

Nicola Taylor, principal of Presbyterian Ladies' College (PLC) Armidale, chats to a group of students.

## HOME AWAY FROM HOME

CARING FOR STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL WELLBEING IS TOP OF MIND FOR THESE BOARDING SCHOOLS.

WORDS HANNA MARTON

WHETHER IT'S FOR THE first time or the hundredth time, dropping your child off at boarding school after the holidays is bittersweet. Bags are hauled to dorm rooms and friends are made (or reunited). The excitement is squeal-worthy and adventures await. On the other hand, tears can flow. Nerves can fray. And you can squeeze in only so many extra-long hugs before saying goodbye.

Being away from home for weeks, or even months, is a daunting prospect for kids – and parents. Homesickness is the number-one challenge experienced by boarding students, reports Terrie Jones, principal of Canberra Girls Grammar School (CGGS). “As welcoming and as wonderful as the boarding staff and house are, it's still not home,” she says.

Resuming boarding, especially after the Christmas break, can be overwhelming for returning students, too. “It's the beginning of a new academic year with potentially new subjects and peers,” explains Nicola Taylor, principal of Presbyterian Ladies' College (PLC) Armidale. “New staff in both the classroom and the boarding house can have a big impact, and there may be a change in dorm or roommates. These things can present as challenges, though it's often through challenges that we grow.”

Indeed, boarding offers many opportunities to flourish. Living on campus fosters independence, agency, tolerance and resilience. “We hear alumni talk about the skills they learnt at boarding school all the time; of self-management, self-regulation and how to live with, and have respect for, people from different cultural backgrounds or life circumstances,” says Terrie.

Sure, many boarders come from rural or remote properties. However, some are city-dwellers whose parents have been posted overseas for defence or diplomatic purposes. Others hail from a whole other continent. “This builds a really broad perspective and an outward-looking mind in students, which is key for us as an International Baccalaureate school,” adds Terrie.

Almost every boarder will battle homesickness at some point; the first step is acknowledging that it's inevitable, says Terrie. “We don't pretend that homesickness won't happen. It's a natural part of moving away and becoming more independent.” She advises families to visit the boarding house ahead of time. CGGS also welcomes new boarders two days earlier than returning students, so

they can settle into routines and bond with other new students. Some even take a school-sanctioned sightseeing tour of Canberra. Weekly meetings are held throughout the term so that all CGGS boarding students and staff can ask questions or air concerns. “We also have separate new boarders' meetings, where the girls meet with boarding captains and the head of boarding to ask questions they don't wish to voice in the larger open forum.”

Terrie adds that some students tend to “keep calm and carry on” despite feeling anxious or homesick, and confide only in their families. So, open communication between parents and boarding staff is crucial.

At PLC Armidale, new students are welcome to “sleep over” in the boarding house before commencement. Each girl is paired with a buddy, with whom they're encouraged to keep in touch before school starts. Check-ins with certain staff – such as the college psychologist, chaplain and head of boarding – after their first day, week, term and year help bolster boarders' emotional wellbeing.

Time away from home is considered so good for growth and development by PLC Armidale that all Year Nine girls – including day students – experience the transformative Explore Serve Journey (ESJ) program. It's a unique, 28-day outdoor

education program where girls learn survival skills, participate in community service, and go mountain-biking, hiking and canoeing. “Every girl in the form is a boarder for one month, and with limited to no access to technology,” says Nicola.

Ultimately, boarders learn resilience and how to ride the waves that life churns up. The butterflies, pining and tears are only temporary. “Just as autumn changes to winter and winter to spring, with homesickness, ‘this too will pass,’” reflects Nicola. “We talk about that with the girls.” And the next school holiday is never far away. *CH*

“It's often through challenges that we grow.”

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### BOARDING SCHOOLS THAT CARE

- Presbyterian Ladies' College Armidale, (02) 6770 1700; [plcarmidale.nsw.edu.au](http://plcarmidale.nsw.edu.au)
- Canberra Girls Grammar School, (02) 6202 6400; [cggs.act.edu.au](http://cggs.act.edu.au)
- Frensham, (02) 4860 2000; [frensham.nsw.edu.au](http://frensham.nsw.edu.au)