

Award-winning Camberwell principal's cybersecurity niche



By Grant Quarry

Published June 2, 2021

Competition for excellence in education is never more fierce than in the inner eastern suburbs of Melbourne.



Here, the most exclusive of private schools fight it out for supremacy, and it is here that public school principal Jill Laughlin must somehow compete on a fraction of the budget afforded to her illustrious neighbours.

But at 1100-student Camberwell High School, complete with its stunning original American Gothic 1941 building, Laughlin and her team are not only competing – they're positively thriving.

The school leader and recent recipient of Victoria's [Outstanding Secondary Principal Award for 2020](#), is leading an eye-catching innovative and sustainable curriculum and providing her students with a strong career and pathways focus.

“The sense of competition in this vicinity is incredible,” she acknowledges.

“And parents are discerning in terms of the way they look at a school and the expectations of what it offers.

“I think that this school is very conscious that the offerings that it makes to the community are diverse, but also really rich in terms of a co-curricular program as well...

“One of our students said to me recently, ‘this is a really big school and the potential is that you could get lost in it,’ but actually, what it means is that everybody can find a place within it, because there’s so much on offer.”

A major focus of Laughlin’s is developing independent and self-managing learners, equipped to negotiate the many challenges of the future – in work and in life.

Back in 2012 the school established its ‘Enterprise Centre,’ a home base for its Year 9 cohort, where the development of soft skills takes priority.

“So the ‘dispositions,’ as we call them, are built on four pillars: resilience and reflectiveness is one, critical and creative thinking is another, resourcefulness is the third, and collaboration and ethical behaviour the fourth.

“... underneath each of those are a number of subsets of the kinds of attributes and skills that you want young people to have – and the fundamental premise of the Enterprise Centre is developing those dispositions in order to prepare young people for the future.”

Year 9 students take part in what’s called ‘Connections,’ an inquiry-based subject developing the dispositions within the students.

To complement this, Laughlin successfully applied for an Australian Government grant to become the only Victorian P-Tech (Pathways in Technology) pilot school specialising in cybersecurity.

“We had just been through a big review of Year 10 and we were just about to implement a program that we call ‘Futures’ at Year 10, which, like Connections, is very much focused on inquiry learning and setting young people up to understand themselves as learners and think about their future pathway.

“The grant was going to give us that extra linkage that we were looking for to think about, within Futures program, a group of students who might really want to focus on the STEAM pathway and that subset around cyber security.”



Laughlin believes cybersecurity brings together many of the elements of STEAM and gives kids a really tangible way to focus on it.

“I think the trap is with STEAM that you can think very big, it feels like such an enormous space to work in – science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics – it’s huge, so how do you actually grapple with that and find a tangible way to approach it?”

“So the cybersecurity focus and the Futures program were just kind of a perfect storm of coming together with how we could move the school forward, ... how we could propel our students forward in their learning in that space, and also give them the connection beyond school...”

“As the ATAR’s glory days are kind of fading and universities and industry are already coming up with their own unique ways of tapping into talent in secondary schools, we just wanted to be on the front foot and think about how we could position our young people to take up those opportunities while they’re still at school.”

One of the important parts of the grant has been the introduction to the school of an industry liaison officer, who’s key responsibility has been to work in the curriculum space and with industry and tertiary partners to find them and to link them into the school as part of a real collaboration.

“We had the Futures curriculum and at the steering group discussions we talked about what the students were going to be learning. We invited the partners to give us advice about modifying that learning and that’s been done continuously. It’s a true collaboration about thinking about the Futures curriculum and how we energise that with our partners’ input, but it was also about both bringing them into the school and sending our children out into the workplaces and tertiary institutes.”

Naturally, last year, because of COVID, contact was by email and Zoom, however Laughlin says every one of the 25 Futures students involved in 2020 had a mentor either from tertiary or industry.

“Each of the students had a project, had a focus, that they wanted to explore in cybersecurity and their mentor worked with them on refining that focus and helping them to understand how that would be articulated in the workplace or in the tertiary sector.

“... the other part of it was a more generalised approach where the students were exposed to lots of experiences from the industry sector, particularly, whether they be Telstra or NBN or (leading cybersecurity and managed security services provider) Trustwave or BHP, where they were coming into the school and speaking about cybersecurity within their own industry and how that was expressed, what were the roles and what is ‘a day in the life of’, whether it’s a programmer or whether it’s a penetration tester...

“... so for students to see what that job actually looks like and to have a personal relationship with a mentor in that workplace has been phenomenal, it’s been really, really exceptional.”

Those important links will continue on despite the P-Tech funding ending, and stretching beyond her own school, with her Outstanding Secondary Principal Award PD grant of \$25,000 prize money, Laughlin is hoping to spread the joy.

“It’s great that I’ve had the opportunity to build P-Tech, but I would like to think that this is something that all schools could do, and to think about how that might be done more systematically.

“So the funding would be for me and a couple of my team to be able to travel to see other schools in which this has been effectively implemented.

“We’ve got a few ideas about some places where this is going well, including Denmark, and the UK, but it will all depend on travel restrictions whether we can get there or not.”

This story appeared in the May 2021 edition of *Australian Teacher Magazine*.