

John Beach, principal at Newcastle East Public School

By PENELOPE GREEN - Oct. 26, 2015, 9:30 p.m.



Where did you go to primary and high school and what led you to choose teaching as a career?

My own school education was in exclusively male-only schools, at Waratah and at Newcastle Boys' High School, an academically selective school, which closed in 1978. I was fortunate to have some outstanding, inspirational teachers who gave us the expectation of continuing learning throughout our lives, and a fine sense of education as a powerful agent for change.

It was the turbulent sixties and seventies, social issues abounded, and even at school we were a politicised group of young people, inspired by some wonderful teachers. From a very early age, I had decided to be a teacher.

Did your own schooling experience or any teachers have an influence in that decision?

Both English and Maths departments supplied wonderful role models for us boys. As an example, Shakespeare really came alive for us, when the teacher arrived in class in character as Hamlet, quoting lengthy soliloquies while brandishing a metre rule as a sword above his head. Hamlet is very real when he's staring you in the face! Likewise, in Maths our teachers inspired a love of speculative maths, and of logical analysis, which was to benefit me greatly in later life.

When did you join NEPS and what was your path to becoming principal?

I've been at NEPS since 2002, following some time as Principal at two smaller, rural schools.

I understand your own ancestors attended the school?

My mother's family came from Inverell, but during the Great Depression lost both the family farm and their small business. They moved to Newcastle in search of work, then settled in inner-city Newcastle, where my aunts and uncles attended this school. It's a lovely family connection!

What are your core roles as principal?

The school leadership role has evolved over time to incorporate greater independence for principals, and to try to make schools more responsive to local needs.

With greater autonomy over matters such as finance and staffing, comes greater responsibility and accountability.

My core functions include maintaining healthy two-way communications with our educated, articulate parent body, working to constantly improve the school's administrative and financial systems to make them more responsive to needs, and ensuring the richest learning environment for our students. There is a much greater emphasis on continuous professional education for our teachers as well, to keep their skills sharp and relevant.

What are the biggest challenges for public school teachers today?

Our system is adapting to the needs of 21st century learners, with an entire generation now brought up on technology-based learning.

The impact of Digital Learning has affected how we teach, and our schools have changed to offer better individual learning pathways for students, using technology and advanced pedagogical skills to ensure that all students can learn effectively.

It's an exciting time to be a teacher, with our learners now having many flexible means to achieve their goals.

Next year NEPS, the oldest continuously running school in Australia, celebrates its bicentenary. What will be the highlights?

Our NEPS200 Committee has been working for three years to plan a range of events to mark this significant occasion. We have commissioned a sculptural installation, we have a newly-published school history, which will be launched by former PM Julia Gillard, and we have a formal dinner, with Justice Michael Kirby as guest speaker.

How did you manage to convince Julia Gillard to participate?

Ms Gillard was Education Minister for a time, during which we used Federal funds to build a new wing on our school, allowing us to build a new library, two classrooms, and video-conferencing facilities.

Her new role with the UN agency working for universal access to education, particularly for girls, makes her a strong advocate for public education, and she has taken an interest in our school's long and proud history.

Working with Sharon Claydon's office, we were able to have Ms Gillard re-arrange her schedule to come along and launch our new school history book, *To Climb The Hill*, which documents our two centuries of schooling, through the eyes of our students.

With alumni like Miranda Otto, Kyle Loades, Ben Lexcen, and Arthur Sinodinos, and many others, we have some great stories to tell!

Can you tell us a bit about *To Climb The Hill*?

Under direction from Professor John Ramsland, a team of writers and researchers has produced a history of the school through the eyes of its students, each era explained through the experiences of a typical student.

The children of convicts, coal-miners, and merchants, all share their personal histories, each throwing light onto a period of the school's past, and our national history.

What do you enjoy most in your role?

Education is a caring profession, about advancing the lives of children through helping them learn in a safe and stable environment. To see students overcome obstacles in their academic or personal lives can be very rewarding.

Next year's kindergarten is a bumper one as more families move into the city. There was talk of using Newcastle train station as an extension of the school. Is it badly required?

Public education is certainly very strong in Newcastle, with all schools offering the highest quality education. With changing enrolments, planners are considering a number of options for the future.

You are widely respected in the community in your current role. Are you planning to stick around for some time yet?

I will certainly be here for the Bicentenary celebrations, which may well extend into the middle of next year. Then, the time may be right for me to contemplate my next challenge.

What do you hope your legacy will be?

This school has a rich, inclusive culture of pride in the school and its history, which stretches back 200 years. My legacy will be to see that culture continue, the school community united in its high regard for education, and in its great sense of pride in the school.