

Reclaiming the “lost year” through outdoor education

Special year 9 programs centre on positive relationships, resilience and independence, writes Kate Jones.

Year 9 is a crucial year for high school students. Many find themselves at an academic crossroads where they either continue learning or disengage from formal education altogether.

It’s also an intense developmental time in their lives. Both boys and girls are trying to adjust to hormonal shifts and changes, and many feel they are no longer children, but not yet adults.

This situation of flux can be difficult to manage for adolescents. For these reasons, teachers have described year 9 as “the lost year” when students don’t understand the relevance of school and feel caught up in negative emotions.

Educators realise girls commonly experience unique challenges at this stage of their lives, including social difficulties, disengagement from sport and low confidence.

It’s why many independent schools run specialist education programs in year 9, particularly girls’ schools,

where the curriculum centres on positive relationships, independence and resilience.

At Lauriston Girls’ School, year 9 students are part of the year-long Howqua program set at a regional location about three hours from Melbourne. The students participate in a full academic program, twice-weekly fitness runs and a two-day outdoor program each week.

Lauriston principal Susan Just says the program has been designed specifically for girls at this life stage.

“Research has found that young people in this age group often feel a lack of purpose and are questioning who they are and what their capabilities are,” she says.

“The year 9 program provides our students with opportunities to look forward to and participate in activities which encourage them to work with other people and to acknowledge their own strengths.

“They have the opportunity to think about who they are as individuals and to participate in purposeful activities.”

Lauriston students live on the Howqua campus for eight blocks of four- to five-week periods before returning to their homes for four to six



At MLC School, students in year 9 participate in the Marshmead program in East Gippsland for eight weeks.

days as well as school holidays. They are not permitted to use any digital devices or mobile phones while at Howqua and Just says this gives them more focus.

“Without the distraction of digital devices, the students can give attention to their relationships with peers and adults,” she says.

The only exception is the use of digital devices in curriculum lessons. Teachers have access to parents and family members by phone and email.

The outdoor program includes hiking, mountain-bike riding and rock

climbing, plus skiing in the winter season. Students at Howqua are also part of the nearby Mansfield community and join in events such as Anzac day and the Mother’s Day Run, and also community activities such as working in the local schools and care facilities.

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The concepts of personal sustainability, sustainable communities and environmental sustainability and regeneration are

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encouraged, with students undertaking their own cooking, cleaning and sustainable heating and cooling practices within their self-contained houses.

"These experiences encourage students to grow their leadership capacity by building on their relationships with others while improving their communication, decision-making, and interpersonal skills," says Mark Gray, the vice principal of MLC.

"This age group is ready to develop these skills to navigate their social



complexities and prepare them for their senior school years. The program builds on their experiences and allows students to apply classroom learning in real-world contexts, fostering a deeper understanding of academic concepts [developing] essential life skills."

At most year 9 off-site campuses like Howqua and Marshmead, teachers live close to or on campus to provide ongoing support and guidance.

However, there is also a healthy level of "hands-off" learning aimed at building resilience.

This means students are constantly encouraged to negotiate and problem-solve with their peers to achieve team and personal goals. These are skills they can take with them well beyond their high school years.

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emerging independence while offering guidance and structure," Gray says.

"Students learn to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and develop empathy and understanding for

others. These experiences contribute to their overall social and emotional development and help them build strong relationships with their peers."

Perhaps the best way to measure the impact of outdoor programs like these is to listen to the feedback of parents and former students.

Many students report a better understanding of themselves and a definite confidence boost that stands them in good stead for the future.

"Older students will often refer to Marshmead as the best time of their lives, where they feel the support of their friends and peers, helping them realise the value of being part of a community," Gray says.

"Many of them talk about the resilience they have developed and the challenges they have overcome, both big and small."