

Diverse school choices by parents across Australia

A growing number of parents select schools for their children with a great deal of careful thought. In late 2005 the Independent Schools Council of Australia interviewed parents in each state and territory of the nation who had chosen an independent school.



The Carter family in Sydney



In the three years since 14-year-old Nicholas Carter has been attending Kingsdene Special School and Residential Programme, he has learnt to sleep through the night for the first time.

It's not the sort of life skill most parents seek from their child's education, but Nicholas had never slept for more than two hours at a time and used to wake up at intervals through the night, and run through the house screaming.

Nicholas suffers from a rare variant of Angelman Syndrome. The syndrome affects 1 in every 20,000 children. His variant of the syndrome affects one in every two million.

He cannot speak, although he shows his understanding through a range of gestures and sounds. He is also hypermotoric and hyperactive – which means he is constantly on the move, and cannot focus or concentrate. As well as running away from people on meeting them, he cannot cope with crowds and suffers from epilepsy. But unlike most children with Angelman Syndrome, he is physically strong and can walk and run steadily.

Quite apart from the immense emotional and mental challenge his condition has created for his whole family – who had to resort to installing locks on nearly every door of their home in order to manage him safely – it is also hugely physically demanding to care for a growing, active, 70kg boy with such severe problems.

Nicholas' mother, Mary-Lou Carter, is a passionate advocate for the education that Kingsdene provides her son and says the key to its success is the combined school and residential programme, which includes residential care during the school week.

Kingsdene is unique in that it offers a residential programme for children with disabilities. In 2006 the school enrolled 20 students with severe intellectual difficulties, autism, complex high support needs and behaviours due to conditions of epilepsy, no speech, Angelman Syndrome, Tuberous Sclerosis, Down Syndrome, obsessional behaviour, rare chromosomal abnormalities, and visual and hearing impairment.

"The residential programme at Kingsdene has assisted enormously in Nicholas being able to sleep and share things with others," says Mary-Lou.

"The teaching of a life skills curriculum at school during the day is complemented at the group home where he lives during the week after school. It's this total programme that delivers the best outcomes for such high needs children."

Living at home with such severe disabilities made it virtually impossible for Nicholas to make progress in living and social skills.

"At home he would never learn to share because he was virtually an only child. Although I have an older son, they had nothing in common and shared nothing. So trying to teach Nicholas to share something would have been impossible by myself," says Mary-Lou.

"At Kingsdene he has classmates and housemates - the two groups are different - his classmates are not his housemates. Nicholas loves coming to school now. He is so happy here – he's got friends here.

"Living in the wider community at home, he hasn't got any friends. Who will pop in to our house and say, 'can I play with Nicholas?' Absolutely no-one. His community is here. He experiences his value and self worth here.



“Kingsdene is a support to families in ways that people have no concept of unless they’ve experienced it for themselves. Parents come here because of the support given to the whole family, and for the individual learning programmes.”

Funding for students with special needs

The cost of educating Nicholas and others like him is very high. This is because classes need to be as small (six-nine children per class), with consequent increases in the number of teachers and assistants, equipment, facilities and administration required by the school.

Generally, students with disabilities in independent schools receive a significantly lower level of government funding to meet the high cost of their specific educational support needs than their counterparts in the government school sector. The difference between the government funding and the actual cost of their education is met by their parents and through fund-raising.

“I am appalled that students with disabilities educated in the non-government sector are not funded at the same level as a similarly disabled child in the government sector. The funding should follow the child, not the school system,” says Mary Lou.

“Clearly the manner of funding discriminates against children with disabilities in terms of choice, and hamstring parents who seek to find a school which will best maintain, enhance and maximise whatever potential their child may have.”

The Australian Government is currently considering a different way of funding students with disabilities. This has the potential to benefit those students in independent and other schools.

Impact on the family

In the meantime, the Carters still live every day with the knowledge that their son’s disabilities will last a lifetime, and that his education and life at Kingsdene will come to an end when he reaches the age of 18 years.

For the moment, now that she has support for Nicholas, Mary-Lou is feeling the effects of coping with her son’s condition herself for so many years.

“It was one of the biggest things in our life – his not being able to sleep. Even now, though things seem to be getting better, I’m actually feeling worse. I’m not very well, and I think I’m in quite a severe depression. I think a lot of that is the cumulative effect of what has happened over the years,” she says.

“I feel that so many other parents are the same boat, and in fact probably because Nicholas is at Kingsdene it has hit me harder. If he were not here I would still have to be living on my nerves. I wouldn’t have had time to have a break-down because I would have just had to keep going. Parents do this until they collapse completely, or they take a decision to place their child in a home.

“Since he’s been here, I’ve had time to take stock, or my body has – and I’ve hit the wall. It happens to so many families who have very high need children. They are not getting the support and services to sustain their lives.”

The Darby family in Perth



For Len and Sheevaun Darby, the happiness and contentment of their children were primary factors in their choice of school.

“Pastoral care was the key to sending our sons to St Stephen’s,” says Sheevaun. “I’m a teacher and my husband is an engineer so we were confident we could keep track of the boys academically and make sure they didn’t fall behind. But there is a big difference between schools in the way they handle kids, especially those who don’t fit comfortably into an institutional environment.”

The family settled on St Stephen’s because of its excellent reputation in the community for pastoral care.

“While our elder son is a fast learner his interests are not academic – he would rather not be at school! But we felt if he could get the social and personal skills he would need in life, then that would count as a successful schooling experience,” says Sheevaun.

The Darbys considered sending their sons to different schools from each other because of their very different personalities and needs but were so impressed by the way the pastoral care programme at St Stephen’s met individual students needs that they decided to send their younger son there too.

“We were just so pleased with the experience of our elder son,” says Sheevaun. “For the first time in eight years of schooling – although he still would have preferred not to go to school – at least he thought it wouldn’t be too bad, and that attitude remained with him.”

The Darby’s elder son was settled enough at St Stephen’s to remain beyond Year 10, and entered a Structured Workplace Learning – or Vocational Education in Schools – Programme in Years 11 and 12. Over those two years the school encouraged him to try different trade areas to find what suited him.

“He started a pre-apprenticeship in plumbing in Term 3 of his Year 12 and we’ve never seen him so happy,” says Sheevaun. “He could have left school then but it was his own decision to stay on and complete Year 12. For a boy who didn’t like school for 12 years that’s a good indication of how he felt about St Stephen’s. His engagement with the school was crucial to staying on to complete the year.”

The Darby's younger son chose a quite different pathway through St Stephen's but his parents say he is receiving the same level of pastoral care.

"Our younger son is quite different," explains Sheevaun. "He has academic interests and is taking a tertiary entrance package of subjects. What is important to us is that he is seen by the school in his own right, not just as his brother's sibling. The pastoral care programme has also helped him, and given him the opportunity to develop leadership skills."

St Stephen's spiritual focus was also very important to the Darby family.

"We believe that pastoral care and spiritual nurturing go hand in hand," says Sheevaun. "We're a Catholic family and we've come to a Uniting Church school. That was a big decision, to take them out of the Catholic system. But we felt St Stephen's offered enough that, as a family, we could continue to nurture the boys' Catholic faith, and while at school their Christian faith would continue to grow."

Now that their elder son has finished Year 12, the Darby's believe they made the right choice.

"Both boys started in Year 8," says Sheevaun. "They came without knowing anyone. Certainly our elder son was very reluctant to be separated from friends. But at the end of Year 12 he walked out of the school very happy to have been there. He has often made comments about how lucky he was to be educated at St Stephen's. Both boys are proud of their school and our younger son recommends it to his friends. This is quite something for high school boys!"

The happiness that their sons have found in their schooling has been worth the cost.

"We have thought, when we've added up what it has cost us to educate the boys, of what we could have done with the money – but it was a fleeting thought," says Sheevaun. "My wage is directed to pay the school fees, but it was a conscious financial decision on our part, and we don't see it as a sacrifice. I would have paid double to get all that we've got out of it."

The Hamad family in Sydney



Samye Hamad's three children, Kareem, Dalia and Nesma, attend Arkana College – a school of 136 primary students in the inner Sydney suburb of Kingsgrove. Her choice of school was closely linked to her own experiences of growing up in Sydney, with an Iraqi father and a German-Christian mother.

Samye became a practising Muslim at the age of sixteen, and is trained as a high school English and history teacher. She is married to an Egyptian-born Australian. Both her commitment to Islam, and her professional discernment about teaching and learning have been major influences on her choice of school.

She settled on Arkana College for her children's primary education after careful research, and some experience at two other Islamic schools. Essentially, she feels Arkana strikes the balance she wants in schooling – a mainstream Australian academic curriculum that includes Islamic religious instruction, Arabic language and a range of cocurricula activities.

“Obviously, we are looking for good academic standards. We want our children to do well, and to continue on to university, and to have careers. But there were a lot of other things I was looking for in a school,” she says.

“For them to feel comfortable being who they are, to have the religious beliefs they have – I think one of my major concerns was for them, as Muslim children, to be in a school where being Muslim would be the norm. A place where their religion would not be held against them.

“When I was growing up in Australia, I experienced difficulties being a Muslim – I was very unusual to others around me. I went to many schools in Sydney – they were good schools, but it was a time when being different was not a good thing.

“So I really wanted my children not to have that experience. This was a very big issue for me, and my husband.

“I'm particular about the sort of atmosphere I want them to be in – a safe, happy atmosphere where they are accepted for what they are, and where they learn to accept other people regardless of their differences.

“At this school the focus is on looking at people's similarities. It's very easy to think about others who are different in a negative way, but here they don't. They learn that people are equal, and to respect other people's differences. That's something I want my children to learn.”

The inclusion of religious instruction in the Qur'an, Islamic studies and Arabic language within Arkana's curriculum was important for Samye and her husband.

“I wanted my children to learn about their religion. I was not brought up as a Muslim so there were a lot of things I could not teach them myself. This was something I felt the school needed to do.

“I have bilingual versions of the Qur'an, but when you pray, you must pray in Arabic. When you are not from an Arabic background and you are a Muslim, that means you have to memorise prayers in Arabic. So that's why it's important for my children to learn Arabic for themselves.



“Muslims pray five times a day. In those prayers there is a certain structure which you have to learn. It was important for my children to learn Arabic to the degree that they could pick up the Koran and read any verse from it.”

Samye emphasises that it was not just religious considerations that led to her choice of school.

“I like the balance at this school. It’s not all academic – they have cocurricula opportunities, such as going on camp and excursions, as well as sports and music. There’s a good variety and balance, as you would have in many other schools.

“I want them to have everything, educationally, that other children have, plus a little bit more.”



The Hamilton family in Hobart

Ken and Rowena Hamilton run their own business, which can entail extended periods of travel and disruption at home. To balance this, they looked for a school for their children that provided stability in the classroom and that was able to meet the individual needs of their two sons. They chose Tarremah Steiner School.

“The thing that initially appealed to us about Steiner education was having the same class teacher year after year,” says Rowena. “People say, what if you get a bad teacher or don’t like the teacher – but it quickly became clear to me visiting the school that it is a very difficult and very demanding form of education, and you would certainly never get a lazy teacher opting for it! Because of the commitment the class teacher makes to see those children through their education you get a dedicated, highly trained person to work with your child.”

The Hamiltons have found that having one class teacher provides continuity. They avoid the settling in period at the start of each year, and after the family has been away the children go back to the same teacher.

“There’s a lot of reassurance for us all in that continuity,” says Rowena. “We’ve also seen how other children in the school who have been away are welcomed back – the children have their own place. There is also similarity across Steiner schools, and we thought that if we had to go away for an extended period and the children went to another Steiner school then there would be a lot of familiarity in the new school.”

The calm atmosphere of the Steiner classroom was also attractive.

“One of the defining qualities of the Steiner classroom is that it is very orderly, there is a rhythm and routine and a lot of certainty,” says Rowena. “The approach tends to be teacher centred – which means the child knows where to look for instructions. For children whose lives are very busy or who have a learning difficulty of some kind, this very calm, organised classroom culture is very important.”

The non-competitive environment of Tarremah was an important factor in the Hamilton’s choice of school.

“I wanted our children to have a good education and be well prepared to go to university if that was their choice,” says Rowena, “but I didn’t want academic pressure and achievement to take place at the price of emotional nurturing and social development and happiness.

“I was trained as a primary teacher in mainstream education and never doubted that my children would learn to read and write and acquire basic skills,” says Rowena, “but whether they learned to have an interest in life, a recognition of the goodness in others, and self-confidence, and all those things – they are the key things for me that make the difference between a school I am happy for my children to be at and a school I wouldn’t be happy for them to attend.”

The focus on being part of a group has also impressed the Hamiltons.

“At Tarremah it isn’t a case of ‘you must be the very best you can be with all your skills’, but ‘what can you offer the group’ and ‘how can you all move along this journey together’,” says Rowena. “We have seen how the children reap the benefit of this approach in middle schooling – there’s such a supportive attitude among the children.”

The Hamiltons believe that being known really well by the teacher, and the strong group support in the Steiner system that is developed over time helps young people make the social and personal adjustments that come with adolescence.

“It has been a very important life lesson for us as a family that you can work on a relationship, that you can persevere through the inevitable pitfalls and get an incredible amount of goodness out of a relationship like that,” says Rowena.

The Hamiltons see Tarremah as offering their children the opportunity to experience a very different environment to mainstream, commercial culture.

“Our family operates in a mainstream context, so we don’t have a purist approach to Steiner education,” says Rowena. “I felt Tarremah offered our children a world away from the crazy, hectic life that seems to pervade the rest of our culture. It provides a space for them that is free from consumerism, where a beautiful wooden pencil is a precious object that you care for and use until it is shaven down to the tiniest stub before asking for another. So the school provides this incredibly rich strand in their life experience. But our children are aware that they operate in two distinct cultures, that the school is different from the broader culture and that our family sits somewhere between the two, and they are adept at moving between these cultures.”

The Steiner curriculum has impressed the Hamiltons.

“Steiner is a spiritually based educational philosophy,” says Rowena. “That was important to me. I didn’t want the children educated in a religious school which had a religious agenda but I did want recognition that ritual, ceremony and spirituality, and religions of various kinds are an important part of understanding the wholeness of life.

“The curriculum is very carefully thought out,” says Rowena. “It is Euro-centric and, while it doesn’t attempt to cover the whole world, it does give the children a very detailed and carefully structured journey through a series of stories. I have seen how my children are able to extrapolate from that to another culture. They understand how religion, politics and history all interact to create the fabric of the world.

“People have commented about the Steiner philosophy and its late start in teaching reading and the delay in introducing computers into the classroom. Yet these are not difficult things to teach or learn. Having an understanding of how the world works, and having something to say about it, these are the difficult things to teach.”

The Lucas family in Brisbane

With tertiary qualifications in education and a background of teaching and consultancy experience in the government schools sector, Pauline and Scott Lucas began their search for a school for their daughters by first reviewing research on girls' education.

They also drew on their own personal educational philosophies to develop a list of all the school characteristics that they believed would make for the best possible educational environment for their children.

"We initially made a choice for an independent school for our daughters," says Pauline. "This was for two main reasons. Firstly, we wanted an all girl environment, based on research that indicates girls can achieve better in a girls-only school. Secondly, we believe that government schools cannot provide to the same degree as independent schools an ethos rich in tradition, positive social values, religious values and community mindedness."

The experience of a family friend who has worked in both co-educational and an independent girls' school provided support for the family's choice.

"It was our friend's experience that girls have more opportunity to achieve to the best of their ability through the range of learning experiences available in a girls-only environment," says Pauline. "Girls also benefit from fewer inhibitions in expressing their views."

Size of the school was also a consideration. "While we were not seeking a very large school, where contributions of individuals may be lost in the whole school fabric, we also did not want a school with fewer than 500 secondary students. Again, drawing on our readings in education, we know that fewer than 500 students can limit subject choice in secondary school," says Pauline.

"We also wanted a school that mirrored our personal educational philosophies," says Pauline. "We were looking for a school that provides a rich values environment, develops the whole individual, pursues academic excellence, encourages student participation in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, and reflects positive social and Christian values through the daily life of the school and its involvement in the community."

One aspect of influence in Pauline's personal educational philosophy is UNESCO's 1996 *Four Pillars of Education* – Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Live Together and Learning to Be.

"We weren't looking for better quality teachers or a different curriculum, because we know from our experience that there are also good teachers in government schools," says Scott. "But we felt that independent schools are more able to be explicit about their values which permeate the many layers of school life – from the employment of teachers who 'fit' the school's values, to the many and varied aspects of the school and its community."

Another deciding factor in the family's choice of school was the extent to which individual student differences were able to be recognised through, for example, deliberately smaller class sizes.

"Our daughters are very different from each other in terms of their interests, skills and strengths," says Pauline. "We wanted a school that could cater well for student differences while acknowledging all individuals as significant contributors to the school community."

“In a nutshell,” says Scott, “what we were looking for was a school that would help our daughters achieve their potential and become well-rounded, resilient and tolerant individuals.”

The Lucas family found a match for their “wish list” in St Aidan’s Anglican Girls’ School, a day school for girls in suburban Brisbane, with 830 students from Prep to Year 12.

The family attended many open days and other activities to give their girls as much exposure as possible to different schools and to include them in the selection process.

“It was in attending one of these activities that there was a moment when, as a family, we all knew that St Aidan’s would be the school, when we thought that this was a community and educational environment in which the girls would be happy,” says Pauline.

“It was important to us that as well as academic rigour the girls gain a sense of community from their school,” says Scott. “We don’t have a huge sense of community in our own neighbourhood and we felt that St Aidan’s – because of its ethos – would give that to our girls.”

A high level of parent involvement is evident at St Aidan’s. Each year the school holds a community fundraising event called “Ambiwerra” – a food, wine and jazz festival which attracts around 6,000 people. Before, during and after the 2005 event, more than 500 parent volunteers provided their time and effort. “That’s an outstanding commitment in a school of just 680 families,” observes Pauline.

“St Aidan’s was founded by the Anglican Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Advent,” says Pauline. “The Sisters’ philosophy of selflessness and commitment permeates throughout the school, its community, pastoral care and education programs. This, combined with outstanding school leadership, committed teachers, involved families, engaged and happy students make the ethos of the school almost tangible. It’s a wonderful educational environment for our daughters in their formative years.”

The Papini family near Adelaide



A toss of the coin early in their marriage planning was all that determined whether Tammy and Ans Papini's children went to a Catholic or Lutheran school.

Tammy had been brought up in the Lutheran faith and Ans had been raised as a Catholic. It was of paramount importance to them that their future family would share the same faith, so they tossed a coin to determine their family's denomination. The Lutherans 'won' the toss, and Ans adopted the Lutheran faith.

Years later, this foundational decision about their family's faith has continued to shape their lives, including their children's education. All three of the couple's children, Tahlia, Samuel, and Georgia began their formal education at St Michael's Lutheran School in the nearby Adelaide hills community of Hahndorf, which their mother had also attended as a child.

Tahlia, a Year 12 student in 2006, and Samuel in Year 10, are continuing their education at Mt Barker's coeducational Lutheran secondary school, Cornerstone College, while Georgia is completing Year 6 at St Michael's Lutheran School.

Tammy says Christian teaching was the major factor in their choice of schooling.

"We wanted to pick a school for the children that backed up what we believe in at home. Its teaching of the Christian faith was the most important factor why we sent them to Cornerstone College," she says.

"Also, in reading about the school and having other friends who had children going there, we could see that it's a very nurturing school, encouraging them to do their best – academically, in sports, or in the arts. It is very much a nurturing school, concerned for the individual child's best interests. This includes discipline, to a certain extent."

St Michael's Lutheran School is a 'feeder' school for Cornerstone College, which made the transition to secondary school much easier for the Papini children.

"When I was pregnant with our eldest child, Cornerstone was about to be built and they were asking for parents who would be interested in sending their children to a Lutheran secondary school. Tahlia was one of the first children to be registered with the school," she says.

"For our children it was an easy transition because a lot of the children they'd been to primary school with went on to this secondary school. Mind you, there's a lot more children at this school – there's about 700 students – and they have widened their circle of friends.

"There are families with different religious beliefs at the school, which opens up their eyes to different faiths as well."

Tammy also values the nearby location of the school and its active links with the local community.

"Cornerstone College is very local to us – we live and work in Mt Barker. The school is very community minded – a lot of the work experience that the children undertake comes from the businesses in the Mt Barker region. It sounds a bit inter-bred, but it's not – the school is very community minded, which is good in a reasonably small town. It's also held in high regard by the business community in and around Mt Barker".

The Paul family in Canberra



School has been central to family life for Martin and Felicity Paul and their three children, Joshua, Imogen and Henry, since moving to Canberra from Bathurst about seven years ago.

Initially when they arrived in the national capital, the Pauls were looking for a small school that would provide a safe and secure environment in which their children could learn well.

“We wanted somewhere where our children would feel secure and safe, particularly when the children were young. You hear about bullying in schools, or you hear about individual children being isolated at school – we really wanted to find a school where these concerns wouldn’t be an issue – where these problems were well managed. That was our starting point,” says Felicity.

“We wanted a values system in the school where we knew that the children would be taught about respecting and honouring people. Honour is a very strange word to use these days – it’s a bit old fashioned, I guess. But it’s still an important concept.

“The Christian ethos of the school was attractive, of course. But at this school the ethos is practiced, not just spoken about. The teachers really follow up with children at Emmaus, and the kids notice and appreciate that.”

The Pauls cite the school and its community life as at least 50 per cent of the reason why they have made Canberra their home.

As a parent-controlled Christian school, Emmaus Christian School provides opportunities and encouragement for parents to be closely involved in the governance of the school, as well as day-to-day student activities.

“Parent governance, although we probably weren’t too cognisant of it at the time (when the children started at the school), was something that we really warmed to, and we now see as a major strength,” says Martin.

In 2005 Martin completed six years on the school board.

“The parents don’t have a role in the **management** of the school – they have a role in electing the board that **governs** the school. That’s a model we feel comfortable with.

“We were involved in the establishment of the high school. It was great that parents could have a say about how they wanted it structured. Parents wanted a middle school integrated curriculum model. Other schools in Canberra were doing this too, but it was great that the parents were putting forth what they wanted – it wasn’t instigated by educationalists. Of course they were involved, and able to progress and assess the concept, and say, ‘yes, we can do this.’”

Emmaus now has 175 students in its primary school and 100 students in its high school.

“We really wanted to see the advantages of the primary school available at a secondary level – such as the relationships between children of different ages due to it being a single stream school. Also, all the teachers know all the children, and all their names,” says Felicity.

Like other parents at the school, Felicity and Martin have also been closely involved in the school’s day-to-day activities, such as covering books, organizing the school fete, class excursions and working bees.



They believe their high level of involvement in school life has a positive effect on their children's education.

"My kids understand how important their schooling is to us because they have seen us involved in school meetings and activities. They can see the relationships between us and others in developing the school – we really try to develop a sense of community," says Martin.

"Through having a teaching team and parents working together for common goals there's a greater strength in communications about your children. The teachers have a professional relationship with the children, but they have greater understanding because they know the family. The closer relationships enable mutual support.

"We socialise together – the kids and the adults have dances together, family fun nights and all that sort of stuff. Most of the kids' social things end up being parents' social things. There's a whole family involvement in virtually every aspect of the school."

However, families vary in their level of commitment to school activities, and as each family develops, their involvement changes and adapts.

"Not everyone wants this. Even for us, life is very different now to when we started. I didn't work when we started here. I then worked part-time in the school. I now work full-time outside the school. So, we have a very different day-to-day relationship with the school now, but it's founded in our original involvement," says Felicity.

The Powell family in Alice Springs

As a young girl, Colleen Powell yearned to return to the land of her ancestors. A descendant of the Stolen Generation, Colleen's parents had both been separated from their parents.

Years earlier, her grandparents had been removed from their original homelands by government authorities and sent hundreds of miles away to Crocker Island, Darwin and to Jay Creek.

Colleen moved to Alice Springs from Darwin at the age of 10 with a desire to reconnect with her extended family and cultural heritage.

Reconnection with her family's heritage was still a driving force for Colleen when she decided to send her son, Brendon, to Yipirinya School in 2003.

With just over 200 students, Yipirinya is an independent Indigenous school founded by local Indigenous people and managed by an Indigenous board of governors.

The school offers students the opportunity to learn up to four Indigenous languages, reflecting the melting pot of various Indigenous groups that live in Alice Springs and its environs.

It was the school's focus on teaching Indigenous languages, traditional lifestyle skills, and culture that attracted Colleen to choose the school. A number of its teachers are Indigenous, as are all its teacher assistants.

"Yipirinya is a great school for kids to come to so that they can keep their language and culture," says Colleen.

"At this school they've got four different languages – from four tribal groups – and my family is related to each and every one of them.

"Where the school is situated in Alice Springs is where my ancestors come from. A number of my great grandparents came from this area – one was from central Arrernte, and one was from Eastern Arrernte; and then on my father's side, there's the Warlpiri language. We also have two other languages here at Yipirinya – Luritja and Western Arrernte.

"The school is important for reconnecting with our ancestors. Brendon is comfortable here, he's got family here – and when he hangs out with his mates he's also learning from them because they are all fluent (Indigenous) language speakers."

Brendon was placed in the school's Central Arrernte and Western Arrernte classes, in order to learn the languages from both sides of his family.

"When we first came to the school in 2003 we didn't know much about our family, and I didn't know if I had family here. But I've learnt along the way that we have family amongst the staff and parents. We've also learnt who we're related to through the Dreamtime stories," says Colleen.

"I really like it. The kids go on cultural excursions and they look for bush tucker and learn how to make Aboriginal tools."

Ken Langford-Smith, principal of Yipirinya School, emphasises that the school also takes seriously the teaching of literacy and numeracy and that recent results from the school's *Ann Morrice Literacy Cycle Programme* are very encouraging.

"It's obviously very important to the school to see that the students are properly taught so that they have a future. In 2006 the school is also pioneering the Yachad Accelerated Learning Project in the Northern Territory," he says.

Brendon is in the school's senior secondary class and is starting to think about his future. He hopes to continue his education at the school through taking up a part-time apprenticeship in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) course.

"The school is just beginning to offer vocational training for its secondary students. These students would probably be on the streets if they weren't here – they wouldn't be undertaking any education at all. This year we hope to establish some VET courses for them," says Ken.

About half the school's student population come from Indigenous camps in Alice Springs and the other half live in the bush.

The school's buses travel up to 100km each morning to collect students from the bush and from the town camps to bring them into school where, as well as providing an education, it supplies breakfast, a morning snack and lunch before taking students home at the end of the day.

"If we didn't provide the transport, the children wouldn't come to school. For children in the bush, there is no local government bus. We have close links with the communities, and our bus drivers get to know families and bring the children in (to school)," says Ken.

"For a couple of years now we've been seeking assistance with transport to help run our buses – to pay the bus drivers, buy fuel and so on. The Northern Territory Government has done nothing to date to help us with this.

"Our parents can't afford to pay school fees – that's why we don't charge, except for childcare, for which they pay a little each day. But there are no fees for the rest of the school."

The Australian Government provides the vast majority of funding for Yipirinya School

The Sherburn family in Melbourne



Karen and Ashly Sherburn attended neighbouring independent grammar schools when they grew up in the Melbourne bayside suburb of Mentone and their children are now attending the same schools.

Karen says fulfilling family tradition was a bonus, and not the reason why they sent their daughter and two sons to their old schools.

In 2006 Kristen is in Year 12 at Mentone Girls' Grammar, and Nathan is in Year 10 and Dane is in Year 7 at Mentone Grammar.

After living in country Victoria, Karen and Ashly thought hard about where their children would go to school when the family returned to Melbourne. Following in the parents' footsteps was well down the list of priorities. Their three primary requirements were: high academic standards, pastoral care and Christian values.

Karen felt strongly that she needed a really caring school where teachers were prepared to 'go that extra mile' because they were committed to the children and put their hearts and souls into the job.

"I felt that I needed to have someone at the school who would be a second mum when I am not there - that's something that money can't buy."

While high academic standards are essential, Karen says that she was also looking for a school that had strong sporting and cocurricular programmes and was community focused – a school that would produce a well-rounded 18-year-old in whom any parent could take pride.

To achieve this, Karen believes that there must be a strong relationship between the teacher and student so that, for example, the student feels comfortable seeking out the teacher at recess to ask if they can talk about a maths problem.

Karen says she wanted a school with teachers that students wanted to have lunch with, or teachers who would suggest to their pupils that they form a group to visit an art exhibition together after-school.

The history of the school was also important for Karen.

"I felt that if the school has a proven track record of general excellence across all streams, there is a fair chance that it is also going to happen for my children."

Karen remembers one maths teacher telling parents that he knew that his Year 10 pupils were going to be in the top one to two per cent of the state's Year 12 results. When asked how he knew, the teacher said his judgement was based on 20 years' experience.

Looking back over her children's schooling, Karen says they are fortunate to have such a wide learning experience.

"It's not just strictly classroom learning any more. The opportunities that are available are very important. Children have to learn how to be multi-skilled, highly resilient and self-sufficient because it is a tough world out there."

Karen believes that young people can develop into caring and respectful adults through the varied programmes offered by the school, supportive teachers, discipline, ethos and the pride that both students and teachers have in their school.