Larger classes are proving a hit with years 8 and 9, writes Avril Moore.

ROB Casamento acknowledges the irony in marketing huge class sizes to prospective parents when most schools are hell-bent on playing down this potential detractor.

But the principal of Karingal Park Secondary College is spearheading a fresh approach to teaching those often recalcitrant early teens of years 8 and 9. The school was awarded $1.5 million from the State Government's Leading Schools Fund for its two 500-square-metre, Max Learning Centres, which allow for class sizes of 125 students. The open-plan, multipurpose centres were opened in October.

"In the past, year 8 and 9 have presented the college with significant challenges related to engagement, attendance and achievement," Mr Casamento says. "This new model, which minimises traditional teacher-directed delivery and focuses more on negotiated learning, is achieving promising results."

Before adopting the plan, the principal's team at Karingal Park visited Kinross College in Perth and the Australian Science and Mathematics School in Adelaide, both of which operate larger classrooms successfully. It also sourced educational research by Elliot Washor and Prakash Nair, two world-leading authorities on school planning and design.

In a 2005 article in Designer/Builder magazine - "Radically Rethinking Education" - Mr Nair writes that teachers "need to become facilitators, step back and allow learning to take place in a spontaneous, somewhat uncontrolled and unpredictable way. But if you look at most of the schools we are building, they are the exact opposite."

According to Mr Washor, previous educational architectural solutions are based on a "factory model" of inflexible space used to deliver a repeated stream of information. Unlike these conventional "closed-door" classrooms, the Max Centres have 20 staff in learning teams of five, all working at the same time in a large, open-plan space. While the classes are much bigger, the ratio of teachers to students is better in the centre than anywhere else in the college.

"Students are incorporated into satellite learning communities working intensively with their teacher as they move between subject areas," Mr Casamento says. "These groups are created in response to individual learning needs, which means students are free of the one-size-fits-all curriculum design and are able to excel in areas of personal interest and expertise."

A typical day in the centre can appear quite chaotic to someone unfamiliar with these learning practices, says assistant principal Angela Pollard. "Students are encouraged to use chat, email, discussion groups and video-conferencing to expand their knowledge and experience. It's not uncommon to have a group of students cooking morning tea in the 'wet' area, while another is at computer stations researching juvenile justice as part of a crime and punishment unit."

Meanwhile, five or six girls are listening intently to two staff in disagreement over a problem using metre-rulers and ice. Off in a corner, a boy tutors another in algebra under the guidance of a SOSE and maths teacher.
"This highly collaborative approach between staff and students ensures that everyone is learning and each has a chance to have their skills on display," Ms Pollard says. "Students also have the opportunity to see adults working co-operatively, an experience they miss out on in the traditional classroom."

Di Kean, one of the centre's maths teachers, says that although students and staff were apprehensive about the logistics of operating in such an open-plan space, these fears were quickly dispelled.

"We now feel that by working in such a big group we are more respectful and aware of other's needs," she says. "It's hard to believe that 125 students in the one space is not disruptive, but in fact it's quite the reverse. There's always the hum of activity but overall, the centre is much quieter than any classroom I have ever taught in."

Professional development is not only directly linked to the college's performance and development plan but also designed by staff working at the centre, delivered in context and resourced by the college. There will also be opportunities for teachers from other schools to observe and work alongside Max Learning Centre staff.

Year 9 students Jessica and Elly view the experience as an important preparation for year 10, a transition that traditionally triggers apprehension, as it represents the senior years of school.

"We've been in the same class with the same people for two years and now we're all mixed up together," Jessica says. "This means when we stream off into our specialist areas next year we already know everyone, including our teachers."

Even the round tables have proved a hit. "We're able to talk quietly and more easily to each other," says Elly, "and teachers can see us, which means we get help as soon as we need it."

While thrilled with the enthusiasm of staff and students, Mr Casamento is keen to see some hard data in improvement targets. "We are already experiencing a decrease in student detentions, suspensions and absences and an overall improvement in student performance and attitude to school. It has definitely been worth all the hard work."

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