Agility

To be agile is to be nimble, is to be able to move quickly and easily. To implement a new curriculum might seem a less-than-nimble process, a marathon-like task.

At Gilson College, leaders have used a project management process called Agile to plan the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in 2013. In doing so, it has also furthered its status as a school with a best-practice professional learning community.

“You don’t have to look overseas to see best practice in education,” said Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor Max Caruso. ‘A visit to Gilson College will demonstrate best practice in action.’

Mr Caruso introduced the Agile process to Gilson College in late 2011. The project management process is a little like turning a marathon into a series of short runs. The process calls the micro-actions of project management ‘sprints’.

For example, an initial sprint would be a teacher, not necessarily in an official leadership role, speaking to staff in broad terms about the Australian Curriculum. Another sprint would be a newsletter item introducing parents to the idea of the new curriculum. Another sprint would be deciding who will be taking the lead with the first four subjects of the new curriculum: English, mathematics, science and history. Yet another sprint would be timetabling teacher professional learning for the new curriculum.

‘The Agile process is a vehicle that delivers projects – big or small – in a strategic manner,’ said Mr Caruso. ‘It has embedded practices that focus on peer-to-peer learning, professional learning by doing, sharing, collaborating and co-constructing.

‘I sensed Agile would sit well with the school’s spirit of continued professional learning and building of ongoing leadership.’

‘Agile has been great for our professional learning program,’ said Sandra England, the school’s Learning and Teaching Coordinator. ‘It means that classroom teachers can take on leadership roles that may have previously been delegated to coordinators and the like. It means there is more “teacher voice” in planning.’

Gilson College is a Prep to Year 12 Seventh-Day Adventist coeducational school in Taylors Hill, with 780 students.

Challenge: To implement the Australian Curriculum in 2013.

Action: Introduce the Agile process of project management.

Results: Leadership capacity spreading through the school.
The College's involvement with the Smarter Schools National Partnerships program and the Advisors from Independent Schools Victoria has added a wider and deeper focus to our professional learning.

– Mrs Sandra England, Learning and Teaching Coordinator
Mr Caruso explained that Agile works by creating teams and team leaders who come and go according to the needs of the various school priorities and ‘sprints’. ‘The teachers do not need to be in official leadership positions. What is more important is the notion of the teacher-leader, and that teachers have the opportunity to lead.’

‘The Agile process allows for leadership in teachers to be recognised and distributed,’ added Mr Caruso. ‘It creates an environment where staff can authentically engage in collaborative learning.’

‘The school had already begun to introduce what could be called a “flatter”, more widespread system of leadership,’ said Mrs England. ‘That system has been enhanced by Agile.’

As well as the Agile process, professional learning at Gilson College is occurring through concepts such as action research in the classroom, evidence-based observation in the classroom, and cognitive coaching of teachers. An action research project may be about the teaching of persuasive writing, or about Year 1 students using iPads. Evidence-based observation involves another teacher noting and detailing how a colleague teaches. Cognitive coaching gives teachers the opportunity to reflect on and alter their teaching practice.

All of these elements, including the Agile process, combine to form a dynamic professional learning community at Gilson College, a learning community that has moved away from the notion of professional learning being predominantly short-burst, quick-fix, one-day events.

‘The essence of professional learning communities revolves around providing specific time for staff to meet and focus on excellence in pedagogy – teaching practice – and with the central focus being student learning.’

‘The school’s involvement with the Smarter Schools National Partnerships program and the Advisors from Independent Schools Victoria has added a wider and deeper focus to our professional learning,’ said Mrs England.

‘Conversations between staff about professional learning are very rich. Teachers are thinking deeply about the way they teach.’

Mr Caruso said the SSNP program at Gilson College has been significant and has “helped to enhance and add value to an already very positive school environment”.

Mark Vodell, Gilson College Principal, praised the SSNP program for its positive effects upon teachers and students. ‘The programs developed by Independent Schools Victoria and rolled out with us at Gilson College have significantly assisted us to develop the capacity of our leadership and teacher teams. They helped embed a number of systems and protocols into our school culture that assisted to raise the standard of teaching and helped us reflect on our pedagogy – developing our professional learning culture.

‘The benefits of this are evident in learning and teaching, and the results from our student data reinforce the fact that this is more than just anecdotal.”

Mr Vodell described the assistance provided by Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors Max Caruso and Lynda Cutting as “evaluable, as were the intensive professional learning opportunities provided through National Partnerships initiatives for Gilson College leaders.”

He said that the Agile technique used in preparation for implementation of the Australian Curriculum ensured that the process was effective and “relatively pain-free”.

Also, teacher capacity has been built upon through the Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors working with teams of teachers or individuals to plan and deliver enhanced learning for students.

‘The impact of the National Partnerships programs throughout our school is having a substantially positive effect on the education and achievement of our young people from the western suburbs of Melbourne.’

The Agile process has also been introduced to Ilim College of Australia Inc, to guide the school’s opening of a new campus in 2013.
Green Thumbs

Henderson College is set in fertile country, amongst orchards and vineyards just five kilometres from the Murray River. It is the ideal setting for a school vegetable garden. The garden began in December 2011 and has already produced abundant crops of asparagus, avocados, broad beans, carrots, edible flowers, eggplants, garlic, Jerusalem artichokes, kale, leek, purple broccoli, strawberries, sugar snap peas and tomatoes – to name just a few.

The garden, in tandem with the College’s upgraded kitchen, has also produced some very enthusiastic young gardeners and chefs. Henderson College’s primary school students cook up feasts, including asparagus quiche, minestrone, flat breads, focaccias, chapattis, gnocchi, other pastas, and lots of salads (imagination salads are very popular amongst the students).

The College, one of 50 Seventh-Day Adventist schools in Australia, saw the theme of food – growing it, cooking it, sharing it – as a way of fostering partnerships, along with teaching about healthy diets.

It is the first Independent school in Victoria to successfully apply for funding through the popular Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, a national program that aims to change the way children approach and think about food.

‘The students love the program,’ said Cherie Reid, Henderson College’s Head of Primary, and Coordinator of the Henderson College Kitchen Garden Program. ‘They don’t mind getting their hands dirty. Even at lunchtimes some students will be out in the garden, working and some are now building their own kitchen gardens at home, and also cooking meals at home.’

Parents have helped with working bees in the garden and have cooked in the kitchen as ‘celebrity chefs’. They are also keen to buy the local – very local – produce.

‘It’s a real feather in the cap for Henderson College to be the first Victorian Independent school in the Kitchen Garden Program,’ said Craig Dunstan, an Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor to Henderson College. ‘It’s a very rigorous selection process.’ (There are over 260 schools across Australia currently in the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, which has been running since 2001.)

Henderson College is a coeducational Prep to Year 10 Seventh-Day Adventist school in Mildura, with just over 130 students.

Challenge: To strengthen the school’s connections with the broader community.

Action: Primary school students build a large vegetable garden, via the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program.

Results: In less than 12 months Henderson College begins making connections, and wonderful food.
The students love the Kitchen Garden Program. They don’t mind getting their hands dirty. Even at lunchtimes some students will be out in the garden, working and some are now building their own kitchen gardens at home, and also cooking meals at home.

– Ms Cherie Reid, Head of Primary and Kitchen Garden Program Coordinator
The garden at Henderson College provides opportunities for the school and their families to share experiences and be part of a community,” said Mr Dunstan. “The students have thrived with the hands-on nature of the program. They have been proactive in using their own time to care for the garden and have experienced food and cooking they otherwise wouldn’t have tried.”

With four hectares (10 acres) of school grounds, the garden has had plenty of room to expand, even in its first twelve months. It measured 23 metres by 50 metres initially. By September 2012, it was 23 metres by 100 metres. ‘We’re so lucky to have all this space here,’ said Ms Reid, ‘plus beautiful soil and plenty of water.’

The garden includes water tanks, raised garden beds, bathtubs, rows and rows of vegetables, and trees. A local orchard donated 23 fruit trees, another donated eight citrus trees. “Mildura businesses will reduce the cost of items once they know it is for the Kitchen Garden Program,” said Ms Reid. ‘We bought, at a discount, wine barrels which, cut in half, can be large pots or small raised gardens.’ The program has also benefited from donations of round plastic raised beds and fencing.

Henderson College has been sharing its kitchen garden experiences with nearby government school, Wentworth Public School (which has been part of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program for three years) and is hoping to compare notes also with another government school, Go Go Public School, a recent addition to the program.

The College is looking at possibly forging links with the local TAFE’s carpentry, horticulture and hospitality courses.

Meanwhile, there are vegetables to grow and meals to make. Out in the garden the students turn over and fertilise soil, dig in manure, plant seedlings, water plants and make their own individual garden beds. Inside the kitchen they prepare, serve and share meals. They celebrate being together and cooking for each other, learning about different cultures and their cuisines.

Henderson College has a garden specialist, Jody Thomas, and a kitchen specialist, Natasha Faulkhead, whose roles are, with the respective class teachers, to supervise and guide the students.

The program has taken on a life of its own. A third water tank was set to be installed in Term 4, 2012. A chook pen is being built. There are hopes for building a pergola and an outdoor pizza oven. A roadside stall is being mooted.

‘The students have really taken ownership and pride in the Kitchen Garden Program,” said Ms Reid. “They love it.”