



Monday October 19th, 2009

**Letter from the Alpine School Campus (Altitude 1600m).**  
**Spring weather is finally on its way.**

Dear Parents, Guardians and Families.

Welcome again to the community of the Alpine School Campus. Congratulations again on the achievement of being personally, as a team, as a family and as a school selected to participate in this Alpine School experience.

The purpose of these letters (there will be four or five) is to provide you a perspective of the *intended program* here at the Alpine School. What your son or daughter experiences, and then of course what they may communicate to you, may vary! This is quite normal! We will not be writing about individuals, more about the experiences of the community as a whole.

It seems amazing that a couple of weeks have passed already. As we indicate to your son or daughter, the time here seems to pass at an accelerating pace. I think it is something to do with the familiarization of the living situation here. And familiar they certainly seem to be! I am really delighted at how readily our students this term have settled-in.

Homesickness is a normal emotion at this time in the program, although it does tend to diminish. If you think that your son or daughter is still unreasonably homesick, do call us and we can compare notes, so to speak. None of us can really predict how this anxiety may manifest itself. Our staff members really do make a priority of ensuring students' wellbeing during these first, more unsettled weeks; they will give you a normal call in the next week. Moreover, how are you coping with being "son or daughter sick"?

Experience helps us in explaining how students cope and why they behave in certain ways here. We see students (to varying degrees) in their first week or so of living here being very concerned with self. They often ask, "When is dinner? or "Where do I wash my clothes?" On the inside, we feel students are asking, "Who are my friends and how do I fit?, Does she like me or what does he think about me?" They are concerned about "me". This is a very egocentric period. After this normal and possibly "selfish" time, students find themselves comfortable with this day-to-day concern, and tend to identify with their team very strongly: "I belong to "Footscray City College" or "Orbost Secondary College", or "I am a city/country person". Students tend to be placing themselves in a category so they can find their position in a "new social/school order". They tend to cluster with familiar friends.

For some students letting go of their past and embracing the new is a traumatic period; it is a "rite of passage". This can manifest itself in a whole range of denials and refusals, even to fundamental agreements like mobile phones and hair straighteners! Once these refusals are accepted as part of the Alpine School, and equally so, as time passes, we tend to see students developing a strengthening association with the Alpine School as "home", especially after the visiting weekend. They associate strongly with this place as their own, where they live, and see it as a key part of their identity. This sense of security or anchoring is fundamental to the students' sense of well being and belonging. Parents' weekend is possibly the first time in your and their lives that your son/daughter will be showing you around *their* home.



Another way to describe the experience for students is the model of “*Mourning-Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing-Mourning*”. At present, they are past “*forming*” as a group and are beginning to “*storm and norm*”. That is, they are testing the rules, and are beginning to see where they fit in the group with their values and beliefs. This often translates into greater familiarity with staff and the routines. The last experience, “*mourning*”, will be your challenge as their new world is deconstructed. How will you deal with *that* type of challenge?

Our educational and care programs reflect this knowledge and understanding of the psycho-social development and needs of young people in a setting such as this. What we do at various stages in the program reflect the needs of our students; we call this a “student centered approach to learning”.

We provide this as a way of explaining perhaps why some students behave the way they do, and preparing you for, among other things, a revisit of separation anxiety (*mourning or grieving*) or homesickness after the visiting weekend. The homecoming, while apparently a long way off, is worth considering now. You may also find communication may vary at different times and possibly decrease after an initial burst. You may feel you are totally abandoned after visiting weekend in particular. Please contact us if you would like to discuss this further!

Sometimes some students appear “really too cool” to be here at first, and struggle with the fact they do not have the pretend identity here they might have at their own school. At The Alpine School, it is hard to maintain a pretense, and the real or true person emerges. This is the person who is valued by all of us and who we all want to know. The Alpine School is a terrific place for that “real” young person to emerge, and we are sure they will. We hope that your son or daughter has a chance to really grow here in many ways.

The program is well and truly underway, and the students are certainly becoming immersed. We hope you get the day-to-day feedback from them, either electronically or by letters, on what they have been up to. They have their Laptop computers and seem to be enjoying the access to such a wonderful tool. They have started their Level 1 First-aid course and the TAFE Safe Food Handling course has been completed. Students have been out undertaking their introduction to safe mountain bike riding, and have done environment and alpine expedition skills sessions too. They have also been involved in a unique team building activity called “bridge building”.

The program for working on the CLP (Community Learning Project) is underway, but it involves a lot of peripheral work and learning beforehand. Students have spent time organizing themselves around the CLP, but it is not the main priority at this stage. First and foremost, your sons and daughters need to feel comfortable in the living situation of the Alpine School, and a lot of what we do focuses on that. Secondly, they need to undertake what we call a “needs audit” around their CLP; “what things, skills or knowledge do we need, have or require to complete this project?” The next stages involve team process work, solution-finding skills, Ned Hermann’s whole-brain learning and de Bono’s six thinking hats, multiple intelligences, VAK (visual, audio, kinesthetic) learning, communication skills, environmental education, peer support, conflict resolution skills, public speaking skills, relaxation, leadership classes and so on. This all interweaves through the program from now until visiting weekend. These are all leadership attributes we work through to make the process of completing the CLP more realistic. An integral component to all of this work is the “Alpine Learning Project”, or ALP. The ALP is an excellent training ground for the CLP. And in the midst of this is recreation and free time, plus time to undertake personal cleaning and clothes washing and the like. It’s busy! Can we recommend that questioning your son or daughter about aspects of the program, especially using some of the terms have been mentioned? This is an excellent way of connecting with his or her experience here.



It is also worth noting that your son or daughter will NOT receive a report written by us. The combination of their CLP, ALP (Alpine Learning Project), Passport, Personal Progress Interview, Presentations of Learning, First Aid and Safe Food Handling Course as well as all the written communication you will receive, constitutes their "Report". We as staff have considerable input into many of these things. Many of the appraisals and reviews undertaken are "360 degree". That is, feedback and appraisal are sought continuously from those people in immediate contact with your son or daughter (who could be staff or students, and hence includes "peer review"), and we highly value this type of appraisal as an integral part of the learning process, not a type of afterthought.

On the note of being busy, students do not have time, nor is there an expectation, to undertake schoolwork from home. This is made clear at the information sessions. We intrinsically value the learning they are undertaking here. We can assure you, our research and experience shows that students do not suffer *in the long term* with "missing" a term of schoolwork from their home school. He or she will, however, most definitely suffer from *lack of support* from schools, if that was the case, in a social and emotional sense, and that will effect their academic reintegration. Our experience is that after an adjustment period contextual to the individual and with appropriate support from schools, students accelerate in their schoolwork and their lives on their return home. Experience also tells us that adjustment period may be up to six months, but it also varies considerably person-to-person.

May we also remind parents it is not appropriate to visit the Alpine School, especially unannounced? Such visits, while they may appear seemingly helpful to your son or daughter, can in fact create difficulties for him or her. We are all trying to help them develop independence, and visits can create equity issues and consequent embarrassment and disunity. We also urge you if there are mobile phones and you know about them, they are incredibly divisive in a small community, please encourage your son/daughter to hand them in, or let us know.

Some parents occasionally telephone indicating that their emails have "bounced" or they have received messages along the line of "mail box full". Students are allocated 10mb of email space and 30mb of downloads per month, which we normally consider adequate. In their understandable exuberance, some students have emailed attachments that might include large photos or images. These have the effect of "using" the allocated space. We talk about reformatting images to lower resolution to reduce size, to limit the number of attachments, minimize the size of distribution list students might use, and so on to help them all manage their network resources. Don't hesitate to call if you feel there is an issue.

They will soon be heading out on bushwalking expeditions, carrying their backpacks and all their alpine camping gear. We start locally with an overnight expedition, and after the visiting weekend, we head out on a more ambitious expedition. Please be reassured that all expedition routes are reviewed for safety and access and modifications made as deemed necessary, to ensure that the safety of your sons/daughters remains as paramount.

Parents' visiting weekend is rapidly approaching. This is specifically a weekend about you as a family and about your relationship to you son/daughter, and is an integral part of the whole Alpine School separation and reintegration process. Give them your undivided attention and take the interest in their experience here and their return and reintegration over the winter period will be so much better for all of you. You will all be changed for the better as a result!



# Alpine School Campus

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If you are not able to make the visiting weekend or would like to talk to us about any of the matters raised, please do not hesitate to do so.

With every good wish,

Yours sincerely

Mark Reeves, BA (Rec.), Grad Dip (OE & PE), Postgrad. Dip (Organizational Change), MACE.  
Principal.  
On behalf of the School Staff team.

Russell Shem  
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