

Vertical House System

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At the first National Conference of the Australian Boarding Schools' Association in Canberra I was speaking to a conference delegate about a proposed new boarding facility being designed to accommodate 150 boarders. The planning sounded most impressive providing students with accommodation in single or double dormitories. It had been decided that the facility would meet the needs of the entire boarding community under the one roof.

I asked the delegate if the pastoral care of the boarders in such a large spacious boarding house be a vertical or horizontal system? The response indicated that the immediate planning concern was the location of a site on campus, the architectural design and the building program throughout the coming year. The unanswered question caused me to consider that the planning for a pastoral care structure for boarders should probably be finalised long before the consideration of the design of the building.

The pastoral groupings for any boarding community is vital for the harmony and care of the boarders. I would also recommend vertically arranged boarding systems produce a high calibre pastoral care for students. Students in schools, in a similar way to siblings in a family or the interaction of children in the playground, should be flanked by older and younger students to support each other and to learn from one another. Even experienced boarding staff forget the powerful influence that the recognition and support from senior students can have on a younger boarders. A single conversation about a worthwhile activity can point a junior boarder in the right direction and provide an understanding of the opportunities available in the future.

The vertical system of caring for boarders is most probably the most traditional structure that boarding houses have been arranged since residential houses for students originated in Europe over six hundred years ago. The vertical system has proved very successful however recently further improvements have been experienced in the structure as senior students have become friends and mentors to younger students. Up until twenty years ago boarding schools did allow senior boarders to have a high level of disciplinary powers which caused bullying to be a close ally to student leadership.

Today (I hope) all disciplinary powers in boarding houses are in the hands of well trained boarding staff and no longer are boarders forced to follow student leaders through fear. In today's boarding environment respect for the older members of the boarding community should be earned through their good behaviour and close care of the other boarders, constantly helping junior boarders and providing worthy role models at all times.

Given that schools have a harmonious boarding community with both staff and students sympathetic to the needs of each other, and respecting that all students have different God given talents the vertical system of boarding provides a wonderful way for boarders to grow and develop through their school years. It provides boarders with an escape from immediate peer group who are making constant comparison between each other producing parallel pressure in their lives.

The size of a the boarding group under a vertical system of management is vital. Supervision and care of boarders in a vertical structure that is too large may diminish the effectiveness of the pastoral care system. Each age group should be equally represented, equally respected and given small privileges balanced with increased responsibilities as they progress through the House. The boarding house population needs to be large enough to have a healthy representation of children of all ages but not so large that each age group of students will not need to move out of their group to seek the experiences and friendship of older and younger students.

A population of boarders moving each year from different places of residence on campus organised in a horizontal pastoral care system may not allow students to move away from the strong peer pressures of the age group and increases the opportunity for peer harassment to occur. It also does not allow boarders to treat one environment at the schools as their own. It is difficult to establish the continuity of care through the ongoing relationship with house staff. Moving to a new house each year means for the boarder establishing relationships with new staff and new routines. Much of the previous knowledge and understanding of the individual may be lost by staff of the school. It is not always easy for a student suffering from peer pressure in horizontally structured classroom to return to live with the same age group in a boarding house seven days a week. I believe horizontally planned boarding houses have the likelihood for great pressure and stress between boarders than a vertical care system.

Constant comparison of performance between students of the same age group can produce a demanding environment for residential staff to control in a horizontal based boarding arrangement especially if number are large. It can also cause students to be withdrawn not wanting to attract negative reactions from their peers.

For the teachers and house supervisors the progression of a student's education and development in a vertical house system is advantageous for the general progress of the student. Staff can also closely monitor growth and development, academic performance and the participation of the boarder in co-curricular activities as the student moves through different levels of the school. Changes in attitude and personality of the students can also be monitored year by year as the student moves through adolescents.

The house staff who support the students should continually be vigilant that each boarder find a special place in the boarding community. Sometimes recognition for gifted academic students or sportsmen come quickly however, other boarders need constant guidance to find their rightful and meaningful place in the school. If boarding staff are familiar with the needs of a student over a long period of time and have a close understand of the student's history there will be more chance of providing opportunities to assist the student connect with the school and feel an integral member of the campus community.

In my experience a vertical pastoral care system in boarding will produce a boarding environment far quicker accept and respect other boarders than other forms of boarding structures. The vertical systems if supervised and cared for as parents recognise the needs of children of a different age in a family structure the boarding system will produce a sensitive, sympathetic and loyal group of boarders. Role models and experiences will be displayed daily by older boarders to younger members in a vertical house system engendering examples of future levels of mature behaviour for younger members to emulate.

There are schools which choose to separate the junior (Year 7) boarders believing that keeping them away from older boarders may be helpful. This horizontal model has benefits but also underlines the pitfalls of having a young mindset all in together. There are definite benefits of having the junior boarders together in their first years away from home but perhaps a model of keeping them together in one House along with the full complement of older boarders in Years 8 to 12 should be considered. This way, the junior boarders have a designated introductory programme as well as getting to know each other yet at the same time have the positive role models of the older boarders across all age groups.

As a result of numerous conferences focussed on boarding within Australia and overseas many horizontal boarding models have be changed to vertical. Transformation of boarding house arrangements have been most common in South Africa. Although this can be an expensive exercise due to considerable changes to boarding accommodation it has been an enormous improvement in the needs of boarders. Mr Stuart West former Deputy Headmaster of Bishops School in Cape Town attended many workshops about boarding conducted at International Boys' School Coalition Conferences.

After some years of discussion with staff from other boarding schools who were familiar with vertical boarding models he decided to convince the Headmaster and School Governors to change the boarding model from horizontal to vertical. It is interesting to read a section of the Bishops web-site today regarding the pastoral care model at Bishops.

The backbone of Pastoral Care - the House and Tutor System

Within a demanding school environment of over 700 boys it is difficult to imagine this all happening and so each boy needs to belong to a smaller community where he feels comfortable to be himself and where he learns to live with others in order to grow in knowledge, thoughtfulness and confidence. We believe that all boys will do well if they live, work and socialise in an environment in which they are recognised, appreciated, encouraged and challenged. The vertically structured House and Tutor group organisation are designed to provide such an environment. They give boys a sense of belonging to something that has meaning and to which their contributions make a difference. A boy belongs to a House that has a physical building and a leadership, pastoral structure and tradition all of its own. Here he has the opportunity to grow, mature and contribute to those traditions.

The vertical house system carefully organised by experienced staff and supported by outstanding young house leaders will continue to be the strongest model for the good care of boarders for many years to come.

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The Age Old Problem!

Due to the greater understanding and innovation into the teaching and learning process the academic programs in all schools are becoming more exciting for teachers and students. Students are enjoying the choice of a wider range of subjects taught with the assistance of interesting advancements in technology. Boarders benefit from opportunities of higher levels of pastoral care from well trained staff, extra academic tutoring after school hours and access to school facilities seven days a week.

The retention rates of students at school continues to increase and parents encourage their children to further their education after they have left school. Rural boarders who once may have returned home after they have completed Year 12 now continue to tertiary education to gain further qualifications to succeed in the more diverse and competitive economies of both city or regional areas. Twenty years ago at Shore School, North Sydney about 35% of the boarders graduated from university, today this has increased to eighty percent.

The academic culture in schools has been greatly enhanced as parents and teachers are quick to recognise, praise and support the academic achievements of their students at school. Boarders today support each other in the learning process in the same way as the students encourage their friends in co-curricular activities and in games.

One aspect of the organisation of our schools that has not changed sufficiently in recent decades is the large number of the student population who are younger than the average age of the year group. Students entering school below the age of their peers can be disadvantaged in comparison to children at the correct or older range of the year group. The age discrepancy is particularly noticeable in a boarding environment when children live together comparing and competing against each other seven days a week. A child that is suffering from immaturity could be hindered in their academic and social development through the most crucial years of growth and development at school.

It is important that a child's psychological world expands to include developing interests (relative to his age, sex and culture), attitudes, values, beliefs, physical, social and mental skills, knowledge and ideas. Children who are younger than others around them will have fewer earlier experiences, since every personal experience involves the effect of preceding observations. Whatever the expectations parents have of their child's performance at school they can't ignore the most important influences affecting the behaviour of pupils in school are: the family and social origins of the child, the age group or friendship patterns of the child, the school itself and the pupils' perception of his or her future career. In each grade at school there is an instrumental order in respect to conduct, character and manner and the acquisition of specific skills. These functions could be potentially troublesome to a child if faced by a student younger than his academic year group.

The predicament of a boarder enrolled at a young age compared to their peers can especially affect the performance of a new student upon their arrival at boarding school. The boarder is confronted with a greater level of adjustment to match a living away from home environment than a day student. Many new boarders require extra support and they do not need the additional pressure of competing against students who are many months older living in close proximity with them as they adjust to life on campus. Indeed, the child must, in their new environment achieve status on the basis of his own physical, social and cognitive skills and personality traits, where previously the child was dependent for status upon his parents. As the child becomes established in the school and peer group, the peer group influence will tend to overshadow that of the teachers, whilst the boarding house parent and teachers overshadow the family. How important is it therefore that the child has the maximum maturity and age to handle these challenging tasks?

Children are sent to school early by parents for valid reasons in response to family pressures and often in the case of boarders due to access and location of available education. In the early years of education a child's age or size does not seem to be an issue and throughout primary school immaturity does not manifest itself quite as much as it might in years to come.

Toward the conclusion of primary years parents and teachers often discuss concerns about the age and maturity of a child before the promotion to secondary school. Teachers and parents weigh up the situation of advancement however the need to repeat a year of primary school is usually strongly dismissed by the child. Parents are also reluctant to cause any extra stress to their child at this sensitive time when peer pressures and friendships have become significant in the life of the child. The excitement of moving on with friends especially relationships established between junior boarders (who are generally of similar size and who have not commenced advanced physical development) in primary and early secondary school years usually outweighs the need to repeat, after all it is much less trouble for all concerned if the child simply proceeds to the secondary school.

When I was a Year 6 classroom teacher I was often asked by concerned parents about whether a child should repeat 6th class or move on to the secondary school. Many parents requested this information after the final primary school report was received which immediately caused the situation to be stressful as the decision had to be made quickly without the student fully understanding the advantages and disadvantages of the situation. Each individual circumstance was different and although many of the students referred to me were coping adequately with their academic work there were often signs of immature behaviour. Both teachers and parents noticed that the child was struggling to keep up with natural development of their peers. Immaturity was often identified by attention seeking by the young child trying to impress his classroom friends.

One proof of maturity is when a child is comfortable understanding the thoughts and ideas of their peers into an appropriate framework, so that an awareness of a single perspective is not mistaken for absolute reality when it is only a single point of view.

Hard decisions have to be made by many parents making the decision in regard to the choices for their young person many lacking the ability to forecast the full potential of their child. Even after considerable counselling very few parents of under age children who have displayed signs of immaturity actually make the decision to duplicate a year of the child's education.

Many years since my time as 6th grade teacher I have often been reunited with the students and parents of the primary school 'repeaters' and without exception they have identified the repeating year as a major reason for the student achieving their true potential at school. The parent and student expressed some horror imagining what level of achievement their child would have attained if they had completed their education a year earlier at the age of 16 or 17 years.

The difference in age between students whose age falls in the upper range of the age group and the youngest in the class can often have a variation of eighteen months. In the early years of high school the disparity in age will reveal obvious differences in the levels of the mental, physical and social behaviour of young adolescents. This is also the time when parents of immature adolescents will reflect upon their previous thoughts and concerns regarding the placement of their child who struggles to keep up with the maturity of his peers. The most obvious sign can be the lack of physical growth and development compared with older children combined with social pressures can be of great personal embarrassment to student falling behind.

In Queensland the age of school leavers is a source of much debate. The traditional model of education in Queensland results in students leaving school at 17, a year younger than students in other Australian states. The matter of the reception age of a child in Queensland is being reviewed as a reaction to the problems of students leaving school prior to attaining the age of 18 which is the 'age' for a number of legal requirements in Australia.

A boarder on campus has greater difficulties enduring the effects of immaturity as he or she gets very little respite from the competition of peers 24 hours a day. This can result in boarders experiencing complications trying to be 'someone that they are not' both day and night. In later years privileges enjoyed by the older age group may not be extended to the younger student in respect to applying for driving licences and entry to places restricted to over 18 years in activities such as the 'schoolies' holiday period. These matters may not be of the highest priority for adults but are very important milestones for adolescents.

I am reminded of the 'age' discrepancy in our schools every time I read the title of a feature horse race in the newspaper. The age of the horse permitted in a race is the first criteria for entry to a race. Obviously a two year old horse would not be permitted to compete against three year old horses. The 'age' restrictions continue until horses reach their maturity.

Another irregularity in many schools is that school policy will allow a child who is under age to participate in classroom learning activities however when it comes to sport the student will be required to register in the correct lower age group. This produces a further dilemma for the younger student who then is challenged to move between ages and friendship groups for different activities. The younger student is not necessarily accepted into one peer group at school but becomes a member of two age groups. If the student is moving between age groups they will not receive the full recognition of their peer group resulting in a reduction of self esteem and a reduced feeling of belonging in the school.

Having observed children in boarding houses and the classroom for many years I have become aware of many manifestations of the immature student. The normal reaction of the child feeling that he or she is falling behind socially or physically is to draw greater attention to themselves which can be a distraction to the individual or to those around them. The immature child will also notice, but not fully understand changes in the attitude and relationships with other children who are becoming more mentally and physically mature. Often attempts by the younger child to imitate the more mature student will become a source of embarrassment and frustration to the younger student. When children at school feel that they are already behind physically or mentally before new challenges present themselves it is easy to understand that immaturity will produce a demoralizing effect upon the child's self-concept. Is it any wonder that the younger child gives up, or becomes rebellious and aggressive? The child's pride is shattered and their self-concept dulled. If the notion of individual differences is to mean anything to teachers in primary schools, it must imply the necessity for insisting children are in the correct cohort to allow children to experience achievement and improvement commensurate to their ability among other children on a level playing field.

A study in California produced some impressive research regarding the development of males from infancy to adulthood. Boys in the older age group who matured at a faster rate than others were found to be relaxed, less animated and more matter of fact. The younger child in age and maturity compared to their peers were described as attention-getters who were always on the go. When the same males were examined years later some of the differences seemed to persist. At the age of 33, the more mature students scored higher on a test measuring the ability to make a good impression, and they tended to show less rebelliousness than those who were under the age of their friends at school.

The academically gifted or capable sports person are not immune from displays of immature behaviour. I have been surprised that immaturity has spoiled the performance of capable students early in their teenage years and others in the final stages of their school career. There are many examples of students suffering from immaturity at school and in social situations which have caused major periods of disruption to their confidence attempting to embrace the learning process. The failure of under age students to have strong and balanced relationships with peers can lead to student becoming anxious and isolated. The same child is also more likely to be subject of ridicule and bullying. Relationships with the opposite sex can also be challenging due to age differences. Boys are usually behind the maturation rate of girls and if the boy is younger than the age of his peers this will further exacerbating developing social relationships with girls.

Some boarders and day students in their final years at school are appointed to leadership positions. Immaturity can destroy the chances of these students to successfully establish themselves as leaders. It is enormously challenging for those younger to exercise discipline and issue instructions to older and possibly more confident students who are a little more sophisticated and worldly

School registrars and administrators must continue to ensure that prospective parents are discouraged from enrolling a child into a year group where the child will be clearly younger than their peers. Many years of personal observation and experience across many levels of learning have confirmed to me that a child placed in his or her correct year group will be advantaged compared to the younger counterpart.

It is important that every child has an equal opportunity to succeed at school in order to reach their full capability without hindrances beyond their control. Commencing at the same age as other children will create a basic platform for this to happen. If a under age child does have difficulties at School the child's parents and the student will never fully understand the possibilities that an additional year would have made to the career of the child at school and other life experiences.

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Flight Zone

Queensland graziers have been advocating that stockmen should understand and respect the 'flight zone' of cattle when close to the herd or moving a mob of cattle. They suggest that there is valuable saving to both cattleman and beast if cattle are moved from place to place slowly and quietly without stress. Whip cracking and shouting to move cattle from one place to another should be replaced by a quieter and more relaxed form of management. The Queensland graziers believe the results have been noticeable that animals seem less anxious and cattle go forward in better condition!

The Queensland graziers explain that at times you have to get close or inside the 'flight zone' to shift cattle however the majority of contact with the animals can be made from a distance, respecting the animal's private space.

The team responsible for the management and care of school boarders can gain knowledge from this practical example of controlling live stock. If the supervision of boarders by staff is erratic and without the appreciation that boarders need a good deal of 'space' it will create a negative response by the students and an unsettled atmosphere in boarding houses. Boarders will feel much more secure and comfortable if they know boarding staff are taking care of them and maintaining a keen interest in their development from a sensitive distance. Boarders do not need staff who are absent from their watch for long periods of time and then suddenly penetrate their 'flight zone' when things become unsettled.

A consistent living environment and they thrive and routine provides the opportunity for a boarder to thrive. Residential students will feel comfortable if they are constantly supported by well trained, friendly boarding staff who can be relied upon twenty - four hours a day. Boarders who are left without stable supervision will develop less consistent standards of behaviour (especially over weekends) and will react poorly to supervisors who are not reliable. I have noticed cattle reacting in the same way. Cattle that are isolated for months on end without human contact that suddenly have horses, bikes and dogs racing around them will take fright and behave badly.

Boarders benefit from a boarding program that is carefully designed and well organised. Organisation and discipline should be clearly understood by the boarders and administered by competent staff. Decades ago boarders suffered largely under the control of inexperienced senior students who had permission to discipline younger boarders. Boarding staff were also quick to revert to corporal punishment for incidents viewed today as minor matters! The atmosphere and environment in boarding houses often lacked trust and security between boarders and staff.

Today the well-being of all boarders can be achieved in a quieter more relaxed and caring environment. Certainly there are times when staff have to make urgent corrections to an adolescent's behaviour and intervene their 'flight zone', however most boarders will grow and develop in a caring and supportive environment where there is no sign of panic, raised voices or severe punishment!

Boarders today live in an relationship of friendship with peers of their own age and fellow boarders older and younger. Respect for senior students is earned by the leader by their performance as a fair and supportive role model, not gained through fear. Boarders will thrive in a secure, well organised and compassionate environment.

If the correct atmosphere prevails in boarding houses boarders will respect the boarding staff and also display respect for fellow boarder's privacy and space. The allegiance of staff and boarders will be based upon co-operation and trust. If boarders living in the boarding community feel comfortable they will treat their fellow boarders with admiration and help each other to cope with the many physical and emotional demands of teenage years. They will also have confidence in the boarding house management team.

I have no idea how cattle think but if cattle are approached with respect and have more time to understand what a stockman is trying to do with them they may do what the stockman wants then to do! Good communication and timing by House supervisors are also paramount in giving boarders the chance of comprehending and understanding daily routine. Early and regular information from House staff regarding boarding house rules, personal expectations of behaviour and performance will provide boarders with greater opportunity to do the right thing. Boarding House staff must give the boarders plenty of notice regarding their responsibilities by meeting with them daily and displaying news of coming events on notice boards and internet portals well in advance of deadlines. If boarding supervisors do detect problems with an individual they should discuss the matter with the boarder and seek as much specialist help as is available. If everyone has a clear understanding of what is happening on campus the boarding community will be more relaxed, comfortable and it will result in a more successful place.

The administration and organisation of a boarding house is not rocket science. It can be compared to the needs of a family unit. All groups need a sympathetic understanding by their managers and an understanding every child have their own God given talents. It is the responsibility of carers to discover those talents and allow the individual to shine in the community by being able to demonstrate those talents providing the individual with self esteem and confidence.

Boarding house supervisors must be attentive at all times yet not be too obtrusive. There are no short cuts when caring for boarders especially in regard to the time and interest that must be devoted to their care. The flight zone must be kept on the radar at all times but not always penetrated!

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