

# **The Friends' School, Hobart**

## **A Report from the Principal to the Association Annual General Meeting 10 May 2008**

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For many years the Principal's report was presented to the Association as an agenda item at its AGM to accept the Financial Statements of the School.

However, early in my Principalship, in 2003, it was decided I would report more formally to a wider audience that included senior staff, representatives of the Parents & Friends, Staff and Old Scholars Associations as well as Tasmania Regional Meeting.

Although a report on the state of the School's health cannot avoid comment on enrolments, curriculum development, academic success, financial viability etc. because of the consistency of this audience, I have each year felt an obligation to give the report a different slant. My great concern has been that I would run out of slants because given the longevity of most Quakers, recycling seems, even in one's most optimistic and naive moods, a remote possibility.

The majority of this report must, of course be concerned with the areas I've just mentioned but as later today the Board intends to engage itself in a workshop entitled "Vision for the School's Future", I am tempted to add a few personal ideas about how for example we may help our present Prep Classes prepare for the time when in 2020 they will be in Year 12.

Now let me emphasise that they will only be ideas - not policy. Ideas to be considered and possibly rejected. I emphasise this because in my latest performance appraisal it was brought to my attention that the Board has a perception that I am a lateral "top down" thinker and that some of my strategic recommendations come out of left field and this, for some, is a source of tension.

So please relax and remember if I start to speculate where we might be ten years or more, they are only ideas.

Before we can realistically look at where we are going we must of course have a good idea of where we are and how we are travelling. We need to have a feel of how well our practices match the values we promote, the levels of academic success we are achieving, how comfortable we are with current pedagogy, our standing in the community, an assessment of how well our infrastructure is serving our current needs and its adequacy for our future aspirations and of course how financially viable are we?

Much of this knowledge and awareness is subjective but we do have some measurable indicators. We are fortunate that most if not all of these measurable indicators have, over the last 10 to 15 years, been positive and in most cases increasingly positive.

Perhaps the most important School health indicator we have is the community's demand to have their children attend The Friends' School.

Our traditional measure of this demand has been our enrolment numbers. Despite pressures on our physical capacity, enrolments have again grown this year. In the last 121 years demand for places has never been higher. Today we have more than 1,300 K to 12 students - the highest ever enrolment in our history.

As I reminded you last year, the enrolment growth in the School is made more remarkable by the fact that it is being achieved in a demographic environment where the school population in Tasmania is declining by 1.5% per year.

Enrolments have been the traditional indicator of demand for places, but a more recent and more accurate measure is the number of potential students on our waitlist. It is not so long ago that this measure did not exist and for the vast majority of schools in Hobart is a goal yet to be attained.

We now have waitlists in most of our Kindergarten to Year 10 year groups and our Year 7 entry is now waitlisted out to 2019. It is a great sadness that we were unable to accommodate 143 students wanting to enter the School at the start of 2008.

It is also with great regret that recently we decided to close the long waitlist for our outstanding Friends' Early Years childcare centre because those joining the list would have no realistic chance of gaining places.

Late in 2007 we used a parent survey devised by the Education Department to give us an additional insight into how this important part of the community views the School. We were only allowed to distribute 500 copies of the survey across all sections of the School. Despite a short turn around, 193 replies were returned for analysis in Melbourne.

In every aspect of the survey Friends' parents responded more positively than the average responses from the other Tasmanian schools participating in the survey. In response to the statement, *"Overall, I am satisfied with the education my child receives from their school"* 84.4% of parents strongly agreed and only 1.2% disagreed.

Very similar results were recorded about statements reflecting the suitability and the standard of the school's academic programs. High levels of satisfaction were also expressed about the range and quality of extra-curricular activities. Strong support was shown for the propositions that the School always aims to improve the quality of the education it provides and that we always strive to improve.

As with all communities, we have those who want to seek out and focus on the negatives, however I believe the recent survey results and the measures of enrolment growth and waitlists are authentic measures of our positive standing in the community.

I know some are less convinced and wish to establish other measures that may more rigorously reveal strengths and weaknesses as well as broaden the scope of people's responses. And fair enough, for we must resist being seduced by complacency or shirk from the aim of continuous improvement.

But perhaps on special occasions such as these we might be allowed to retreat from the harshness of expecting perfection from our leaders and teachers and look at these indicators as evidence that we have achieved and are continuing to achieve special things in this School.

Many families who presently are outside our community want a share of those special things. So how can we help them achieve that aim? Or more realistically how can we increase future enrolments without overcrowding our physical facilities or compromising our standards of pastoral care?

Maybe due to curriculum improvements and better learning outcomes, demand for places in the primary section of the School has grown quite strongly in the last few years but with the addition of one or two new teaching spaces there is still some capacity in one or two of the year levels.

Again because our building program over the last four years has kept up with increasing enrolments at Clemes we are still able to take in a few more students in Years 11 and 12. The bottleneck is the High School. We have reached our overall enrolment cap in this section of the School. However, in the short to medium term we will modify the size of each year group so that we can expand the size of our Year 10. This will create some spaces for more domestic as well as some international students in the final High School year. The policy should increase the intakes into Year 11 and enable our international students to be better prepared for pre-tertiary courses at Clemes.

We must recognise, though, that in the short to medium term we will do little more than optimise our facilities and only tinker with or ameliorate the potential problem of sustained over demand for a Friends' School education.

Here I must emphasise the word "potential", because we will be operating in a demographic environment that predicts a Statewide decline in the school aged population for some time ahead. A trend that has led the Education Department to plan the closure of 35 schools over the next ten years. Within this environment we cannot be certain that the drift from the Government sector towards the Non-Government school sectors will continue. Also, while we may not be able to predict the severity and timing of any economic slowdowns we know they will occur.

However, the declining Tasmanian school population is not a new phenomenon and we have operated successfully in this negative environment for some time. Also if we believe in the effectiveness of our strategic planning for curriculum and pastoral care and our capacity to achieve the ambitious aspirations we have in these areas, we have to believe that, short term fluctuations apart, there will be a continuing high demand for places in the School. We need to decide how to react to this proposition.

We can either lift the drawbridge and operate as a protected and privileged oasis or try to satisfy the demand. If it is the latter, we will have to consider bold and imaginative strategies.

We know our campuses have a different feel when, for examples, the Year 6s are in Canberra or the Year 9s are on Bruny Island. So could we take pressure off our Hobart campuses by teaching some of our students for periods at Far South, the Tiwi Islands or an overseas campus? Should we, with the likelihood of a number of inner city schools being presented to the real estate market, not seriously be considering an additional campus to house specific activities or year groups?

In the year ahead we intend to be proactive in exploring some of these possibilities. I remind you that I am talking only of possibilities. It will be for others to either champion or reject them. I also remind you that much of our current success is based on our past ability to be bold and different.

Often big changes are more successful if they are an accumulation of many small changes. So two examples of the small steps we intend to take this year are as follows.

For Far South, in the short run, we must build some supervisors' accommodation closer to the student dormitories but we will also create a master plan for the infrastructure needed to support longer stay study periods at the camp.

Many of our plans come from marrying objectives from different strands of the strategic plan. For example, when thinking about our 2020 vision we may ask what second languages will give our students the greatest advantages and be most useful to them. Would, for example, being a Chinese speaker be more useful than being a German speaker?

There appears to be many reasons to suggest we should grow our capacity to teach Chinese, but compared with schools in the large mainland capitals we are disadvantaged. It is very much more difficult to attract good teachers of Chinese to a small isolated city with no substantial Chinese population or culture.

One way to build a reputation in Chinese is for us to build a strong Chinese language and culture support base with Jin Yuan our Shanghai sister school.

When I, with our then Board member Helen Lucas, visited Jin Yuan in 2004, Jin Yuan talked tentatively about possible future joint ventures. Having lived in an Asian, Chinese dominated city for 12 years I understood that first trust and respect would have to be nurtured for some time before further cooperation projects could seriously be contemplated. Since 2003 we have built a strengthening relationship with Jin Yuan through student visits, scholarships and extended visits by the senior staff of both schools. In the belief that now is the time to take our relationship to a higher level, the Deputy Principal, Business Manager and I will accompany our students on their visit and stay at Jin Yuan later this month. Jin Yuan has already responded positively to our suggestion, made earlier this year, that we discuss future projects with them.

The exact nature of these projects is yet to be determined, but in the meantime we have researched Jin Yuan's location, financial strength, academic standing and the emerging establishment of the International Baccalaureate in China and in particular Shanghai. From our research we see some exciting possibilities.

The financial outcome in 2007 was similar to other strong outcomes we have enjoyed in recent years.

Much of the credit for these strong performances must go to Shaun Sargent, our outstanding Business Manager. The containment of costs to budget allocations, his shrewd use of cash reserves to bolster income and the minimisation of bad debts has helped us enjoy the benefits of increased income from controlled enrolment growth.

The recent strong financial performances, along with some increase in debt, enabled us in 2007 to invest \$3.5 million in infrastructure and equipment.

The major investments were the construction of the new Art and Music classrooms and toilet block at Morris and the purchase of Far South our environmental education facility just south of Dover. A number of smaller projects were also completed including the development of a High School Student Support Centre, an upgrade of the High School classrooms in East Block as well as the installation of

soundproofing and floor power points in four of the High School laboratories. At the start of 2008 we embarked on an extensive upgrading of the play and social spaces on both our Commercial Road and Argyle Street campuses.

Without a stable and secure financial framework we cannot support the investment needed to improve our teaching and learning.

Looking into the future I see the financial demands on good schools increasing dramatically. There is, therefore, an urgent need to build The Friends' School's future financial capacity. To illustrate the importance of finance, I will link it directly to teaching and learning and our values, especially the pursuit of equity.

Even though we can probably boast the highest Year 9 to 12 retention rates in the State, not all our students are strongly engaged. If we want to keep all our students engaged we must both change our pedagogy and supply more support structures to our teachers and pupils.

In Quaker schools there should be an easy recognition of all children being unique, with different levels of understanding and experience. Not being an academically selective school, we can experience in the same teaching groups gifted children with academic skills well above the norms for their age being taught alongside students whose reading ages are five years below their chronological age. So how can we continue to teach entire classes the same thing at the same time? Truthfully tackling the teaching of children with different needs is not easy. Child centred learning is a career long endeavour, requires a persistent honing of teaching skills as well as a willingness and courage to significantly change classroom practices.

But teachers need more than just courage to significantly change classroom practices. They also need training and structural support. School leaders, therefore, need the finance to provide the technology, professional development and more input from support teachers and aides to help teachers make effective changes to the way they differentiate their classroom teaching and the curriculum.

Currently, I am excited by our potential to help teachers do just that. Two years ago in 2006 I told you why we needed to upgrade our technology network and I said at the time how I thought the development of our own learning management system, Friendsnet, would over the next two or three years revolutionise the way we use our databases, the communications between our stakeholders and the way we teach and learn. I am pleased to report that there are already a number of teachers who are using the new technology to revitalise their teaching practices. A number of teachers have started to use the technology to help them differentiate the curriculum. Recently I saw a Year 7 Maths assignment delivered through web page technology. Included in the assignment on factors were a number of exercises. Once completed the students could access an interactive factors game then an exercise involving a partner and a snippet of film illustrating the topic. The makeup of the assignment could be individualised for particular students. The result is that the most able should never be bored and struggling students should be able to achieve and stay engaged.

In the strategic plan the main focus for teacher professional development next year will be learning techniques to help them teach for more differentiation.

To further support teachers in this direction we have established student support areas on both campuses and this year increased the number of learning support teachers and aides.

There is no doubt that more is expected of schools than in the past and the resources to meet these expectations are costly. The response to increasing costs for most independent schools has in recent years been the imposition of large increases in their tuition fees. As a Quaker school this is a response we must resist. We must find other ways to build future financial capacity.

We must find ways to slow the tide that is pushing us towards a higher fee and more exclusive school. For if we do not, an even greater proportion of the general population will be excluded on economic grounds from being able to choose Friends' as their school.

At present, the cost of running the School comes from two main sources. About 68% comes from school fees and 30% from government funding. So about 2% comes from other sources including philanthropic donations.

In its strategic planning the Board recognises that if we want to reduce our dependency on school fees we must grow this, at present, small third income stream. The wonderful thing about this School is that rarely do we just wish to do things. Instead, even if it is only in small ways or after a time lag, we will see proactive moves towards achieving desired goals. I think one important move towards expanding our third income stream has been the decision to employ a consultant to teach us how to generate and maintain philanthropic giving.

It will demand a lot more proactive support from the Board and Principal but I am excited by the possible aims it may achieve. For example if we can increase the third income stream from two to say six or seven percent of our income we can reduce debt and not need school fees to finance major capital development. We will also be able to devote additional resources to helping more refugee and indigenous students enrich our School community.

Before addressing measures of educational outcomes at The Friends' School, I would like to visit Saul Eslake's address at the recent Australian Educators National Conference in Hobart. Saul Eslake is the chief economist at the ANZ Bank and is a Tasmanian. In his address Saul was damning about the state of education in Tasmania. Compared with other Australian states we have the lowest per capita income and highest unemployment. He claims Tasmania should not use its isolation or size as excuses because being an island on the periphery of a large continent should not inevitably condemn us to poor economic and social outcomes - otherwise Ireland and Iceland could not now have the third and fourth highest per capita incomes in Europe. The main reason for our poor economic and social situation, he claimed, was the poor quality of our education system and its educational outcomes.

He claimed that on average not only did Tasmanians receive a smaller quantity of education than other Australians but that evidence showed the education they did receive was inferior to that provided in other parts of Australia. As evidence he used data from the National Literacy and Numeracy Benchmark tests as well as the PISA Assessments that are used worldwide to test Scientific, Mathematical and Reading literacies.

The data shows that while in year three Tasmanian students perform as well as their counterparts in the mainland states the longer they remain in the Tasmanian education system the further they fall behind. He felt that part of the problem was that in Tasmania education was not valued as highly as it is in other states.

On a more micro level when we compare the The Friends' School's PISA assessments and literacy and numeracy results we are at odds with mainstream Tasmania. Our parent body also values education very highly as shown by their willingness to make the financial sacrifices needed to provide us with the resources to support better educational outcomes.

At The Friends' School we believe in and provide a co-curricular program, promote science, technology and second languages, invest heavily in new curriculum such as the International Baccalaureate Diploma and Primary Years programs and innovative connections weeks in the High School. We also, on a per head basis, spend more on technology and the professional development of our staff.

All these things impact on student outcomes. We hope the most important student outcomes are associated with a global perspective, a love of learning, an ability to think clearly, to understand that fulfilment comes from service and the ability to recognise the worth of others.

For these are the roots of not only a confident and fulfilled life but also academic success. One of the most overt measures of our academic standing is the public examination results achieved by our pre-tertiary students.

When discussing our students' results with the Head of Clemes at the end of 2006 I said, "Andrew it does not get better than this." At the end of 2007 and the start of 2008 I discovered I was wrong.

In December we received our students' TCE results and in January the results of those of our students who sat for International Baccalaureate Diplomas. An analysis of these results with comparisons of results from previous years can be viewed on the School's web site.

However, some of the highlights included the fact that 96.6% of our 128 TCE students and 18 International Baccalaureate Diploma students gained university matriculation scores.

Another pleasing aspect was the number of students obtaining very high scores. For example 25 of our Year 12 TCE students were ranked in the top 100 students in the State.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma results were released in January and in some respects were even more gratifying than the School's TCE performance. For example 13 of the 18 candidates (72%) achieved TER scores of more than 90, placing them in the top 10% of pre-tertiary candidates in State.

But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. For according to Saul Eslake we are achieving comparatively outstanding results within a state that is bottom of the league. So can we find a more challenging benchmark? The answer is yes I think we can.

One of several excellent reasons for electing to offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma was to give us more challenging academic benchmarks. Given the nature and status of schools that offer the IB Diploma, we rather ambitiously wanted to benchmark ourselves against the best schools in Australia and the world.

So the following statistics issued by the International Baccalaureate on 9 January are of interest.

The average Diploma points awarded to candidates worldwide = 30.72  
The average Diploma points awarded to candidates in Australasia = 33.58  
The average points to candidates in Tasmania (i.e. Friends') = 34.11

I hope we will never accept that Tasmanian students educated in The Friends' School cannot be compared favourably with the rest of Australia and the world.

I have surveyed a number of indicators that show the School is strong, without yet examining the most telling - the School's ethos. During the last six years I have often said that the School's acceptance of Quaker values and practice is its greatest strength. But on further reflection I think the School's great strength is the general recognition of its uniqueness.

Defining the uniqueness is difficult and the perception of it may vary from person to person. We certainly cannot say our values are unique, because most of them are shared by many other organisations and a large proportion of the population. But when we combine them with our use of silence, and the use of reflection and enquiry within a willingness to be open to new knowledge and truths, I start to get a sense of uniqueness. This sense is enhanced when I see the way that so many in the School embed these practices and values in our everyday activity.

Visitors often comment on the unique feel of the School's ethos and practices.

As an example and a final comment on the health of The Friends' School, I would like to quote from observations made by two recent visitors – Drew Thomas, the Clerk of South Australia Regional Meeting and John Dunston the Head of Leighton Park, a famous English Quaker school.

Drew Thomas wrote:

*"I arranged my visit to Friends' to help me further understand the conundrum, disturbing to some Friends, of our AYM Quaker involvement with a fee paying school. Gathering, and a couple of other conversations, has left me in considerable comfort.*

*Good, and great, things happen in all schools. My participation in Gathering has me clear that special things are happening at Friends'."*

John Dunston said:

*"Having read "Focus" with admiration for some years now, I was delighted to be able to come to Friends' itself, and find my admiration reinforced. Please thank all your colleagues and students who made me so welcome, whether in the boarding house on the Sunday, or all over the school on the Monday. I thoroughly enjoyed the tour, of course, and all that I learned during it, but also appreciated enormously the sense of being at home everywhere I went in the school, perhaps particularly when coming by chance upon the Gathering in the Meeting House. The thousands of miles between us simply evaporated. Congratulations on all that has so obviously been achieved in the school over the past few years. Friends' clearly serves its students and indeed its whole community in a quite outstanding way, intellectually, spiritually, creatively, and in the superb facilities you have. The southern hemisphere should be rightly proud of its Quaker school!"*

I agree with both our visitors. Special things are happening at Friends' and we should all of us be proud of our southern hemisphere Quaker school.