



Talking Point

Learning by liberation

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The State Government has spent \$161 million over eight years rebuilding schools and colleges.

THE razor-wire fence that once surrounded Reece High School has gone. It failed to prevent the Devonport school being burnt to the ground in December 2000.

The school is now protected by something proving far stronger than razor wire: pride. Since the opening of the rebuilt \$10 million school in 2003, there has been very little vandalism. Principal Sheree Vertigan says there has been only a handful of instances of vandalism by students and virtually no damage over weekends.

"The community has taken on ownership of the school and people are very proud and feel special about having a school of this calibre in their neighbourhood."

Reece High is bucking the state and national trend of increasing numbers of students choosing private schools. Daily it gets calls from parents wanting to enrol their children.

When Ms Vertigan took over as principal in 2002, students were in make-shift accommodation at Devonport High, waiting for their school to be rebuilt.

Then Reece had 502 students; now it has 679.

The new facilities and curriculum changes that allow greater student input have increased student interest in the learning process at Reece, and school records show behaviour management problems have fallen 83 per cent in the past three years.

Last year, Reece had its best ever retention rate for students continuing beyond year 10: 93 per cent enrolled at Don College, 2 per cent at TAFE and 4 per cent were apprenticed.

In 2003, Reece was rated among the top seven schools of the 21st century by The New York Times and it is the first school outside North America to win the James D. MacConnell Award,

which recognises educational facility excellence from the planning through to occupancy. The school's design is now the basis for schools being built in Britain. State-of-the-art technology includes closed-circuit television, , electronic whiteboards and wireless laptops that can be used throughout the school.

There is one computer for every three students and rooms have movable walls. There are no classrooms in the pure sense and every student in years 9 and 10 has a work station.

However, the school is designed to accommodate project-based learning and has the ability to recreate a classroom environment whenever appropriate.

Behind Reece High's building design is New York's **Prakash Nair**, who has designed schools in 17 countries.

His interest in school design came when employed by New York City on a \$10 billion project to build more than 100 schools and renovate another 500.

"They were just rebuilding the same schools using the same designs (but) they did not improve educational outcomes," he says. "There was no impact on graduation, attendance, social and academic measures . . . I decided I wanted to do something about that and have been working on planning schools that meet modern teaching methods."

Mr Nair says the culture of Reece changed, but much of that was through the school being more open and inviting to the community.

"You will not find all the answers to a school's problems in architecture. Most is up to the school and teachers, project-based learning and motivating the students.

"Tasmania's state education does not have to be second to private education, and Reece has proved that."

Mr Nair says: "Today's students need to be adaptable as they will go through many career changes during their working lives. Teaching is . . . moving away from the one adult teaching passive students in one place to multiple teachers acting as coaches or facilitators . . . Education is being customised and personalised so that all students experience success.

"You can spend a lot of money on new buildings and still not improve learning."

Mr Nair says demolishing schools is impractical and short-sighted and that school furniture and interior design are the best places to improve a school environment.

"You need to have furniture that is flexible in its use so that teachers and students are not forced to stay with the same room layout and can change the way the room operates and give more options for teaching strategies."

Principals have reported increased engagement in learning at all schools that have had work done under the State Education Department's capital works program.

They include Clarence High, which had \$1.35 million spent on new classrooms and an overhaul of its design and technology area. Clarence's principal, Marcelle Watts, says: "The design centre has improved dramatically with its use of glass walls and allows students to be working on designing or on building their projects in the one class as both areas can be supervised by the one teacher. This means that the classroom now works more like an industry workplace where people are working on different projects at different stages at the same time."

At Cambridge Primary, which had \$725,000 spent on it, the principal, Kim Harvey, says: "The rooms are more comfortable, colourful and engaging. Movable walls, dedicated wet areas and more adequate audio-visual and computer facilities have allowed teachers to do more.."

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