

Opening up pathways for girls and young women

OPINION Leaders at three independent schools discuss their approach to educating girls.

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Principal
Santa Sabina College

David Bowie once famously said that “tomorrow belongs to those who can hear it coming”.

Empowering young women to have agency over their lives in the 21st century, means equipping them with the competencies they will need to flourish. At Santa Sabina, we are future-facing because the ambiguity of what lies ahead presents a complex challenge.

We look to prepare our students for a fast-paced, technological world, while at the same time inspiring them to live a slower, healthier, more balanced and meaningful life.

Empowered women are strong and resilient

Teaching our girls how to bounce back after setbacks is a priority. It is part of an education that strives to build strong, confident and healthy women. It means working closely with parents so that we all understand the importance for girls to experience disappointments rather than clearing a path and removing obstacles.

We have programs in place that teach our girls how to self-regulate, take responsibility and learn to be resourceful. In her book, *The Bonsai Child*, leading clinical psychologist Dr Judith Locke reminds us that it is the discomforts that life delivers that are key to helping our children make good decisions, become self-aware, develop coping mechanisms, resolve conflict, develop compassion and feel confident to tackle future setbacks.

Empowered women are innovative problem solvers
Developing a capacity for deep thinking also empowers our girls. Social media platforms and easy access to swaths of information have reduced concentration spans and threatened the capacity for deep thinking.

The college incorporates technology to facilitate access to a wide range of information, allowing our students to practise discernment in an information-rich environment. Women who are able to synthesise information and think critically will be those who can make informed decisions and develop innovative solutions to new problems. These women will be the leaders of tomorrow.

Empowered women are socially and emotionally intelligent

Finally, women who can build relationships and who are emotionally aware will also thrive in the 21st century and wield influence. Empathy, the ability to listen and work with others while respecting and understanding different perspectives, will add human value that technology cannot replicate.

We provide many opportunities for our girls to build strong relationships – with each other, their families, teachers and those who work in industries through our Career Women’s Network. Research tells us that strong relationships are a key predictor of good health, producing more optimistic and positive people.



MARISE McCONAGHY
Principal
Queenwood

I have led girls’ schools for many years, and what several seem to have in common is their beginnings. Both Strathcona Girls Grammar School and Queenwood were founded by somewhat radical women of their time.

The foundresses of Queenwood resisted the sectarian divisions present almost a hundred years ago, instead opting for diversity of faith and inclusion. They promoted the idea that education should enable women to make an active contribution within their community and outside their local sphere. For these women, this was where true empowerment lay.

Often when we try to think of the ways we can best empower women, we think of the various “ceilings”, the gender pay gap or “choice” feminism. Women are sold the myth that they can have it all. But the corporate world is frequently out of line with the kinds of values that we try to foster.

I completed a fellowship several years ago, interviewing alumni about the directions their lives had taken, and what came through time and again was that these women were seeking something more than what corporate life could provide. In other words, they felt a void when their career did not align with their values.

Of course, Queenwood produces exceptional women. Alumna Katherine Bennell-Pegg is the first Australian to be trained as an astronaut by NASA. But not every girl is destined for the moon – or the corner office!

Empowerment means having an impact, and often that impact is within one’s immediate sphere. Our students are continually challenged to engage in what we consider true service. Gold coins and cake stalls just aren’t going to cut it at Queenwood. We want students to see the power they possess to make small impacts every day.

Students grow and see their personal power only when they come face to face with who they serve. Our younger students have been tasked with addressing the worldwide loneliness epidemic by providing lively company for the local elderly community.

Our older students also give up their Saturday mornings to provide respite to Mahboba Rawi, who fosters around 10 girls who escaped Afghanistan and are now receiving an education and safety in Australia. Here is where local action can have global relevance.

If women decide that the moon is where they want to be, that is a worthy goal that empowers so many girls through exceptional role modelling. But if students want to feel the power of their actions at the level of their community, then we are all about supporting and celebrating that to an equal extent.

In an increasingly individualistic world, we think that seeing their impact on others and the community is the highest form of empowerment for young women today.



LISA BROWN
Principal
Meriden School

Enhancing opportunities for women to strive for leadership roles is a topic that I am particularly passionate about. As principal of Meriden School, I have an appreciation, developed through decades of observation and experience, for activities that can help enhance the leadership potential of young women. It is this appreciation that has led me to pursue doctoral studies, examining the contribution of school sport to the development of women leaders.

Research suggests that sport is one tool that can be used to develop leadership capability. Participation in sport can help to develop human capital and key leadership skills and attributes such as teamwork, confidence, resilience and discipline.

At Meriden, we see high participation rates across all sports and, as a result, we have girls who are confident and capable and are equipped to handle pressure.

The development of resilience is important for the healthy management of life’s ups and downs, and we believe that girls who participate in sport are able to exercise their ‘resilience muscle’ more by responding to setbacks, leading to an enhanced capacity to respond to daily challenges.

Further research suggests that team sports are even more influential due to the various roles that need to be fulfilled for a team to function effectively. Roles such as the task leader, the motivational leader and the social leader are not necessarily formally appointed leadership roles but important for the effective functioning of a team, nonetheless.

Meriden offers a variety of team sports because we believe these will enhance the girls’ leadership skills. Being part of a team teaches you to put the needs of others before your own, and that contributes to our emphasis on servant leadership. It is our desire to develop young women who are well-equipped to serve others and who make positive contributions through their leadership.

The school environment is critical in encouraging the continued participation of girls in sport, thereby equipping them to lead. I believe that an all-girls’ environment promotes positive involvement.

Meriden girls support each other in victory and in defeat and celebrate their personal bests. Women supporting women is a key message to deliver, particularly on International Women’s Day, and I am thrilled to bear witness to this support every day.

While the statistics indicate there is still a long way to go until we reach gender parity in leadership roles, I am excited to see the next generation of leaders emerge: leaders who are confident, resilient and disciplined and are prepared to serve each other and their communities.