

High on achievement

ET visits Melbourne's first selective high school in 50 years

Nossal High School's inaugural year in 2010 marks the development of an educational hub in Berwick in Melbourne's outer east as much as the establishment of a top flight selective school.

The first of its type to be built in 50-plus years, Nossal High School will join MacRobertson Girl's High School, Melbourne High School and, in 2011, Suzanne Cory High School at Werribee in the city's west to form a network of selective schools.

While operating independently, the four schools will share resources and cross-pollinate ideas towards the best results.

Nossal High's location within the grounds of Monash University's Berwick campus will give the students access to university facilities and senior students access to Monash's lecturers and those at the nearby Chisholm TAFE.

Principal architect Sarah Ball from Woods Bagot, says that the buildings were designed around the school's teaching approach, which has an accent on tertiary style and self-directed learning. The first stage comprises the teaching facility with stage two, encompassing a sports facility, music and performing arts complex, and lecture theatre, to come on line in 2011.

It was an accelerated project – with the entire first stage, from tender to concept and build completed within two years. The total build represents a \$20 million investment.

Woods Bagot was responsible for the architecture of the Monash Berwick campus and had a good overall understanding of the site and how the high school project would interact with the university.



Above: High ability students achieve more when educated together; Below: Stage one will be complete in March with students currently using the classrooms at Monash Berwick



“We wanted the school to have a presence on the university campus and make its own statement. The design was devised to reflect a theme of excellence, which is echoed in the finishes that we used.

“There is actually no back to the building, it was designed to be viewed from all aspects, whether being approached through the university from the front or the freeway to the side,” Ms Ball says.

Stage one's first and second floors are linked with a two-storey library/learning resource centre.

“Students are encouraged to pass through the learning centre and down the building's spine to the classrooms. It ties in with the idea of constant learning and progress.”

The “spine”, a rethink of the standard corridor, is multi-purpose, with seating designed to



Above: Nossal High is nothing if not multicultural; Below: assistant principal Toni Meath and principal Roger Page

encourage informal meeting spots, “They’re blurred, flexible areas.”

The classrooms are organised into four “teams” (learning communities) which form the basis for the student’s pastoral and House groups. The rooms can be used as a larger learning space or sub-divided into three intimate spaces so students can work in groups.

“The teachers’ rooms are still located within each team area, but we’ve tried to design the classrooms so that there is less of an emphasis on the eyes to front format.” Each learning community is self contained with the students and staff toilet facilities, kitchenette, printing and lockers housed in the area so that is becomes their ‘home base’ for the four years they are at Nossal High.

The ground floor has administration, two learning communities, food technology, creative arts, café, and the bottom floor of the learning resource centre.

Rising around three metres from the roofline, stage one’s roof cowls are an interesting design feature. A prominent part of the building’s silhouette, they admit abundant light and air, reducing the school’s energy footprint.

The school’s overarching philosophy has been based on the thinking of Harvard academic Howard Gardner, specifically his “Five minds for the future” theory.

Broadly, Gardner’s work stresses five tenets; the disciplined mind, the synthesising mind, the creative mind, the respectful mind and the ethical mind. A grounding in those areas gives an individual both the enthusiasm and the tools to thrive in school and later life.

Toni Meath, the school’s assistant principal and its director of curriculum says that an environment like Nossal High supports highly



able students to perform to their potential.

Each student will have an individual learning program. The planned pathway of each student’s education will be the result of a very inclusive process, “We’re encouraging a shared learning journey between teachers, parents and students,” she says.

As it matures, the school will become a lively place. Students are drawn from some 96 schools in as many geographical locations and its Berwick location means that Dandenong, one of Australia’s most culturally diverse areas, is a stone’s throw away.

The school will work with other local schools in the Casey network to ensure that it becomes a part of the broader educational

community, and will host pre-service teacher teams, particularly for those studying gifted education. Nossal High School also houses the Southern Metropolitan Regional professional development centre that can accommodate up to 100 teachers.

The school has been located in the urban growth corridor, as has Suzanne Cory High School; areas where, traditionally, fewer students gain entry to selective schools and comparatively fewer achieve tertiary entry.

“Our school offers another option for highly academic students and adds to the diversity of educational opportunities in the area and is contributing to Australia’s intellectual capital,” principal Roger Page says.