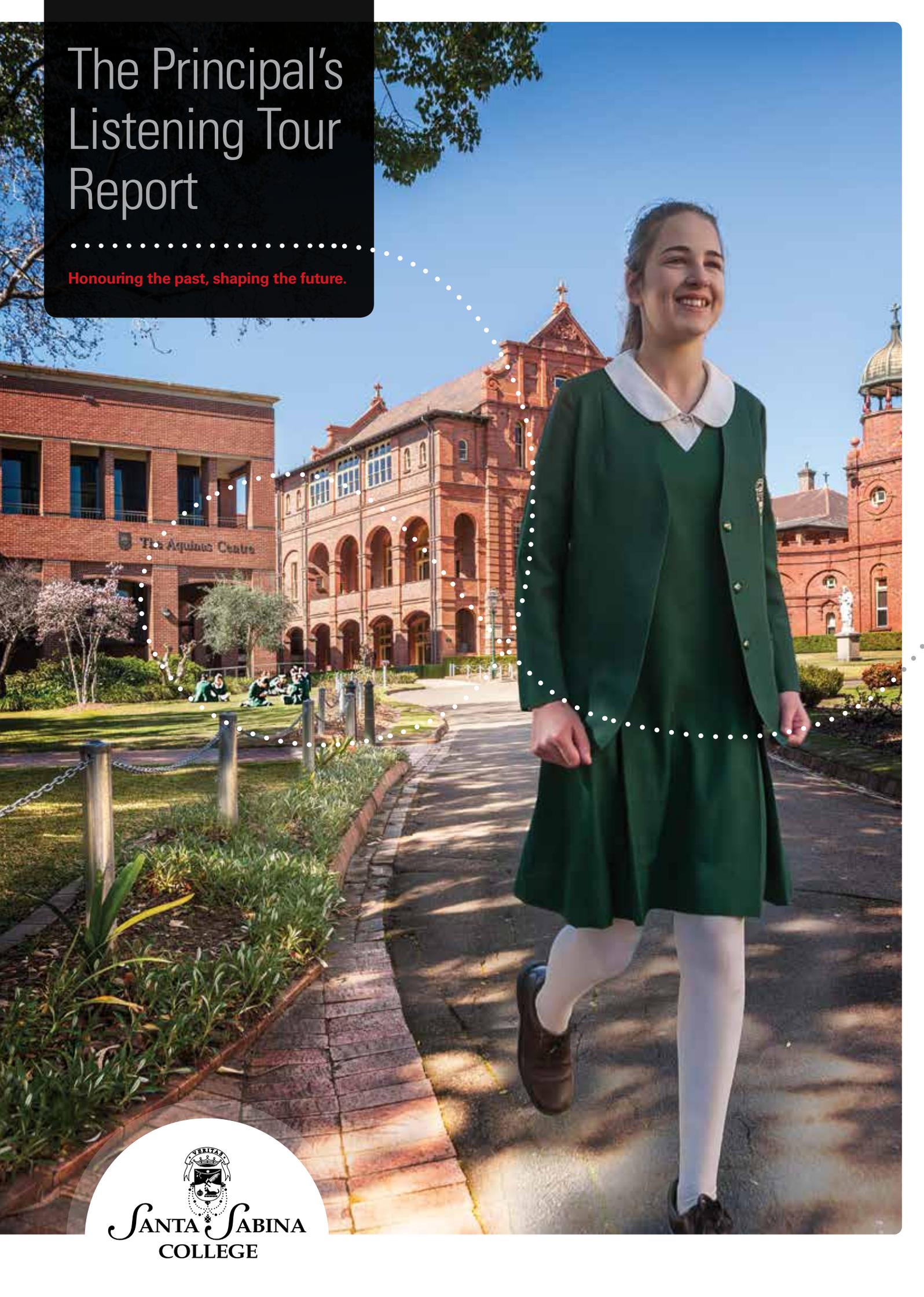


The Principal's Listening Tour Report

Honouring the past, shaping the future.



SANTA SABINA
COLLEGE

The Principal's Listening Tour Report



Dr Maree Herrett
College Principal

Welcome to this report that represents the views shared so generously by members of this community.

When I began as Principal of Santa Sabina College at the beginning of 2013 I made a commitment to the College Board that I would conduct a listening tour in order to understand and be understood. As I explained to participants in the tour, I was very conscious that as a member of the Santa Sabina community with some considerable history as former staff member, parent, and indeed student, it was tempting to assume a strong familiarity with 'Santa'. The Listening Tour was a very intentional way of signalling that I would not just rely on my own stories.

The Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and the Solomon Islands have been engaged in the Ministry of Education since their arrival in Australia from Ireland in 1867. As a steward of that ministry I take very seriously the awesome responsibility of being faithful to the Mission of Santa Sabina. At the same time I am very conscious that tradition is not held in 'aspic'.

*"Tradition is the record of the community's conversation over time about its meaning and direction. A living tradition is a tradition that can raise questions about itself."
(Philip Smith, quoted by Sr Mary Britt OP, Stewardship in the Dominican Tradition, Aug 15, 2008)*

I trust that this Listening Tour report contributes to that ongoing conversation.

Planning the Tour

I planned the tour with key questions about the College in mind. I wanted to find out what the community thought about Santa Sabina today; its strengths as well as challenges for the future. What are the things that we need to change or do differently? What are the elements that must not change? I wanted to find out how the College Mission resonated with different members of the community. After speaking with Sister Sheila, I was inspired to ask participants what gave them joy in their work, and by contrast what 'diminished' them. I also simply wanted to know more about members of the community – what were their stories, backgrounds and interests.

I began the tour with the knowledge that relevant contextual factors such as Government funding anomalies, the intense competitive education 'market' of the inner west, and significant demographic changes have shaped and will continue to shape us into the future. So can we draw on our past to face those challenges of our present and future with both fortitude and joy? I believe that our community has responded with a resounding 'yes - we can', as long as we work in collaboration.

Principles of the Tour

The three key principles that informed the Listening Tour were:

Respect for all participants and their views

Inclusivity – listening as far as possible to all representative constituencies

Transparency – results to be communicated both on the Santa Sabina website, and on the intranet, and finally through this report

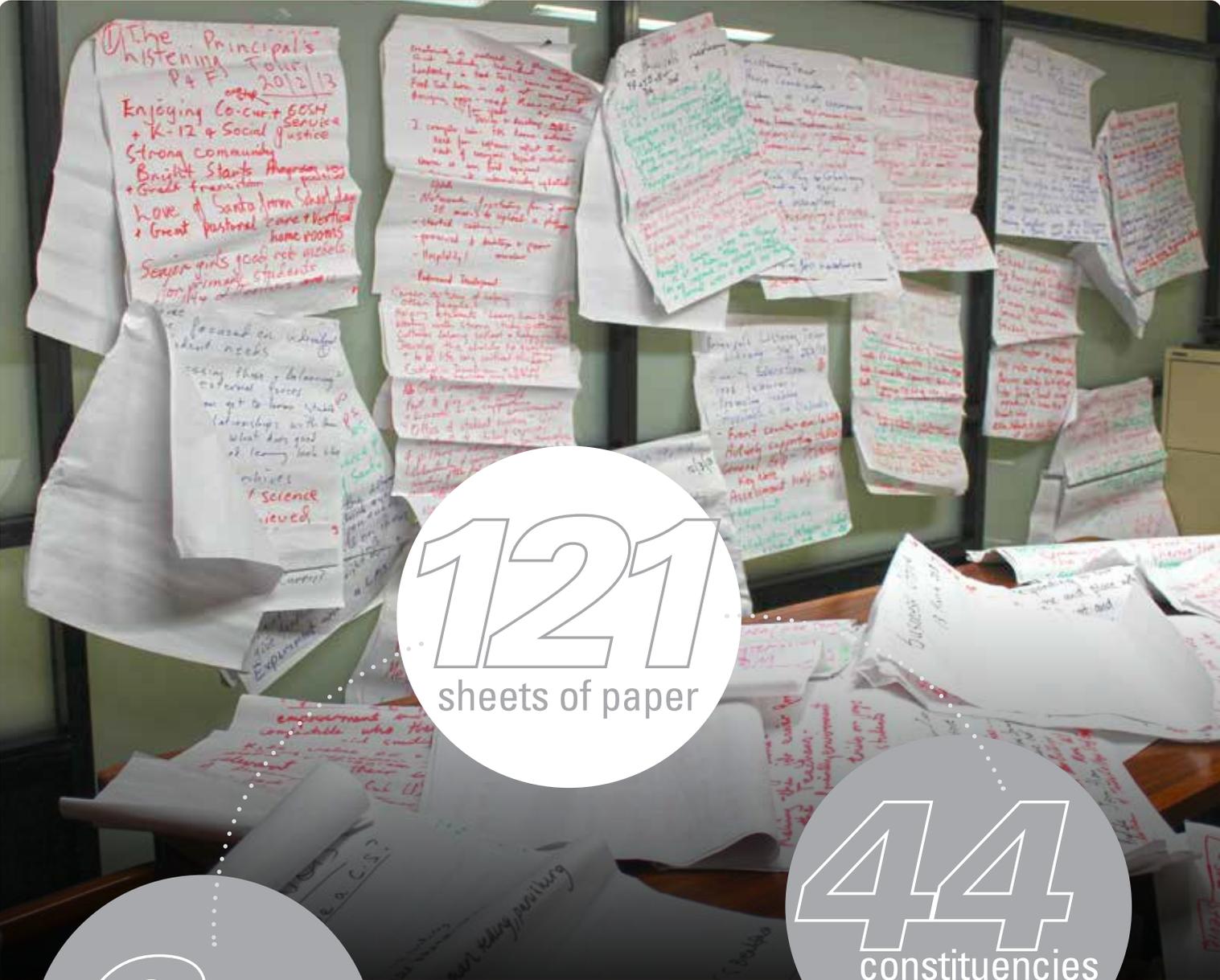
The report is divided into the following sections:



I identified the different constituencies within the College, and this initially amounted to approximately 32. By the time the tour was complete, this number had grown to 44 distinct groups. I initially set aside 30 minutes per group, but again this often expanded to a period of an hour or more.

Throughout the tour, Ms Juliann Lee, Director of Human Resources, was the facilitator in each session. She helped keep us on task, and recorded each discussion. The tour began very early in Term 1, and the last sessions were completed by mid-Term 2.

Snapshot



121
sheets of paper

44
constituencies

6
campuses

509
participants

Key Findings



There is steadfast love and affection for Santa Sabina College across the spectrum of past and present community members. People – staff, students and parents feel that they belong here.

The legacy of the Dominican Sisters was spoken about frequently. There is great respect for their past leadership and ongoing connections. The ex-students stressed the significance of the Sisters in promoting education and independence for women - both as role models as well as in their explicit messages. Today the Sisters continue to be part of teams within the College. Many staff spoke warmly about Sister Judith Lawson OP (current Prioress and former Principal), and of the way they began their employment at Santa Sabina with an invitation from Sister Judy that ‘they just couldn’t refuse’. In some cases that invitation was over 20 years ago, and they are still here. The importance of study and discernment in the Dominican tradition was identified by both former students and current Sisters. Many staff and students talked about the inspirational influence of Sister Sheila Flynn OP, and the significance of the South African immersion experience in the lives of Santa Sabina students and teachers. The Sisters themselves love to keep the connection and see the students playing and having fun.

“Throughout the course of the school’s history, the College ensures students learn how to learn.” – Sr Judith Lawson OP

Many staff and parents talked about their moment of joining and deciding this was the right place for them. Those ex-students who had attended Del Monte talked about the special bond created. Their parents often had their circle of friends grounded in the Santa community. There is widespread appreciation of the aesthetics of the grounds and our beautiful heritage buildings. At the same time the constraints of traditional learning spaces were also noted.

“I love to watch the children grow and learn, and building relationships with their parents.”
– OOSH Teacher

While the commitment to personal excellence and pastoral care might be expected from the teaching staff, it was the same commitment from the support staff that both surprised and gladdened me. Whether the support staff worked in administration, the uniform shop, OOSH, property or business office, they had a holistic view of education. The care of students was paramount in their view – they took time to know and understand both students and their families and saw this as a ‘normal’ part of their work. The depth of the respect for the babies, children and their families by Mary Bailey House staff was a real highlight of the tour.

Our *community is a family of all ages*



“Small steps in the development of young children can be seen as giant achievements to prepare them for life after Mary Bailey House.”
– MBH Teacher

When parents were asked why they chose Santa Sabina for their children they nominated the College’s outstanding academic approach, the pastoral program, social justice initiatives and the extensive co-curricular activities.

Kindergarten parents believed that Santa Sabina would be able to ensure their children would competently deal with the challenges they may face in the future. Areas that would be important as the students progressed through their schooling included dealing with competition, learning that sometimes you don’t win, learning that change is necessary and vital, and the belief that Santa Sabina will equip students with the ability to cope with change. Parents also hoped students will appreciate the opportunities they are given at Santa Sabina and that they would embrace social justice initiatives. Considering that their children would not graduate till 2026, they were asked what were the key skills they thought children would need. Parents suggested that the main skill was good communication. Not knowing what the future held for their children and what skill sets would be necessary when they are looking for employment, the ability to communicate effectively would be an advantage. Parents also hoped students would have the courage

to stand up in a society where their beliefs may be challenged.

The question of the College Mission statement sent some members of the community into a mild panic as they searched to locate it or to memorise it as if being tested. What was clear was that they had such a strong understanding of the Mission, and the Gospel spirit that informs it. They identified key tenets such as ‘education for justice’, ‘personal excellence’, ‘student-centred curriculum’, ‘love of the aesthetic’, and the importance of individual dignity. However the Mission Statement itself was seen as ‘too long’ and somewhat repetitive.

“I want my children to learn to deal with adversity, to be confident and mostly to be happy.” – Kindy Parent

The importance of people’s stories was the single most important finding. No matter how careful we are to document dates, facts and events, it is the narratives that are compelling. Everyone was very generous in sharing their stories – and there was a great sense of trust. I sincerely thank everyone who participated in the Principal’s Listening Tour, and for welcoming me ‘back’ to this community.

“Learning about personal journeys was the joy for me.”
– Dr Maree Herrett, College Principal



Community This Place

The significance of Santa Sabina College as a Catholic, Dominican community was articulated throughout the tour. This Dominican connection means that the idea of community is both spatial and historical. Students, for example, identified the sense of community within the campuses at Strathfield, but with the wider community, including connections to South Africa, Outreach programs and Tallong. They feel they can be part of a wider world from the central location of Strathfield. There is a great sense of pride in the history, traditions and reputation of the College. Relationships developed over many years are highly valued, and can be summed up by one of the participants who said, 'when I walk through those gates I feel at home'.



Student Connections

Secondary students were consistent in their endorsement of the vertical homeroom system. They felt that this enabled genuine care and relationships to foster between the older and younger students. I found this particularly interesting as I recall the commencement of the vertical system from my former days as a teacher at Santa Sabina. At that time (late 1990s) there was much sense of the 'sky falling in' for some when we switched from horizontal or Year group homerooms to vertical. Now it's part of the culture.

"The purpose of the homeroom was to ensure that 'No pupil should walk alone during the day.'"
– Jenny Allison

Middle School students spoke of the confidence they are gaining through the Middle School experience. Through greater independence, fantastic facilities, exciting use of technology and lots of opportunity, students described the campus as stimulating, and preparing them for the change that will come with high school. Interacting with the friendly older girls at Santa Sabina and having a gradual introduction to high school meant they felt happy and secure in their environment. Apart from occasionally getting lost and navigating the locker rooms, the girls unanimously agreed that the start of the new school year has been a largely positive experience.

"There are so many opportunities available to me at Santa Sabina."
– Middle School Student

Year 12 leaders described their role as representing the voice of the students and being good role models for the younger students. They saw their role as being advocates for school policy together with critiquing school policy at the same time. They reflected on their role in fundraising and Santa-Fest initiatives, which opened up the College to a wider community. The students also identified with key ideas in the Mission Statement such as building self-esteem, leadership and responsibility and how being an independent learner is a key focus at the College.

Campuses

The size and location of the campuses at Santa Sabina can be problematic in achieving a holistic sense of community. At times there was a sense of 'silo' thinking on the part of different groups – that if only 'others' understood what 'we' did all day, then all would be better. The bridge spanning the Boulevard also represented a 'divide'. While we are one community, we are also lots of separate communities within, and the busyness of our days can mean that we do not look beyond our own specific area of concern. This is where Mary Bailey House is pivotal to the College. Apart from the excellence demonstrated in early childhood education, the connections made at Mary Bailey are very significant. Many staff have or have had their children in care at MBH.

“Without Mary Bailey House, I couldn’t have balanced three children, full time work and all that entails.” – Santa Teacher

Staff Experiences

Del Monte staff spoke of the connection between Mary Bailey House and the early years of Primary School, and the influence on student-centred learning in the early learning years. The Reggio Emilia experience of MBH has continued through to Kindergarten and Year 1 and marries well with the Bright Start Program.

Music staff spoke of the physical environment of Holyrood and how the beauty of the area inspires them and their students. However a sense of connection is challenging from Holyrood for the Music staff as they are physically disconnected from Benincasa, the main meeting area for secondary staff.

The staff at Tallong talked about being part of the Santa Sabina community and how this enables them to develop relationships with Santa Sabina students. They felt that Santa Sabina students demonstrated a real love of and connection with Tallong.

Each staff member described their career journey at Santa Sabina and shared many teaching experiences both here at Santa and prior to joining our College. There were so many experiences that were from different schools, from regional NSW, other Sydney schools, together with overseas experiences including London, Paris, Singapore and Russia. Staff recalled why they joined this community and how very satisfying it is to work here as a teacher. The majority of the Sports Team have been with the College for many years – averaging approximately 20 years’ service and told stories of the different roles they have had here at Santa Sabina e.g. teaching Maths, Religious Education, HSIE and working in education administration.

The Property Team described how they enjoyed providing support for College events, such as ‘Dom’s Day’, Mothers’ Day Mass and Grandparents’ Day, as well as many others. They described the pride they take in keeping the school environment in a condition that provides a lasting reminder of how beautiful the grounds are to work in each day.

Partnerships

Ex-students representing a range of year groups from previous generations spoke of the community spirit that has been sustained and fostered throughout the College’s extensive history. They considered that the values integral to the Sisters’ teaching styles are still valid today; those of clear thinking and independent learning. The strong female role models of the past continue to inspire these ex-students. The ex-students spoke of Santa Sabina’s ability to draw out a student’s personal best and the best person you can be. They enjoy strong relationships with other ex-students and the networking opportunities that come with being a part of the Association.

The idea of ‘partnerships’ with other communities was also recognised by staff as important to providing an excellent and outwards-focused education. Del Monte and Santa Sabina staff reflected on our decision to join the Coalition of Knowledge - Building Schools, a cross-sectoral body of schools committed to action research. They talked about it being refreshing to build partnerships outside of our school and with the wider educational community.

An important part of any community is good communication. This is certainly an area that both staff and parents identified as needing improvement. We need to ensure we communicate in a timely and consistent manner, using technology to advantage.



*Being a
Santa student
follows you
for life –
Ex-student*

Key Themes



Curriculum

Lifelong critical thinkers

"The Mission's goal is to develop the ability in students to question & to be lifelong critical thinkers."



Mission through Curriculum

Teachers felt that the College Mission is compelling when it comes to curriculum. 'Education for justice', 'personal best', 'whole person' and 'student-centred' were identified as core to the mission of a Santa Sabina teacher. Staff described how the Mission of the College was demonstrated in their partnerships with parents, and how the value of truth was the basis for open communication.

"It's an enormous responsibility and privilege to help students understand the Mission."
– Santa Teacher

The secondary KLA Co-ordinators reflected on how their role connects to the College Mission and how they are proactive in extending students and drawing out the best in each student. The opportunities to work with Sister Sheila during immersions in South Africa, and on social justice initiatives with Matthew Talbot are integrated in the curriculum and are examples of the Mission in action.

Critical Thinkers

The Religious Education staff on the secondary campus described powerful teaching that promotes critical thinking, pursuit of personal excellence and whole person development. One staff member talked about the message of empowerment and how it was their role to encourage this. The RE Team as a whole discussed how they viewed their responsibility to teach RE as a privilege, and the Mission was to teach students about a range of issues that enables them to grow into intelligent, faithful

women who work for justice. The combination of academic rigour and social justice were the goals of the RE Team. They acknowledge the diverse faith journeys of their students but that Gospel values underpin and unite the various learning communities.

"We need to empower our students. It is our role as teachers to encourage this so students can be comfortable with who they are and their own beliefs." – RE Teacher

The English Department identified the way the Mission is enacted through choice of texts and topics. Students are challenged to examine difficult subjects particularly related to questions of social justice; classes promote great discussion and active learners, and students have agency over their learning.

The HSIE staff described how they challenge students to be critical thinkers in their subjects. Staff talked about how students who have undertaken the Central Australia Immersion are able to bring these experiences back to the classrooms, where they discuss the disadvantages Aboriginal people faced within our society.

Staff passion

The LOTE (Languages Other Than English) staff stressed their strong collegial practices that are grounded in their passion for languages, and that are reflected in excellent academic results. Science staff talked about exploring the Science behind interesting real-life events to spark students' interest.

*Fostering
achievement
of personal
excellence*



Staff described how they promote a culture of “fearlessness” as a key element of their work. The TAS Team enjoy watching the students develop their skills in Years 7 & 8, and then flourish into young designers in the senior years. The Team talked about the enthusiasm of the students who are waiting at the door when the bell goes.

“It is not just relationships between teachers and students that are important but also relationships between teachers themselves.”
– Sr Elizabeth Hellwig OP

Technology

Most of the secondary curriculum teams voiced their frustration with technology infrastructure that meant well-planned lessons often failed to materialise. They also were seeking timetabling innovation in line with best practice for 21st century teaching and learning.

Professional learning

Teachers were very appreciative of the generous professional learning opportunities at Santa Sabina. The initiative of the Board Scholarship has resulted in initiatives such as the K-12 Learning Framework. The Pastoral Team are the recipients of the Scholarship in 2013 and are researching ‘positive education’ as an integrated pastoral and academic approach to students.

Transition time

Middle School teachers discussed what works well, including the transition benefits of Middle School. The KITE homeroom system enables relationship building between Year 6 and Year 7. Students are challenged in their work with empathy and compassion. Staff described the dynamic learning that is student-centred and encourages them to take risks, particularly in the Compass research program. At the same time they talked about strengthening the curriculum, and having a smaller core team of Middle School staff. The timetable structure was also seen as a constraint on project-based learning as lessons were too short.

Boys’ Education

At Del Monte, the question of boys’ education was raised, and whether or not they were being appropriately catered for in terms of both curriculum and co-curricular opportunities. Parents were very supportive of co-education in the Primary School and particularly valued the opportunity to send both their sons and daughters to the same school.

Special Needs

When asked about areas of improvement, some parents identified the provision of support for students with Special Needs. The availability of Speech and Occupational Therapy to students during school hours was raised as a way of assisting both parents and students. Teachers too expressed concern that we remain committed to providing robust learning support throughout the College.

Co-curricular

The co-curricular opportunities were identified by staff, students and parents. Currently the participation rates for sport are 78% for K-12 and 82% for Y6-Y12. The students have achieved great success in competing in volleyball across Australia. Music, drama and debating also provide rich opportunities for students across the College. The Music Festival and external competitions are a fantastic way for students to showcase their talents and teachers love preparing the students for those experiences. Music Camp is open for all students in Years 7-12 and this is a great way for students to develop skills and a love for Music. With over 17 ensembles on the Santa Campus and another 9 at Del Monte, this shows the depth of the music at the College. Teachers get great joy watching students develop and perform. They see students not only growing musically but as a whole person and it is very satisfying to support them. Middle School leaders spoke about the fantastic opportunities available to the girls in both the co-curricular offerings such as debating, dancing, water polo, volley ball, diving, music and drama as well as the interesting class choices.



Currently the participation rates for sport are 78% for K-12 and 82% for Y6-Y12



Culture

Rich history
and tradition

"There is such a rich history and tradition associated with the College & it is enriching for our community that these memories are living through the archives."



Dominican charism

The theme of culture captures the significance of Santa Sabina's history and traditions for all of us. The culture is also identified as dynamic, and participants understood the Dominican charism as being responsive to modern times and contemporary issues. The love of the aesthetic, the diversity of our multicultural community, and the rich stories of our Dominican family all contribute to understanding the meaning of culture at Santa Sabina.

Del Monte staff described their spiritual formation through the Dominican Pilgrimage and the connections that this brings with other Dominican Schools and the Dominican community in Australia and overseas. Building relationships with parents was the key to gaining further insight into the students. Staff saw their roles as building resilience in students and promoting their faith journey.

"The teachers really want to help us learn." – Student Leader, Year 9

College Mission

The appreciation of the College Mission in relation to social justice was demonstrable in responses throughout the tour. The Sisters spoke of the large number of students who enter professions where they make a difference and help other people. The model of Catherine of Siena - seeing a need and responding with compassion – informs the

idea of student leadership. It's not about having all the answers, but speaking up, and encouraging students to find a voice.

The multicultural nature of the College community is integral to the culture of Santa Sabina. The continued growth in this area is to be welcomed, particularly in relation to the changing demographics of the Inner West of Sydney.

The Mission aims to develop the ability in students to question and to be lifelong critical thinkers. Yet at times students appeared to be risk-averse when given the opportunity to discuss leadership initiatives or classroom innovation. Middle School leaders were encouraged to emulate the 'Wild Things' of Maurice Sendak's classic childhood text, *Where the Wild Things Are*. It didn't take long for them to propose a number of initiatives to improve Middle School, and these 'wild' suggestions appear in the list of recommendations.

While there is much to celebrate at Santa Sabina, there was also a sense that we need to 'turn our inside face to the outside world', and communicate what is distinctively Dominican to the market.

"The Mission aims to instil in the students a deep sense of working for others through justice initiatives." – Sr Judith Lawson OP



Recommendations of the Listening Tour

Each group was asked to make recommendations that they believed would enhance Santa Sabina College. I have collated and categorised these under the following headings: Communication; Structures; Pedagogy; and Innovations.

Communication

- Refine the Mission Statement so that it is a more succinct but faithful document
- Proclaim our Dominican values in our internal and external marketing material
- Tell our stories in rich, innovative, creative ways to ensure that our Dominican heritage is celebrated
- Promote scholarship as an intrinsic element of Dominican education
- Include the extended Santa Sabina community of Sisters, ex-students, Board members and past parents in appropriate events
- Ensure communication is timely and tailored, and considerate of parents' busy lives
- Streamline communication to parents through more effective use of technology (eg mobile apps)
- Showcase the achievements of our staff as well as our students through the website, publications, and community events
- Promote and include Mary Bailey House as part of the broader Santa Sabina community

- Develop capacity for greater collaboration across teaching teams, and between non-teaching and teaching staff
- Develop effective communication strategies across the College to meet the holistic needs of students
- Ensure our marketing appeals to the changing demographics of the Inner West
- Review all marketing materials, and internal communication to ensure consistency and appeal

Structures

- Review where the different services are located around the College to ensure optimal and effective use of space
- Design learning spaces that are flexible, adaptable and technology-rich
- Review structures to facilitate the possibility of extending coeducation to Year 6
- Review the secondary timetable to allow for more flexible and extended lesson times
- Leverage the benefits of a P-12 school more effectively through strategic sharing of practice and expertise

- Strengthening Middle Schooling, and ensure seamless transition for students between the different campuses.
- Ensure that staffing decisions are strategic so that expertise is acknowledged and optimised
- Use our beautiful outdoor spaces more frequently and effectively for teaching and learning, and for community events
- Ensure that we identify, implement and review effective models for learning support and gifted education
- Investigate the possibilities of use of College facilities outside of term time (eg Library) in response to student needs
- Review Outdoor Education opportunities at Tallong and beyond

Pedagogy

- Be more overt in promoting academic excellence for both teachers and students
- Profile all students using a range of qualitative and quantitative data to ensure that students are appropriately supported in all aspects of their education



- Educate students to be culturally literate so that they engage respectfully and intelligently with those from different backgrounds and contexts
- Educate students to be digitally literate so that they engage as critical and creative users and producers of a range of technology
- Promote and celebrate professional achievements from all sectors of the staff
- Subject our own practice to rigorous examination through participation in practitioner inquiry, professional learning, peer observation and feedback, and professional reviews
- Ensure that our practices are always informed by academic research, from within and beyond the College
- Encourage greater risk-taking in learning so that students develop resilience, greater independence, and an understanding of 'how to learn'
- Develop a culture of collaboration that supports teachers and students to genuinely co-create the curriculum

Innovations

- Develop strategic partnerships with the wider education community including the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, International Baccalaureate Organisation, and Asia Education Foundation
- Introduce the Primary Years Programme of the IB at Del Monte
- Develop a more tailored approach to Years 11 and 12 so that there is a "Seniors Experience", and these students have the opportunity to be more engaged in the decision making in policies and practices that directly affect them.
- Broaden our co-curricular opportunities in consultation with students and parents
- Develop a culture of coaching and mentoring throughout the College
- Extend services in the school (eg OOSH hours and Library hours on both campuses)
- Provide greater resources on campus for students and families (eg Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy)
- Investigate and implement a new Learning Management System that will facilitate effective online and blended learning; and a Knowledge Management System for profiling and tracking students
- Review the current model of Community Service to maximise student engagement
- Investigate and implement timetabling options that support flexible and innovative practices
- Investigate the viability and benefits of a Prep Year on the Del Monte Campus
- Establish a Centre of Social Justice at Santa Sabina
- Celebrate learning through varied and regular showcases, performances and exhibitions across the College
- Investigate the idea of an extended Year 9 experience at Tallong

"These recommendations will help inform the College Strategy." – Dr Maree Herrett, College Principal

Listening Tour Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals and teams for their assistance with the organisation and implementation of the Listening Tour – Ms Juliann Lee, Director of Human Resources, and her assistant, Ms Liz Cronin; Mrs Yvette Graniero, and Mrs Briony Tyree from the Community Relations Team; and Ms Jennifer Fahey, my Personal Assistant.

The following groups of students, staff, and broader community all participated in the 2013 Listening Tour.

Community Relations

Kindergarten - Year 1

P&F Meeting

Year 12 Students

Administrative Staff - Del Monte

Science KLA

House Co-ordinators

Middle School Students

Ex-students

English KLA

KLA Co-ordinators

Student Leaders (Year 11 & Year 12)

Library (Secondary)

Support Staff (Secondary)

Student Committee Leaders (Year 11)

Year 2 & Year 3 Del Monte

Student Senior Leaders (Year 11)

Year 4 & Year 5 Del Monte

Mary Bailey House

Sports Department

IT Department

Student Homeroom Leaders

Year 9 & Year 10 Student Leaders

Business Office

Music Department

Support Staff

Student Leaders

OOSH

Uniform Shop/Canteen

Learning Enrichment

HSIE Department

Maths Department

Middle School

TAS Department

Religious Education Department

Drama Department

Visual Arts Department

PDHPE Department

Languages Department

Property Department

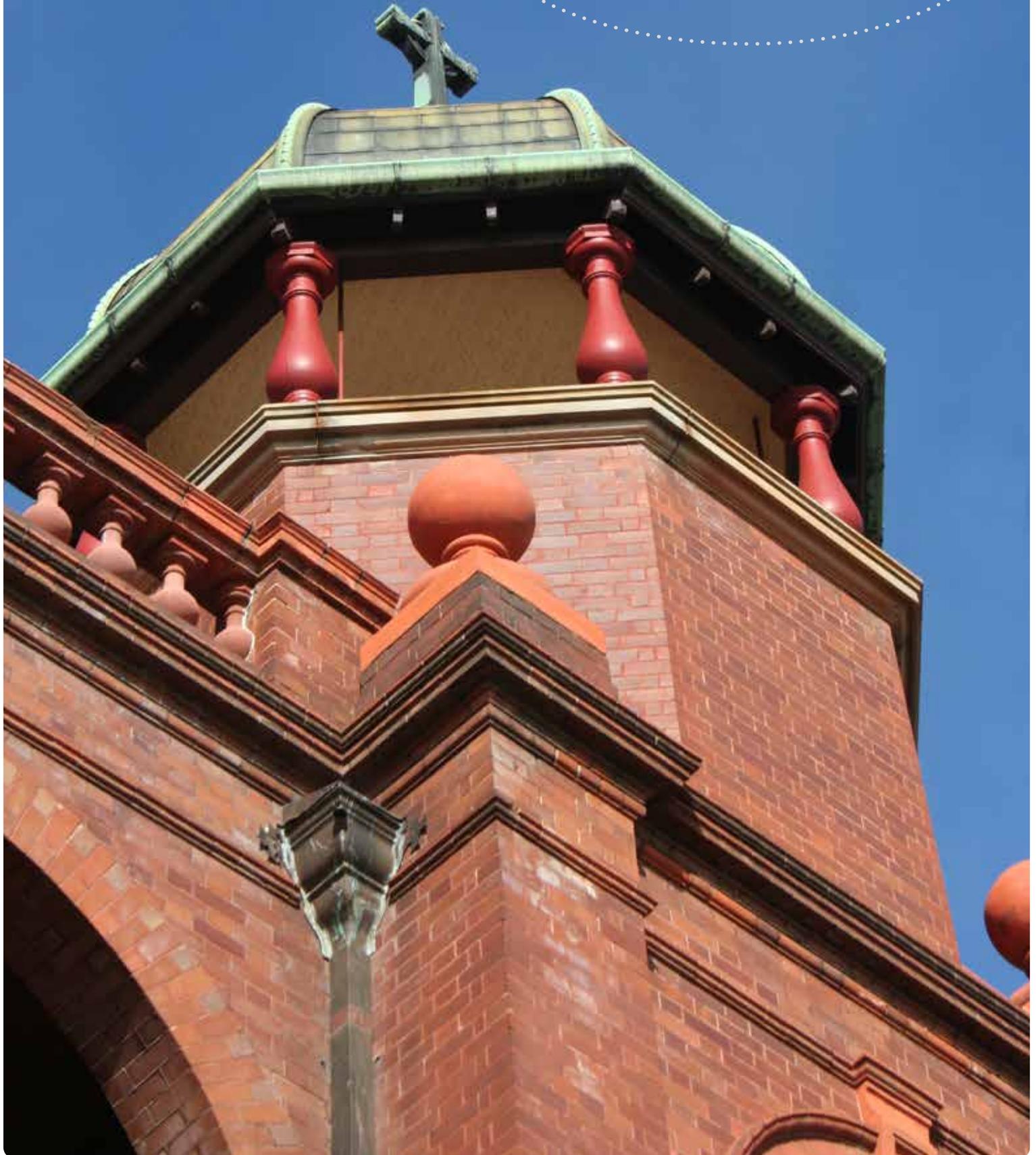
Leadership Team of the Dominican Sisters
of Eastern Australia and Solomon Islands

Middle School Student Leaders

Kindergarten Parents

Tallong Campus

*Honouring the past,
shaping the future.*





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