

ADVERTISING FEATURE

# Boarding Schools Guide

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# Creating a real sense of community and connection

The benefits of boarding are myriad, not least for providing opportunities for personal growth, writes **Anders Furze**.

There are many reasons why parents might choose a boarding education for their children. Potential benefits include everything from helping create a sense of independence, to opportunities for personal and academic growth.

"Boarding facilities are very human places," Geelong College Principal Dr Peter Miller says. "I genuinely believe kindness, courtesy and respect underpin how a functional boarding house operates."

Many boarding students come from regional and rural Australia and move to urban centres such as Sydney or Melbourne, planning to stay on for university. But boarding is an increasingly popular choice for city-based families as well, with parents looking to cut down on commute times for their children.

"Everything's on site: you can go straight from school to your after-school [activities], and you don't have to do that hour or hour-and-a-half trip back on transport," notes Kate Kovacs, director of boarding at Sydney girls school Loreto Normanhurst.

Despite the growing trend, around 85 per cent of the school's boarders still come from regional and rural Australia. Many parents

choose Loreto Normanhurst for their daughters because they might live in a small town without a high school, or after an extended period of distance education.

**'Students have a range of backgrounds, and they come to live together in a strong, shared community. It's quite the microcosm of the rest of our country. To be honest, we could learn a lot from it.'**

**Dr Peter Miller**

"They're also looking at the opportunity for a wide variety of co-curricular options. [And] because it's a bigger school, you've got a much bigger subject choice."

For those students, moving to Sydney is a cultural experience, Kovacs notes, and a dedicated Years 7 and 8 recreation program encourages their confidence in navigating the city.

Boarding has been integral to Loreto



Normanhurst's identity since it was founded in 1897. Indeed, the boarding school sits right in the middle of the campus. "It's part of the whole fabric of the school," Kovacs says. "We're here 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

She notes the benefits of boarding for all students, ranging from easy access to quality healthcare, to increasing self-confidence and expanding their world views.

"The sense of belonging is critical ... It's about feeling connected, not just with your immediate peers, but across age groups. When these girls leave school, they've got friends ... [and] great connections."

Another benefit boarding brings students is a solid routine. At Geelong College's two tight-knit boarding houses – there are only 50 boys and 50 girls on campus – time is allocated for structured activities as well as



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**Boarding Schools Guide** Advertising Feature



Left to right: Wesley's boarding facility; Geelong College girls' boarding captain Stephanie Williams; Loreto Normanhurst students.

free time. "It provides a stability," Dr Miller notes, "which can then enable them to do many things."

After more than a century of boarding and a nearly 40-year hiatus, boarding returned to Melbourne's Wesley College in 2016.

"We had an opportunity to reimagine what boarding looks like in a contemporary setting," says Sean Cox, the school's head of learning in residence. "We weren't

burdened by any legacy infrastructure or programs."

The school runs a dedicated residential curriculum for boarders, designed to complement the senior school academic program and to set students up for success once they graduate. It covers four key areas: future skills, leadership development, an activities program and cultural program.

There are formal classes, covering everything from CV-writing to barista basics. But much of the curriculum is geared around giving students "micro-experiences" throughout the week, whether that be seeing a teacher for academic support after school, working out a sample grocery budget with fellow residents, or heading into the city on a group food tour or to watch a sports event.

"The residential program had to complement the academic program," Cox explains. "We don't want students to feel like they're being forced to learn more on top of what they already are at school, but we

want to set them up for success upon graduation."

Cox notes that students from regional and rural areas often appreciate the confidence that boarding helps instil in them.

"We have students who have never been anywhere bigger than Broome. So, to see them feel confident enough to get the train into the city with their friends, that's huge."

Dr Miller agrees that some of the key benefits of boarding can be found in the small interactions that take place every day.

"Boarding provides an opportunity for incidental moments for young people, in interpersonal [interactions]. They're living with people who are different. I think that's the benefit."

There's a widespread recognition among educators that the days of boarding houses as soulless institutions established and dedicated solely to sleeping and eating are long gone. The Australian Boarding Schools Association regularly runs workshops and

conferences and there's an increasing emphasis on professional development. There's also more of a sector-wide focus on the benefits that come from fostering a real sense of belonging for students who board.

"To be able to live in a community, to live and work with a wide range of people, is a wonderful skill you know," Kovacs says.

"Boarding provides that lovely, real connection, where the girls lie around on the floor, talking to each other. It's very real, it gives them a sense of: 'This is my place'."

Dr Miller adds that culture is "everything" to boarding houses. "And not everybody's looking for the exact same culture. They often look the same from the outside looking in, but from the inside looking out they might be quite different.

"[Students] have a range of backgrounds, and they come to live together in a strong, shared community. It's quite the microcosm of the rest of our country. To be honest, we could learn a lot from it."

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