

One-stop school where kids get life coaches but not grades

Students are grouped in their stages of learning, not by age

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St Luke's Catholic College in Sydney's booming northwest is a pioneer in more ways than one.

Established two years ago, it has been designed as a "one-stop shop" for education, offering preschool, primary and secondary school as well as post-school training on the one campus.

Gone is the traditional 9am to 3.30pm school day. The doors open at 6am and close at 6pm. It's a blessing for working parents but also provides children with opportunities to extend their learning beyond the bell.

A communal and flexible learning area known as The Hub takes the place of stand-alone classrooms and children are grouped according to their stage of learning rather than age.

There are no end-of-term grades or marks and students aren't simply taught, they're "learning how to learn" as "inquiry learning" takes precedence over the traditional direct-instruction method of teaching.

By the time they hit senior secondary school, or the "School of Entrepreneurs" as it is known, students are given considerable flexibility to self-direct their own

learning. They work with life coaches and are encouraged to pour their energy into areas of great personal interest.

At an estimated cost of about \$170 million by the time it reaches capacity by 2023, St Luke's is a prime example of the progressive approach to education advocated in David Gonski's latest review of the education system. And it represents the "new normal" for Catholic schooling, according to

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GREG MILLER
ST LUKE'S PRINCIPAL

the Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta.

St Luke's principal Greg Miller said: "Instead of dictating top down a curriculum that everyone must follow, we balance it with a personalised self-directed curriculum."

"We're maintaining best practice while adopting next practice, which will equate to normal practice in the future."

The St Luke's model is a prototype for the Catholic system, which educates 20 per cent of Australia's students and has budgeted billions over the coming decade to expand existing schools and build new ones.

A second purpose-built pre-

school to post-school campus is being developed at Box Hill, in the same Sydney growth corridor, and another at Badgerys Creek is planned. Queensland Catholic Schools recently announced an \$80m push to bring preschools on to school campuses. Victoria is also exploring school-based early childhood education despite warning it would create "capital demands that Catholic school families could be hard pressed to meet".

The National Catholic Education Commission recently called on the federal government to significantly increase capital funding allocated to non-government schools in light of the expected boom in student numbers.

A spokesman for the Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta, which runs 80 schools, said the traditional model of education that assumed students of a certain age should be learning the same content and at the same rate was "archaic". "We need to be working with students where they are at, not where we are at," he said.

"We're giving them a voice in their learning."

Mr Miller acknowledged the progressive approach had its detractors and "that's OK, we welcome that", but said "the current system isn't working".

He said the college retained a strong focus on literacy and numeracy, particularly in the foundation years, but had opted for a "minimum mandated hours" approach to the curriculum in the senior levels.



Pupils Agamdeep Chhatwals, 9, Gracie Smith, 3, Riley Bettiol, 13, Penelope Buere, 5, with assistant principal Michelle O'Leary

JANE DEMPSTER