

## School Community Report

Damascus College is located on the traditional land of the Wudawurrung people of the Kulin nation among the First Nations of Australia. The origins of Damascus College lie in the amalgamation of three foundation colleges: Sacred Heart College, St Martin's in the Pines, and St Paul's Technical College. These schools were previously administered by the Sisters of Mercy and the Christian Brothers. The merger of all three in 1995 resulted in the establishment of Damascus College, which continues to uphold the roots of its rich Catholic traditions and values. The College has become a leading educational school, offering the only Catholic co-educational opportunity to students in the Ballarat region. Damascus College prides itself on offering innovative and progressive learning and teaching in a well-resourced and ever-expanding educational environment.

The Vision Statement of Damascus College is clearly embedded in the College's current Strategic Plan, with staff and students cognisant of the school's motto statement 'To live in the light of Christ' and of the 2024 College theme 'Living Mercy'. As a result of its recent Strategic Plan, Damascus College implemented a marketing campaign, promoting the College's logo of 'Be.My.Best'. This phrase is used throughout the College to promote aspirational behaviour and individual responsibility for all associated with the College. Students, staff and parents are exceptionally proud of their Damascus ethos and identity and articulated their appreciation for the opportunities and 'sense of community' that the school offers them. During the next review period, the school will undertake the process of reviewing the current Damascus College Vision to co-create a renewed school Vision and Mission that reflects the College's current context and aspirations so that these are named, known and understood by all that are part of the Damascus community.

The College continues to enhance its Catholic Identity by offering students and staff ongoing formation opportunities to augment their understanding of the school's Catholic Identity and Mercy tradition. There is a revised format for retreats and reflection days and added opportunities for students across all year levels to engage meaningfully in a revitalised Religious Education programme. Social justice issues (such as gender diversity, inclusion and acceptance) have been included in curriculum across multiple learning areas, giving students an increased focus and awareness of the dignity of the whole human person. This recognition and demonstrated respect for the diversity of the College's students has resulted in the creation of a working group to implement deliverables outlined in the College's Reconciliation Plan (RAP). The installation of three flagpoles on campus pay tribute to the rich heritage of the College and celebrates the diversity of its community members. Students also highly value the environment and preparation is well underway for the launch of an Ecological Stewardship Group, based on the *Laudato Si*. The school continues to source local opportunities to link Catholic Social Teachings with relevant and needed social action. Students have a strong Justice Action group at the school, participating in the AMSSA student conference, Seeds of Justice and the Vinnies conference, as well as running op shops and providing personal care kits. The Introduction of the Youth Ministry for students in Years 10 – 12 has been successful and has provided students with practical ways to express their faith.

The school intends to further develop and implement a documented guaranteed, viable, accessible and engaging Religious Education curriculum for teachers that aligns to the Awakenings programme. Further professional formation opportunities will assist staff in working together to develop a shared understanding of Catholic Culture and a deeper understanding of the renewed College vision. These should help prioritise the need to recontextualise the teachings of Jesus in the school community and to make explicit links between the school's social justice activities and the Gospel Values.

Reconnecting with the Damascus 'family' and with the Ballarat Community post-COVID is particularly important to Damascus College and the school has explored different and relevant ways to meet the needs of its community. The school has offered increased opportunities for expanded involvement to attend significant events on the College calendar. The Vigil for the Ballarat Community in their recent time of need was gratefully acknowledged, as was the support offered to the Damascus community during the recent pandemic. The development of several communication channels to engage more effectively and strategically with families has been positively received. There has been increased usage by parents of SIMON and PAM, improved and varied marketing channels to share College events with the wider community, updated newsletter and website platforms and an increase in the College Alumni database, resulting in opportunities for the College's alumni to provide positive outcomes for current students.

The area of parental engagement by parents in their children's learning journey is an important and ongoing challenge for many schools in a post-COVID environment. Damascus College has commenced the re-evaluation of how best to re-engage families in a mutually meaningful and sustainable manner that supports student learning. The College intends to review the effectiveness and process of the Teacher Advisor (TA) parent interviews and evaluate the introduction and frequency of subject interviews. Another area for intended improvement is that of communication processes that are timely, consistent, informative, respectful and professional.

There is a shared leadership model at the school which aims to create a collaborative learning and teaching environment. The recently reviewed Staff Leadership Structure, with the increase of several positions of leadership, has allowed various opportunities for emerging leaders to develop their leadership skills. There are professional opportunities for staff through the development of MyPlan, resulting in individual staff coaching, middle leadership programmes and additional positions of leadership to meet the growing needs of the College. The Leadership team conveyed a firm belief in the rationale that an improved school environment positively impacts learning and it is clear that there is great appreciation across the community for the excellent physical resources at the College. The provision of additional opportunities to empower staff in leadership development through regular training, workshops and mentorships is important, given the expected growth of Damascus College. An additional focus will be to implement processes that ensure accountability, transparency and inclusivity across all areas of the College. Enhanced communication practices and channels to provide timely information, build trust through transparency and develop a shared understanding of strategic planning and decision making is an important focus for the next review period.

It was clear throughout the various discussions with the panel that meeting the needs of students is important to the school. The launch of the Instructional Model (5Es - Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate and Evaluate) as the College's Learning and Teaching Framework has been implemented and will be refined over the coming years. The triangulation of data to inform teaching, to document learning trends and to implement intervention and enrichment programmes has resulted in increased student engagement through alternative pathways. Such programmes include Improved Literacy in Secondary Schools (ILYS), the exploration of the Universal by Design Learning, the growth of the Vocational Major Pathway, the Hands-On Learning Programme (HoLP), English Enrichment classes, the Sustainable Racing Team (SRT), improved intervention processes and programmes (Corrective Reading at Years 7 – 9) and the introduction of Parent/Teacher/Student subject interviews alongside the TA interviews, to name but a few. Staff have developed an effective and agreed curriculum located on a SharePoint Teaching and Learning Portal that provides easy access to updated curriculum documentation. There appears to be clarity and consistency in

the teaching of the curriculum, though some staff highlighted the need for ongoing maintenance of an updated and accessible curriculum across all learning areas.

The challenge for the College is to consolidate the implementation of a consistent learning and teaching framework that is linked to a behaviour management framework. There seems to be a need to address behavioural distractions and challenges in the learning environment to better support optimum student learning and engagement. This aspect of exploring how student agency can be incorporated more effectively in students' learning, as well as the implementation of personalised and co-created learning pathways to help students become independent and self-regulating learners, will be a focus for the school over the coming review period.

The College believes it is fostering a supportive and proactive environment for student wellbeing and academic success. The use of effective data analysis has been utilised to implement programmes that lead to improved mental wellbeing and awareness. These include the Live4Life program, a school re-engagement program, parent forums on student mental health, a renewed school transition processes, the introduction of Parent Support Group (PSG) meetings and the appointment of additional staff support in the Wellbeing area. The College has articulated a commitment to celebrate and protect diversity to promote a deeper understanding of others and to acknowledge the rights of individuals to provide a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. A comprehensive Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Framework has been embedded in the Health curriculum and in reporting across all learning areas, with the ReLATE programme successfully implemented across various curriculum areas.

The Student Wellbeing team is monitoring student behaviour through Social Behaviour Tracking (SBT) to support the redevelopment of the College's Behaviour Matrix. Data indicates that students seem to be able to regulate their emotions well, though there are concerns that some students are not regulating their behaviour as effectively as they should. Students and parents seem to agree that, overall, their school is generally a safe community. The leadership teams across the year levels are proactively working with students in identifying areas in the school where some students may feel unsafe. Future priorities for the school in the wellbeing area include agreed and consistently applied classroom and behaviour expectations to ensure a safe and respectful learning culture and environment and the provision of additional and innovative ways to engage families and communities in the College.

Overall, the Leadership team and the staff of Damascus College can be exceptionally proud of the learning and teaching culture they have created to support their students and their community. The panel thanks the school for the Mercy hospitality and welcome its members received and thanks all participants for the honesty and openness with which they approached the School Improvement process. The information gained from the panel interviews, together with the preparation of all the relevant documentation by the College, provided insights which enabled the panel to endorse the College's priorities. The panel wishes the school well as they implement change management processes and strategies to attain their planned priorities over the next five years.

**The Review (Validation and Planning) Panel endorses each of the following Key Priorities:**

- Demonstrate a contemporary understanding of the Catholic culture so that Damascus College can be a flourishing faith and learning community.
- Empower all to contribute to the positive learning culture of Damascus College.
- Promote excellence through a culture that demands a safe, inclusive and collaborative learning community.