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## FUTURE LOOKING MORE BRIGHT

You often hear something described as "life-changing", but in Tahlia and Ella's case, it truly is.

"I couldn't see this future for myself back at my old school. I couldn't even see a future," Tahlia says on this bright sunny day on the outskirts of the city.

They are among the first students at a new college campus that is already making a difference.

Story - page 7



Students Tahlia and Ella take a break at the new Saints College campus at Bungaree, which opened three weeks ago in the former St Michael's School. Picture by Lachlan Bence

**'WE BUILD RELATIONSHIPS FIRST, THEN EDUCATION'** The campus is helping change lives

# Inside Bungaree's newest school

Michelle Smith

AT THEIR old schools, Tahlia and Ella couldn't see a future for themselves.

Now, sitting in the sun in the grounds of their new school outside Ballarat, they talk animatedly about their plans for the future.

They are among the first students at the new Saints College campus at Bungaree, which opened three weeks ago in the former St Michael's School.

The quiet calm of Bungaree farmland is changing how the school's vulnerable students engage and regulate themselves.

The Bungaree campus is the second site for Saints College, a supported, flexible educational secondary school option that opened in Ballarat last year as St Joseph's Special Assistance School.

When the Ballarat campus opened on Humffray St in February 2024, it had 124 enrolments and a long waiting list, such is the demand for alternative learning options in Ballarat.

Across the college's seven Victorian sites including Ballarat and Bungaree, there are now more than 800 young people on the waiting list who come from a range of backgrounds who were disengaged from school, who faced barriers to education, or who mainstream schools have not been able to cater for. Almost immediately after opening, they began looking for a second campus.

The Bungaree campus was planned to open for the start of the 2025 school year, but renovation delays meant they used temporary sites around the town until the campus was ready to open at the start of term two.

There are now 46 students aged 13 to 17 enrolled at Bungaree and 168 in total across the two campuses. Deputy principal Renee Vallance said there was still a large waiting list and constant inquiries about enrolments at the school.

After just three weeks in their new campus, Ms Vallance said staff had noticed a difference in the students.

"We offer the same trauma-informed approach (as the Ballarat campus) ... but the main difference is it's in a country setting where it's calmer, not as busy and more removed from the hustle and bustle of town. (It has) that calming vibe we hoped would have an effect on these young people's ability to regulate, and reregulate themselves."

The peace and quiet of Bungaree has helped students improve their ability to regulate their emotions and actions.

"We initially had some concern because for a lot of those young people, sometimes we had to call it for the day if they became too disregulated but we've found being able to have time out, maybe go for a walk with a staff member ... or chill out in the beanbag helps them re-regulate and means we can keep them here for the day," Ms Vallance said.

And any student who storms off has nowhere to go. Students are bussed from Humffray Street to Bungaree each day and return to the Ballarat campus for their specialist art, woodwork and elective classes.

Ms Vallance said even the daily 'road trip' to school helped regulate students before they arrived. Like students at the Humffray Street campus, they are also provided breakfast, lunch, morning and afternoon tea and spend one day a week "out and about" visiting new places, getting involved in the community and learning new skills. Most of the students at the Bungaree campus attended the Ballarat campus last year but decided



The former St Michael's School in Bungaree, which closed more than 30 years ago, has been refurbished to become a campus of Saints College. Pictures by Lachlan Bence



The common room and dining area of the new Saints College campus in Bungaree.

the new location would be a better fit.

The school has refurbished the old St Michael's School building into a common room, kitchen, dining, sunroom and offices and portable classrooms have been installed for the three classes. Two sheds will be transformed into hands-on learning spaces, and a bright sunny courtyard, complete with beanbags, is a popular hang-out spot.

Ms Vallance said the new campus had benefits for students at both Ballarat sites.

"It's created a huge difference for our students here, and has allowed those young people (in Ballarat) to become really settled and probably even feel more safe and secure about their learning risks they want to take."

A priority is keeping class sizes small so each student has an individual learning experience.

"These guys really need it because they've

got big gaps in their education," Ms Vallance said. "We are really fortunate in the fact that, unlike any other school, we don't have education support staff in our classes but every classroom has a youth worker model."

"That allows for our youth worker to reach out to all the external providers able to assist young people to enhance their learning or mental health. It's a real wrap-around."

"Learning is going to take place only when we make them feel really safe and comfortable so we build relationships first, then education. They haven't experienced that in their schooling because other schools don't have the luxury of that model. In class, they've just got to move on."

Tahlia and Ella, who both attended the Ballarat campus last year, left previous mainstream schools because of bullying.

"I was so down in the dumps when I was

at school, I didn't even want to go out, and now I'm here, hanging out with friends, making inside jokes," Ella said. "I couldn't see five years down the track and now I see the rest of my life."

Ella, who finishes school this year, plans to go into real estate and will do work experience in the field in the coming months.

Tahlia said a big difference for her at Saints College was the teachers, and the smaller size of the school.

"They know how to teach. They don't just throw stuff at you and expect you to know what to do," she said, adding teachers were more like friends than strict teachers.

"I couldn't see this future for myself back at my old school. I couldn't even see a future."