

Doing it tough to build self-belief, resilience

How one school is pushing the boundaries in its experiential learning program. Monique Butterworth reports.

Realising you can achieve what you might once have thought impossible is a powerful lesson. And a lesson not necessarily learnt in the classroom.

Increasingly, independent schools are incorporating outdoor education as a means of engaging students in practical and active learning experiences.

Natural environments beyond the classroom can help students build positive relationships with their surroundings, create life skills, build resilience and even allow teens to realise that stepping away from screens for a while is not such a bad thing.

Jenny Williams, the principal of Firbank Grammar School in the Melbourne bayside suburb of Brighton, says hearing students talk about confidence built by achieving something they thought they could never do is what she loves the most about the school's experiential education program.

"Wellbeing sits at the heart of everything we do," she says. "If students feel safe, supported and secure, they will start to flourish."

"Firbank's program helps build that self-belief, adaptability, confidence and the kind of compassion and empathy we want to see in students. The challenges help develop these skills and once you've got those, you're in a great place to flourish academically."

"Taking students – particularly students who come from a metropolitan background – to a place that is unfamiliar and challenging is a really good thing," she adds. "It helps develop resilience and adaptability."

Firbank Grammar's Experiential Education is a sequential program, starting in year 7 with the Discovering Possibilities Program. Students go on to complete the Exploring Sustainability Program the following year, then the Connecting Through Journeys Program (year 9), the Broadening Horizons Program (year 10) and the Summit to Sea expedition (year 11).

The school's endeavour earned Firbank Grammar 'Best Co-Curricular Program' (service, environmental, outdoor) at the 2022 Australian Education Awards.

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dedicated, enthusiastic and passionate for all the right reasons," Williams says proudly.

"They have developed this very careful sequential development of different skills across our really authentic experiences."

Williams admits that sometimes the skills the program instils in its students can be hard to measure.

"People develop relationships when they're in a tough situation. You've got to reach out and help others or ask people for help. You've got to look out for each other," she says.

"We also really want students to be kind. That's one of our big things here at Firbank. It's all about working with others, developing the



self-confidence and an ability to be self-aware, believing you can do something.”

Bernie Mills, Firbank’s director of experiential education, says the multi-year program is what separates Firbank from other schools.

“Our program model is two trips a year of varying lengths of time,” he says. “It’s embedded into our curriculum for all students in years 7-10.

“In year 11, the Summit to Sea is optional. It takes 20 days starting from the top of Mt Kosciuszko, walking down to the Snowy River, jumping into rafts and paddling to the sea at Marlo. We get over half of year 11 signing up to participate in their school holidays.”

Mills says he is incredibly proud of

the students and how they embrace the opportunities offered.

“They become highly competent and capable, proving to themselves they can achieve remarkable things,” he says. “Students are prepared to put the common interest and needs of others before themselves. They gain real-life learning experiences that have a profound impact on wellbeing and growth.”

Mills says the goal of experiential education is to create meaningful learning experiences that foster critical thinking, problem-solving skills and personal growth, while also providing students with opportunities to develop practical skills such as teamwork, leadership and communication.

“By focusing on practical application and student-centred learning, experiential education can help cultivate a love of learning and a deep commitment to personal growth and development,” he says.

“We acknowledge, too, the importance for our students to be engaged in real world issues such as climate change, First Nations understanding and reconciliation.

“We continue to incorporate more environmental science and service learning into each experience to enable students to gain awareness of the various issues impacting the environment, as well as solutions we can put in place to improve and promote a sustainable future.”



THE GREAT OUTDOORS:

SANTA SABINA COLLEGE, SYDNEY

Students from Strathfield-based Santa Sabina College retreat to Tallong Campus in the Southern Highlands, two hours south of Sydney.

Situated on 97 hectares of bushland in Wodi Wodi country, the campus hosts students from years 3-12 every year for a tailored outdoor education experience. Mountain biking, flying fox, high ropes, camping, hiking and other outdoor activities connect students with the bush and one another.

Collaboration, problem-solving, communication and teamwork are core skills that are developed through the programs. Students develop appreciation for their own and others’ gifts and are encouraged to value diversity.

INTERNATIONAL GRAMMAR SCHOOL, SYDNEY

International Grammar School students in Ultimo are encouraged to try new activities within their outdoor education program. Years 5 and 6 attend overnight outdoor education camps, before progressing to increasingly challenging camps in years 7, 8 and 9.

The SAGE program in years 10 and 11 sees students select their adventure in Tasmania with outdoor education options of hiking Maria Island, Freycinet Peninsula, Three Capes and Wukalina (Bay of Fires).

Students can opt for non-outdoor education experiences in art, drama and film or volunteer at the Tasmanian Devil Unzoo at Taranna, south-east of Hobart, working with keepers, and helping maintain the zoo and its animals.