


3. PREMISES, BUILDINGS, AND EQUIPMENT.

The play area is sufficient for the number in attendance. The building is well lighted and ventilation is satisfactory. The equipment is adequate.



Continuing Traditions: 1987–2012

HE PAST 25 years have seen the modernisation of St Mary's Primary School under the leadership of several dedicated lay principals. Despite the many changes to the school since February 1912 when three Presentation Sisters from Ireland began teaching in a timber classroom with the most basic resources, there are many common threads that run through the 100 year history and connect the past with the present day.

St Mary's parish, school and community

St Mary's Primary School continues to maintain solid links with St Mary's parish and with the wider Dandenong community. Joan Kennedy reflects that from the very beginnings of the school in 1912, 'the fact that the Sisters needed the community in terms of financial help and also community support ... enabled the links between the school and the parish to be very, very strong'.¹ Despite the gradual replacement of teaching Presentation Sisters with lay teachers, each lay principal has continued to

OPPOSITE

Celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Presentation Sisters community in Dandenong, 1987. St Mary's School also celebrated its 75th anniversary that year and a special Mass of Thanksgiving was held at St Mary's Church.

Presentation Sisters of Victoria Archives

TOP

Extract from School Inspector's Report.



maintain a sound relationship with the parish priest. Religious education has remained a core part of the school curriculum and St Mary's teachers have continued to work closely with the parish on developing religious education and the sacramental program. Students are often walked across to St Mary's Church for Eucharistic celebrations and Mass.

The dedication and sensitive leadership of parish priest Father Anthony Guelen has been fundamental to the success of the ongoing relationship between the parish and the school. Tom Lindeman, principal of St Mary's Primary School in the late 1990s, particularly admires Father Guelen for the support he gave the school:

In all his actions and all his deeds and all his words, he always took every opportunity at a gathering or wherever to highlight that this is our Catholic primary school, and we're really proud of them.²

Rosemary Tesoriero recalls fond memories of Sister Margaret Fields, who was pastoral associate at St Mary's parish during the time that Rosemary was principal of St Mary's Primary School in the early 2000s. Sister Margaret ran sacramental classes for students once a week after school and also worked on the spiritual development and well-being of staff members at the school, organising spirituality workshops. Rosemary reflects that the close relationship between the school and the parish was fundamentally due to a common purpose, as 'everything we did, the children were the focus of it and families were the focus as well'.³

Founding philosophy

The school maintains a strong sense of the past and of the spirit in which it was established by the Presentation Sisters. In recording his memories of his school days, one of the first students, Len Keating, wrote that he would always 'cherish the memory of the nuns who took over the school with such little facilities, and played such a wonderful part in fostering the establishment of a thriving Catholic community in Dandenong'.⁴ St Mary's Primary School has held true to the spirit in which the Presentation Sisters began the school, providing quality Catholic education to children, no matter what their religion, culture or economic situation. Throughout the school's 100 year history, teachers have remained dedicated to creating a safe, welcoming and nurturing learning environment that is informed by Christian faith and values.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Grade 4 students in 1987. St Mary's is proud of the cultural diversity of its community and in the spirit of the Presentation Sisters, has always created a welcoming environment for newly arrived families.

Courtesy Faye Chandley

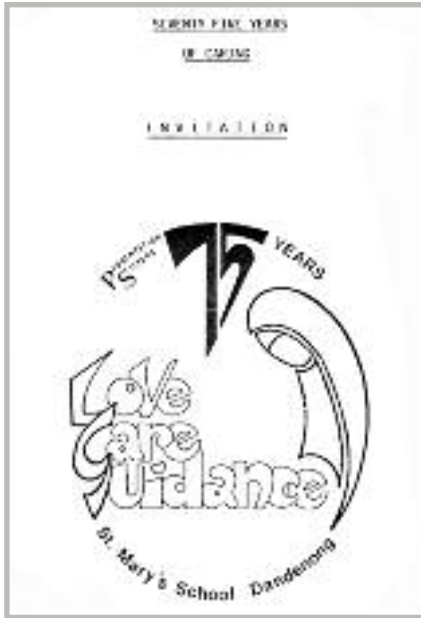
St Mary's students on a school camp. During his time as principal in the 1990s Tom Lindeman introduced a Prep to Grade 6 camping program.

Courtesy Faye Chandley

Prep and Grade 1 students in 1999. By this time students had access to a modernised library system, a computer lab and at least four computers in each classroom.

Sudanese students taking part in Seasons for Growth, an educational program for children who have experienced significant change or loss, early 2000s.

Courtesy Rosemary Tesoriero



Celebrating 75 years of Presentation Sisters in Dandenong, 1987. For principal Faye Chandley the words 'love, care and guidance' in this illustration designed by one of the St Mary's parents were the standout characteristics that the Presentation Sisters brought to the school.

Courtesy Faye Chandley

To commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Presentation Sisters in Dandenong and of St Mary's School, a Mass of Thanksgiving was held at St Mary's Church on 29 November 1987, attended by local parishioners and members of the Presentation Sisters community. One of the St Mary's parents, Neloo Krelschem, designed a badge to commemorate the anniversary, featuring an illustration of a Presentation Sister and the words 'love, care and guidance'. For the principal at the time, Faye Chandley, these words 'were really the standout characteristics that the Presentation Sisters brought to our school'.⁵ While their expertise in education was not forgotten, the school particularly acknowledged and celebrated the Presentation Sisters' philosophy to nurture and support the children and families of the school community. Despite the Presentation Sisters no longer having an active role within the school, their contribution and the vision with which they shaped the school is not forgotten.

A culturally rich community

In partnership with the parish, St Mary's Primary School has continued to embrace a strong tradition of cultural diversity, creating a welcoming environment for newly-arrived migrant and refugee families and initiating new programs and services tailored specifically to their needs. The English as a second language (ESL) program is now integrated into the curriculum at every year level, and the school provides linguistic and cultural support for parents and runs events celebrating the multicultural richness of the community. The St Mary's school community is focused on the needs of not only each student but also their families, encouraging and supporting parents to participate and engage in their child's education. Recently, a weekly program for parents has been introduced, focusing on a variety of outcomes, including community strengthening, learning at home and parenting.⁶ In the spirit of the Presentation Sisters, themselves Irish migrants, the cultural diversity of the community is something that the school prides itself on, and is identified by many as a unique feature.

One of the most significant changes at St Mary's during the past decade has been the influx of Sudanese refugee families into the Dandenong area. Rosemary Tesoriero, who took on the role of principal in 2000, recalls the huge impact that this had on the school, estimating that by the time she left in 2006, one in six students was Sudanese. This represented one of the largest waves of migration experienced by the school in its 100 year history. St Mary's parish and school welcomed all of these new families to the community with open arms, having had extensive prior experience with major migrant groups from Poland, Italy and more recently Mauritius, Sri Lanka, India and South America. However, the sudden influx of Sudanese students into the school over a short period of time did

present some challenges. Rosemary recalls that for teachers, it meant educating themselves about Sudanese culture to help connect with these new children and families. The school also worked to establish strong links with local support organisations, such as the Migrant Resource Centre and Foundation House, which provided crucial professional development to teachers to better equip them for dealing with linguistic and cultural issues in and out of the classroom. To help with communication between the school and Sudanese families and to promote the importance of education in the Sudanese community, Rosemary employed Michael Jada as Sudanese Liaison Officer. Michael worked for St Mary's parish in a similar role and 'was absolutely marvellous because he understood what ... [the Sudanese families] were going through and what their needs were'.⁷

During this busy and challenging time, the St Mary's community really pulled together to provide support to the newly-arrived families and make them feel welcome. Each year at Christmas time, teachers put together gift packages that were delivered to families. The aim was, Rosemary reflects, 'to make them feel wanted, welcome, a very important part of the community'.⁸ This is reminiscent of the 1950s when Joan Kennedy remembers being sent by the Sisters to deliver small brown paper parcels, containing school uniforms and food, to the front doors of newly-arrived families.⁹

Today, St Mary's continues to grow and diversify, with over 90 per cent of families coming from non-English speaking backgrounds. Different cultures are respected and celebrated for the contribution they make to the parish and school communities. Current principal Greg White strives to maintain the reputation of St Mary's as 'a school with an open door where people can come and feel happy and welcome, invited into the school'.¹⁰ As a member of the Sudanese community, Michael Jada wrote on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of St Mary's parish:

We do not feel like we are visiting outsiders; we already feel like being part of a big community, a community into which the small contribution we make is making it better, stronger and spiritually uplifting.¹¹

Nurturing students' well-being and development

The school has maintained a strong emphasis on student well-being and nurturing students' ongoing development – not only academically, but also spiritually, socially and physically – through a variety of programs. Music and the creative arts have been an important aspect of the school curriculum since its establishment 100 years ago. School concerts – a feature of the parish calendar since the very first



Michael Jada (left), pictured here with Joseph Sillah, was employed as Sudanese Liaison Officer in 2005 to help with communication between the school and Sudanese families and to promote the importance of education in the Sudanese community.

St Mary's Parish



concert was held in 1912 – are remembered by many past students of St Mary’s Primary School as a highlight of their school years. The tradition of an annual end-of-year concert continues today, bringing the community together to celebrate the achievements of the past year. The school choir also continues to be an integral part of St Mary’s today, singing at major sacramental celebrations and school and parish events, and providing an opportunity for students to showcase their musical abilities.

A writer’s workshop held in 1987 was the beginning of a program that was run during Faye Chandley’s time as principal. The workshops, which involved themed activities for the whole school, became an annual event. The program engaged students at all levels and encouraged participation from parents and the wider community. Faye explains, ‘We would have a whole school theme based right across the school focused on imparting particular skills where we would invite the community in’.¹²

The writer’s workshops in 1987 and 1988 were designed to expose St Mary’s students to well-known authors and illustrators and inspire them to develop and extend their own writing skills. In subsequent years, other themes included ‘Space Works’, with a science focus, ‘Our Earth’, which focused on the environment and featured an Artist in Residence Program, and ‘Just Imagine’, with a focus on creative arts. Parents were actively involved in each curriculum and invited to attend and participate with their children in the various activities. Building links with the community was also an important part of these events, with local businesses providing support. The St Mary’s Community Hall offered the perfect space for the children’s work to be put on display, giving the students ‘a real purpose for learning and presenting their work and showcasing it to the parents and the community’.¹³

The development of creativity and practical skills has always been an integral part of learning at St Mary’s. Len Keating, who attended St Mary’s School from the day that it opened in 1912, recalled that ‘an interesting break was provided for the boys each week when they attended woodwork or sloyd classes at the State School’.¹⁴ More recently, the development of technology at St Mary’s has also been an important aspect of providing students with a comprehensive education and allowing them to learn a varied set of skills. The first lay principal, Peter Slate, introduced computers into the school in the early 1980s, and Tom Lindeman developed the IT program significantly during his time as principal during the 1990s. With a focus on modernising the school, Tom started with the library, which was somewhat outdated and ‘still running the book system of the tags in the back’. The library was soon completely restocked with the help of a local family who owned a book shop, and automated with the introduction of a computerised library system. Tom soon saw the introduction of computers into the classrooms and by the time he left the school in 2000, St Mary’s boasted a computer lab and at least four computers in each classroom, as well as a consultant who regularly worked with staff on improving the IT curriculum.¹⁵

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

St Mary’s Primary School staff in 1992, 2002 and 2004.

Courtesy Faye Chandley and Rosemary Tesoriero

In August 2009 the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, visited St Mary’s to launch a major government stimulus funding plan. She is pictured here with Principal, Greg White, Father Anthony Guelen and Deputy Principal, Di Taranto.



Tom Lindeman also introduced a Prep to Grade 6 camping program. Previously, only Grade 6 classes had been taken on school camping excursions, but after Tom discovered that ‘a lot of kids lived in flats and had very little area to play in’, a camping program involving all students was introduced.¹⁶ Younger year levels had an extended school day where they participated in special activities at the school until 6 pm. Grade 2 students brought their sleeping bags and spent the night in the hall after preparing and sharing a meal with their parents, while older students were taken on extended adventures further afield.

The camping program continues today, with students in Grades 3 to 6 attending camps each year and younger students enjoying an extended outdoor activity day outside of the school. Principal Greg White has also developed the sports program, enhancing students’ physical well-being through participation in inter-school sports, including summer and winter sports, athletics and cross country. Through such initiatives, St Mary’s staff continue to focus on the broader development of students, enhancing learning through art, music and sports programs that enrich students’ general well-being, develop their skills and encourage independence.

Looking to the future

St Mary’s Primary School was established at a time when Catholic schools survived without any government funding, through the passionate dedication of the community. Parents and families, often struggling themselves, provided what funding, resources and support they could and religious Sisters and Brothers with limited training taught large classes of children for little financial reward. St Mary’s managed to not only survive, but grow and flourish through several decades before government funding of Catholic education was again formally established in the 1970s. The school survived numerous challenges such as low staff salaries and limited resources, a population explosion in the 1950s due to post-war migration, the incorporation of many families from non-English speaking backgrounds into the school community, and a decline in teaching Presentation Sisters who were gradually replaced by lay teachers until the retirement of the last full-time teaching Presentation Sister in 1986.

Throughout the 100 years since St Mary’s was established, Dandenong has also changed – transformed from a semi-rural market town into a thriving industrial and commercial centre. The availability of jobs and affordable residential housing has seen the population of the City of Greater Dandenong swell to over 140,000 residents from more than 150 nations. The St Mary’s school

OPPOSITE

St Mary’s students and community enjoying annual workshop events, which involved activities for the whole school planned around a particular theme. The first writer’s workshop was held in 1987 and became an annual event during Faye Chandley’s time as principal. The writer’s workshops offered an opportunity for parents to be involved in activities with their children, and for the school to build links with the community. Colourful badges were made each year based around the nominated theme.

Courtesy Faye Chandley

community reflects this cultural diversity. The school's physical structure has also changed. Since moving from McCrae Street to New Street in 1968, the school buildings have been refurbished and updated several times. Almost \$2 million has been spent since the year 2000 on several major building and school improvement programs.¹⁷

Despite the significant challenges and changes that the school has faced – both internally and in the wider community – St Mary's Primary School has held true to the founding philosophy of the Presentation Sisters, continuing to provide children with a warm and caring environment in which to learn and grow. It is a school built upon the continued faith, generosity and dedication of the community. With the support of committed staff, the school has successfully managed to modernise, while at the same time maintaining its links with the past. For principal Greg White and the St Mary's community today, it is important to look to the future while remembering the past, acknowledging those who have come before and those who have shaped St Mary's into the unique and special place that it is today.

Today, St Mary's is attended by students from many diverse cultural backgrounds, with 40 different nationalities represented in the 2011 enrolment. Students at the Mass held on 12 February 2012 to launch the centenary year of St Mary's Primary School.

