

Future directions for boarding schools



Boarding schools play a unique role in the provision of schooling for families in special circumstances, such as those in Australia's remote communities, or those living and working overseas. The vast majority of these schools are independent.

Boarding students need a great deal more from their schools than most students – their schools need to meet their personal, social, emotional and spiritual needs on a 'round the clock' basis throughout the school year.

The extremely high level of responsibility and cost that this brings to schools raises the question of whether there is a sustainable future for boarding schools. This was the topic of a major study recently conducted by education marketing consultant, Rob Lawrence[#]. In this chapter, he summarises the study's key findings.

Survey parameters

Some 68 boarding schools across every state and territory in Australia participated in the study. This included a comprehensive survey of boarding families.

More than 3,100 families responded to the survey, which represented a return rate of 51 per cent. Parents were asked to complete many open-ended questions. The study was supported by an advisory panel of nine principals.

Parent responses

The high response rate to the survey reflected the importance of boarding services for these parents. For many, there is little choice but to board their children. Fifty-five per cent of those surveyed run a farm or property. They are acutely aware that a quality secondary education underpins their children's future success, and that boarding helps alleviate the hardships of isolation in Australia's rural and remote areas.

Consequently, whilst parents of boarding students are often reluctant to send their children away to school, 92 per cent of them would still choose boarding if making the decision again.

Most parents surveyed can also identify the benefits of boarding school. The vast majority believe boarding leads to a well-rounded, balanced person. They believe this is due to living in a more structured and disciplined environment, and from having a sense of belonging within a community. Most parents also believe that boarding helps teach children to be independent, self-reliant, tolerant and compassionate.

Where parents have a choice of school, the school's values play a significant role in their decision. A school's academic credentials may figure prominently, however parents attach equal importance to both the management and leadership of the boarding house, and the relative importance of both boarders and the boarding house within the wider school community.

They also look to tangible measures of a school's commitment, including academic support provided to boarders during study time, full-time boarding house staff, access to facilities, and after hours activities and events.

[#]Rob Lawrence specialises in education marketing and works internationally in this field in the areas of education brand strategies, feasibility research, and evaluation of student surveys. The study described in this article was sponsored by his company, Prospect Research and Marketing.



Parents expect schools to understand the needs of young people. This includes respecting their need for privacy, access to technology, and ensuring that the boarding house has properly trained staff. Nothing frustrates students and parents more than closed facilities, temporary or co-opted staff, weekend boredom, inadequate access to telephone and e-mail facilities, and – the most frequently mentioned point of all – poor food choice and dietary balance.

Boarding school sustainability

Forty-seven per cent of the parents surveyed receive some form of support to pay school fees. Without this support, both parents and the boarding schools would be significantly financially affected. Given the high number of farming families that use boarding schools, ill-fortune such as drought and disease leaves these parents and their children's schools vulnerable. More than one-third of boarding families stated that school fees are a critical factor in their selection of school, and they needed to know all the associated costs of schooling, not just the tuition and boarding fees.

A relatively small number of those surveyed had a family history of boarding. About 20 per cent had at least one parent attend the same school as their children, and 59 per cent of parents boarded during their senior school years.

There was strong evidence to suggest that boarding schools may grow in appeal. Many parents expressed the view that boarding schools provide some form of protection from outside influences, thanks to their structured, supervised and disciplined environments. Cocurricula activities give children additional interests, and the sense of community at boarding schools helps to develop individual responsibility. Many families value this aspect of schooling.

Need for change

The survey results clearly indicated that there is a future for boarding schools in Australia, but schools will need to adapt in order to meet the needs of future generations of families.

In summary, the survey concluded that boarding schools needed to address the following issues:

- Boarding houses should be managed and supported by 'professional' boarding house staff. Such staff must understand the needs of young people and provide proper leadership and support.
- Schools need to demonstrate their commitment to boarding as an integral part of the school community, not as an adjunct activity. Whole of school planning must embrace the boarding function and pro-actively respond to the difficulties and challenges experienced by boarding students.
- Boarding houses needs to be student conducive. Families seek privacy, dedicated study and recreational areas, good technology access, and a reasonable degree of comfort, such as air conditioning.
- Schools must include and engage with boarding families. This includes allowing for the 'tyranny of distance' when planning events, offering parents and children easy access to each other, providing regular feedback through a process of consultation and dialogue, and ensuring that boarding staff have an overt presence when parents are on campus.
- In the age of communications, parents expect to be able to access their children by phone or on-line.



- Schools should recognise that the boarding house is also the students' home. Parental concerns included: closure of the boarding house during the day; inadequate weekend activities and supervision; and the lack of after hours access to such resources as computing laboratories and libraries.
- Impressions say much about the quality and reputation of a school, including the demeanour of students, their perceptions of the management and leadership of the boarding house, the sense of community and how the boarding house is perceived and sits within the wider context of the school.

For further information:

Prospect Research and Marketing: www.research.com.au

The Australian Residential Schools' Association: www.tarsa.edu.au

