiences that relate their education to the real world, including trips to France and Japan. High-ability students may also be invited into the accelerated science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) elective at year 9, which includes a science study flight over Antarctica.

Students attend adventure camps that offer team building and leadership opportunities. They can undertake community placements such as mentoring primary school students and helping the elderly and local charities.



Brighton Secondary College.

"Students are encouraged and guided towards becoming managers of their own learning," Podbury says.

Brighton Secondary College has a junior school (years 7 to 9), senior school (10 to 12), offers the Government-accredited SEAL program and has an International Student Language Centre.

Marcellin College

Enriching the body, mind and spirit are key to the middle years at Marcellin College in Bulleen. From years 7 to 9 it integrates humanities and religious education to build on the pedagogical approaches that students experienced in primary school.

Director of junior school innovation Jason Shulman says the Year 7 Explore and Year 8 Discover programs offer an integrated religious and humanities subject underpinned by an inquiry-based approach that builds capacity and self-belief. Students use interests and experiences to develop "authentic questions" to explore.

"Students learn best when they are at the centre of their own learning," he says.

The curriculum is challenging so students receive emotional and social support using Marist traditions.

"The students in these respective year levels are blended throughout the campus," Shulman says. "They are in most part allocated a dedicated room per subject. This enables subject teachers and their students to take ownership of the space, underpinned by a contemporary and innovative curriculum."

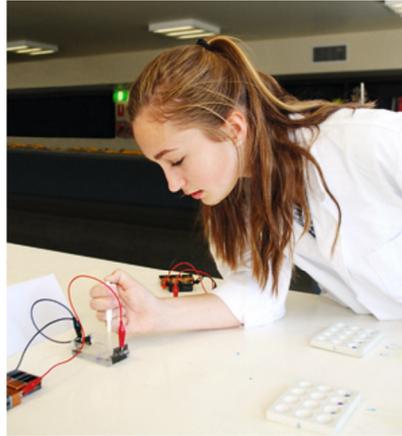
Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar School

Rather than having a separate middle school, Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar works to engage all students and ensure its learning programs are relevant and appropriate to their development stage. Deputy principal Dr Alan Hutchison says the school is committed to this period and contributed to the state government's middle years research and development project.

The school also runs projects such as the year 7 Nepal internet initiative, where the students raised money for internet infrastructure and Skype with students at Shree Jana Jagriti School. Such programs promote global awareness, empathy, responsibility and a "we can make a difference" attitude. "The middle years are vital in laying the foundations for engagement in learning, confidence in the value of education itself and self-belief in being successful through school and in life-long learning," Hutchison says.

Students are surveyed regularly. Year 7 to 10 girls recently said they valued camps, community service projects, leadership and teamwork activities, and the personal and social development programs.

"They rate their schooling as particularly strong in developing their self-confidence, sense of belonging and feeling valued as an individual," Hutchison says.



Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar School.

Geelong Grammar School

Relationships are key at Geelong Grammar, where middle school students are encouraged to develop them in and out of the classroom. The school was the world's first to develop a Positive Education program based on US professor Martin Seligman's Positive Psychology work, which focuses on skills that build confidence, resilience and optimism.

"Positive Education classes are taught at middle school to provide an in-depth exploration of the elements of well-being," says middle school head Tony Inkster.

Geelong Grammar consolidated its Corio middle school into grade 5 to year 8 in 1998, and defined grades five and six as its Toorak primary campus as leadership years. Grade 5 and 6 students are prepared for high school with practical experience, technology and specialist subjects such as science, health and physical education, technology, art, drama, music, library and Japanese. Years 7 and 8 follow a traditional secondary school structure, with more electives, specialist teachers and languages.

The program leads to the school's famous Timbertop campus, where year 9 students spend the school year living, working and studying in the bush.

They unearth personal strengths, develop confidence and learn the value of co-operative endeavour – awakening a belief in themselves that will help them overcome the obstacles and hurdles they will come across throughout their lives," Inkster says.

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