

WHEN MUMS GO MAD (LITERALLY) *Plus* REFUGEE PLAYGROUND

Good Weekend

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A snip in time

The school haircut that mobilised a community and brought down a principal

BY *Henrietta Cook & Konrad Marshall*



BEYOND THE FRINGE

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CLUTCHING A pair of scissors, deputy headmaster Rohan Brown saunters across the sunny courtyard towards the year 10 boy. It's February 1, the first day of the 2018 school year, and the students of Melbourne's Trinity Grammar School have gathered to have their school photos taken. About 80 boys in murky green, gold-trimmed blazers giggle and watch on as the 15-year-old tilts forward a little, hands in his shorts pockets, while the towering Brown cleaves an inch or two from his blond fringe. One of the boys whips out his phone to catch the moment on video.

Snip snip snip.

With these three swift clicks of the shears, the private Anglican boys school in upper-class Kew is thrust into the national spotlight. Over the coming weeks the "incident" will become an administrative calamity and public-relations crisis. The haircut will lead to the most chaotic chapter in the school's 115-year history, triggering Brown's dismissal, student protests to bring him back, and a community meeting at which more than 1500 disgruntled parents and alumni will call for principal Dr Michael Davies and the entire school council to resign.

By May, the parents and boys will have won the battle, if not yet the war. Brown, or Brownie as he's fondly known to the school community, will have been reinstated, Davies will have announced his resignation, and a handful of Trinity Grammar council members will have stood down. An external review by former Federal Court judge Ray Finkelstein QC, and Renee Enbom, a barrister who represented actor Rebel Wilson in her recent defamation

case, will find that while Brown's actions might have amounted to serious misconduct, his sacking was unwarranted. Meanwhile, a separate review of the school's governance is underway. It's an extraordinary outcome for a situation that began with the kind of hair snip that Brown had been giving students for all the 29 years he's worked at Trinity.

But this is far from just a story about a haircut. It's also a story of the inevitable tension between powerful school councils and the communities they serve. Should a school pursue a change agenda it thinks will benefit the community of tomorrow if the community of today – and yesterday – isn't happy about it? To what extent should today's students and parents dictate the direction in which a school heads?

It's also a story about the ongoing struggle at schools everywhere between pursuing academic success and the health and happiness of their charges. And finally, it's about people power, 21st-century style: how a group of children and their parents used a combination of traditional and social media to force those at the top of their institution to listen. Shocked to find that, despite paying up to \$32,000 per student in annual fees, they had no power over the decisions of the council and principal, the school community went rogue, enlisting the power of the media to assert their claim – and win.

"No doubt all school leaders and board chairs will have been watching and wondering, 'What would I do?'" says Dr Mark Merry, national chairman of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA). "This isn't about Trinity, it's about every school."

How a simple haircut threw a school into crisis, emboldened its community and taught its governors a harsh lesson.

ROHAN BROWN arrived at Trinity Grammar almost 30 years ago and quickly built a reputation as someone who was strict but fair. Real and unfiltered, known for saying exactly what is on his mind, the 60-year-old tends to form close bonds with his students. At six-foot-four, he played two games for Carlton back in the day, giving him cachet with his young charges. At Trinity, he teaches year 11 maths and coaches the year 9 football team. "Brownie" is the first person students see when they arrive at school, greeting boys as they file through the gates most mornings, making sure their shirts are tucked in, their hair is neat, and their faces are whisker-free.

He has been known to have a temper. Before arriving at Trinity, in the 1980s, Brown worked for eight years at Erinbank Secondary College in Melbourne's north-west. Former students from the disadvantaged – now shuttered – state school said Brown was aggressive towards some of his students. Brown has previously denied these allegations, but told *The Age* in March that he may have appeared scary to some students and, in hindsight, "owe a few of them an apology".

Initially, Brown doesn't think much of that haircut. He's always nagging the students about ensuring their locks are above the collar and "not so long over the eyes to be a nuisance when studying or playing sport". When they aren't, he sometimes pulls out his trusty scissors. Parents even call to thank him: "That's one less thing I have to do," they joke. "How much do I owe you?" Brown sees enforcing the school's appearance policy as part of his job.

Indeed, on the day the notorious haircut takes place, he chops two other students' hair.

But not everyone is a fan of the haircuts.

After growing his hair over summer, the teenager at the centre of the saga has forked out \$55 for a trim on the last day of school holidays. He wants a fresh start and hopes the haircut will set him up for a good year. So he is upset when Brown hacks into his fringe, which the teacher deems to be in his eyes and thus against school policy. His dismay turns to embarrassment when video of the incident begins circulating on social media. The popular student promptly sends his father a text about the incident.

Speaking publicly for the first time, his father, who does not want to be named, says that while his son's main concern was his hair, for him the video was the greater issue. "That was the thing that I, as a parent, didn't like," he says. "The act of seeing somebody humiliated."

Later that day, the father phones a senior teacher at the school, who tells him that if he wants an audience with the principal, he needs to put his concerns in writing. The father does so. He emphasises to *Good Weekend* that this was not a legal letter but a complaint: the chop was inappropriate and distressed his child. While his son was resilient, he was worried that a weaker child might be traumatised by the incident. "It was not a good look for the school," the father says.

A few days later, he secures a meeting with Davies and the pair agree that Brown will phone him to apologise. "I told him it was not a hanging offence, and that no further action

was warranted," he says. Davies agrees with the father, apologises and promises that Brown will soon phone him. A few days later, Brown apologises. All assume the matter is resolved.

A month later, however, in early March, Brown receives a letter from the school council asking him to attend a meeting one evening that week. During the March 8 meeting, held on school grounds, he is sacked. It is not known exactly who is there from the council, or who does the sacking, but it is made clear to Brown that his actions were inappropriate and irresponsible. He is chaperoned to his office and ordered to pack up his things. He stuffs papers, a maths textbook, a photo of his children and a calculator into a cardboard box, hands over his keys and mobile phone, and trudges home to his Kew house in shock.

THE NEWS is announced to the school community the following day. What comes next is nothing short of remarkable. Students break out in lunchtime protests, demanding that their beloved teacher be reinstated. Chants of "Brownie, Brownie, Brownie" echo through the corridors. Students ditch their uniforms and wear brown armbands to school in protest at the dismissal. They unfurl a handmade "Bring back Brownie" banner on the oval and write heartfelt opinion pieces to major newspapers.

Spearheaded by year 12 leaders, the campaign is feverishly adopted by students across the senior school. Adept with technology, the kids set up an online petition, which quickly gathered more than 6000 signatures, and an Instagram account with even more followers and its own hashtag, #bringbrownieback. A co-author of this piece, Henrietta Cook, has the electronic invites to her wedding hacked and a message added for some of her guests: "Evict ... the school council and principal." Choppers hover over the school as TV journalists stake out spots at the entrance for their live crosses.

A family with long ties to the school, who live next door to the campus, scrawl words of protest on their brick wall and roof calling for the resignation of Davies and the council.

Initially blamed by his peers for Brown's dismissal, the boy whose fringe was cut receives a steady stream of nasty messages and threats from students within and outside of his school. "My son was thrown under a bus in an attempt to change the old guard to the new guard," his father says. "We have been used as political fodder in a game between grown men."

We may never know the full facts behind Brown's dismissal, including who told the school council about the father's complaint and which members of it drove the decision; the full review into his dismissal will never be made public. Was Brown's sacking just to do with the haircut, or was there a broader agenda at play? Some insiders believe the school had been trying to push out Brown for a while, pointing to the fact he was overlooked for the role of principal back in 2013. There was a perception among others that he was part of the old guard – too focused, perhaps, on a broad education rather than just an academic one.

For year 12 student Callum Deed, the campaign to reinstate Brown has been a pivotal

moment in his young life. Last year, the 18-year-old had struggled to turn up to school some days, so Brown would drive to his house in the morning, pick him up and bring him to school. "To have someone that personally invested in your schooling," says Deed, "it makes you care more." Deed is among dozens of students who broadcast the lunchtime protests on their Snapchat accounts. "We said from the outset that we weren't going to accept something that wasn't right by our standards," he says. "But seeing how much interest we got from others really took us aback."

THE REAL trouble at Trinity began back in 2013, when the school council met to discuss a replacement for retiring principal Rick Tudor. At the helm for 14 years, Tudor was one of those rare headmasters everyone seemed to like. Staff and students described him as a collaborative, warm and decisive man who always listened to those around him. Not surprisingly, council members began debating the qualities they wanted in his successor.

"We were looking to continue creating good Trinity boys and to improve academic results," former school council member Jeff Hooper says.

"Some people thought we could have both, but others, including myself, were concerned." The council typically comprises up to a dozen members, including a single representative for each of the parents, old boys and the Anglican Church, along with the usual swag of lawyers, accountants, doctors and architects, each charged with bringing their area of expertise to the oversight of school business. Hooper feared striving for better academic results would come at the expense of students' wellbeing and the school's long-established focus on creating well-rounded, worldly young men.

While Trinity has always achieved impressive results, it was slipping behind its competition. The council wanted to appoint someone who would boost its year 12 results

and lift the performance of mid-tier students. A goal had been set many years earlier: one quarter of all Victorian Certificate of Education study scores must be 40 or above. (A study score of 40 or above places students in the top 9 per cent of the state in a subject.) In 2013, only 19 per cent of its study scores were 40 or above.

Dr Michael Davies, then deputy principal of St Kevin's College in Toorak, a high-achieving Catholic boys' school, was ultimately appointed the school's new headmaster. He was relatively young (45 at the time), a disciplinarian and serious about boosting academic results.

A Welshman and a Catholic, Davies was impeccably dressed, often in a pinstripe suit. An early riser, he was driven, well-read and prone to quoting big thinkers in his school newsletters: Voltaire, Jeffrey Eugenides and French philosopher Henri Bergson. His desire was for Trinity boys to be exceptional rather than typical. He spelled this out in one of his early *From the Headmaster* columns in a school publication, *Trinity Grammarian*, in which he lamented the "disaffected, monosyllabic, non-reading, barely writing" young men in the wider world. "That is not the case here at Trinity," he wrote. "As I have said before, we are Athens not Sparta."

Within the first year of Davies' arrival, VCE results improved measurably. Good grades, though, were not enough to keep people happy. A few years after Davies took over, some parents and old boys began to worry that gains in performance had come at the cost of a harsher edge to discipline and pastoral care. They had noticed a high turnover in staff. Depending on which side you're on, that's either good or bad.

Like many new principals wanting to leave their mark, Davies set out to recruit the best teachers. Some experienced teachers who'd devoted their lives to the school say they were pushed out in the process. It's been reported that 150 of the school's roughly 250 staff members have turned over in the past four years. The school says this is inaccurate, and that its staff turnover rate is in line with industry standards, but will not confirm how many left during Davies' tenure.

In 2017, an incident involving two students and a soccer ball became a flashpoint. The year 12 boys, who were meant to be studying, left their desks during a spare period to let off some steam. One of the boy's fathers, Glen Davis, says Davies stormed over to the boys and told them he had the power to banish them to the local public high school. "He just went off," Davis says. "Instead of telling the kids to put the soccer ball away and go back to class, he threatened to kick them out of the school. It was totally over the top."

Davis says the headmaster suspended his son later that day following a separate incident. This was overturned after the father complained. When put to the school, a spokeswoman says Davies always acted in the best interests of students and that "sometimes, this might require a strong voice".

The old boys, watching from the sidelines, were growing concerned. Last November, Old Trinity Grammarians' Association president David Baumgartner wrote to the school council and principal voicing his concerns about the perceived change of direction. "There is too much inward focus on things like buildings, fundraising, marketing, ATAR excellence, Cambridge schooling program, etc," he wrote in a letter that made its way into hundreds of parents' inboxes. "In my opinion when a school diverts from its fundamental purpose of education and nurturing to one of business, its culture starts to break down."

STRIKING THE right balance between students' wellbeing and academic results is something every school worries about. Dr Mark Merry, the head of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia and also the principal of Yarra Valley Grammar, says the rise of performance data, including NAPLAN and ATAR league tables, has made schools more publicly accountable than ever before. Choosing between a focus on intellect and identity is fraught with tension. "Are you getting the balance right? Everyone agonises over this," Merry says. "You can't hold your hand on your heart and say you got it right all the time."

Merry has known Davies for years and describes him as "an excellent educator and a person of considerable integrity". Indeed, for the stern picture painted of the man in public, he is said to be quiet and sensitive, even shy. When he stepped into the role at Trinity, he was so set on establishing relationships with his staff that he requested a bound booklet of photos with names and titles that he could memorise during downtime. "If you tested me



The haircut that roiled a school community was captured on a student's smartphone.

on the staff, there's 260 and I'd be confident of recognising about 250," he told *The Age* in 2014. "It means I can say hello in the hall, spend a bit of time to get people's story, to get their narrative. I find it compelling – what a great way to spend the day."

Those who know him say Davies has been crushed by the saga. It's not known what he will do once he finishes up at Trinity on June 29.

The attacks have been personal at times. They peaked when a handful of parents paid for two giant mobile billboards to circle the school, calling for Davies' resignation. The electronic screens featured a blown-up image of the headmaster and school councillors with red crosses over their faces. This incident divided the school community. Many felt that the billboards were a step too far.

For all the hand-wringing over fears of an holistic education being sacrificed by Davies on the altar of the ATAR, the truth is that parents care deeply about high marks. A long-running survey of new Trinity Grammar families reveals that "academic results" were their top priority when selecting the school between 2005 and 2017. Leadership and pastoral care ranked only of middling importance, and for all the proud harumphing of the old boys' network, it is worth noting a feature of the school that new families put consistently near the bottom of their lists: alumni.

Parents might not rank alumni as a top priority, but the old boys' network – which runs events, helps with fundraising and has a network of sporting teams – plays an important role in the lives of many former students, including Thomas Hudson. The 29-year-old corporate banker with curly red hair feels deeply about his old school. "I care about Trinity because I want others to have the same experience that I did," he explains. Hudson was among dozens of former students who squeezed into their school blazers for a community meeting at Hawthorn Town Hall. It was here that the old boys threatened legal action if the council didn't resign.

Hudson says he doesn't like the "elite" direction his school has taken in recent years. He points out that his mum was the first in her family to finish high school, but the school always made his family feel welcome. "You didn't have to be a doctor or lawyer. Trinity was about challenging the status quo, thinking outside the box. And challenging authority if you didn't agree with it."

SCHOOL LEADERS will be studying what unfolded at Trinity for years to come, according to educational governance expert John Simpson. A board member for 15 years at an-



Graffiti on a house next to the school calling for the headmaster and council to resign.

other Melbourne boys school, top-of-the-rung Scotch College, and now on Monash University's council, Simpson says private schools have become multimillion-dollar entities and must therefore comply with the same governance requirements as small-to-medium-sized companies. Most importantly, they should consult with stakeholders. In a school's case, that means parents, students, teachers and alumni. "Instead, it just went ahead and made a unilateral decision to fire this teacher," he says. "Apart from being breathtakingly ignorant, it is an abrogation of responsibility to the whole school community."

There are obvious similarities between what unfolded at Trinity Grammar and what took place at a girls' school just down the road in Kew, Methodist Ladies' College, in 2012. Six years ago, the MLC board of directors sacked then principal Rosa Storelli, claiming she had been overpaid by \$700,000 over 10 years. (It later said she'd done nothing wrong.) Wearing pink armbands, parents and alumni marched around the school's perimeter with signs demanding the MLC board resign over its decision. This was another case of a school failing to consult with its community or anticipating the consequences of a controversial decision.

The consequences of Trinity's decision to sack Brown became apparent when three members of the council stood down, including its chairman, commercial lawyer Rod Lyle, less than a day after the Hawthorn meeting supported mass resignations. The new school council chair, truffle farmer Robert Utter, has said that the remaining members will stay on council pending an orderly transition to a new membership. Meanwhile, a review into the school's governance model, constitution and council composition is underway. There's appetite in the school community for greater parent and alumni representation but it remains to be seen whether this eventuates.

Simpson says many school councils operate as they have for the past 100 years, despite monumental shifts in society. They are unaware of the power the internet has given young people – power to make their voices heard and

force change. "Many schools have not woken up to this fact," Simpson says. "They just don't get it. A lot of people of my age don't grasp just how powerful young people are."

PAUL O'SHANNASSY is a private school matchmaker. The managing director of Regent Consulting helps parents choose the right school for their child, and negotiates on their behalf to help secure an enrolment. Parents are willing to pay up to \$4000 for the service. He says the saga at Trinity has created a great deal of uncertainty among prospective parents, who are wary of instability or doubts over staff morale. "This game is a little bit like buying prestige cars," he explains. "They might buy a Mercedes, a BMW or an Audi. Whether it is Scotch, or Xavier or Lauriston, people like to know what they are joining. The minute you hear about the Mercedes being recalled, you know what I mean? People don't like uncertainty when they are about to spend half a million [dollars]."

School choice is, of course, a big choice – and perhaps even bigger in Melbourne. "The cliché is 100 per cent true," says O'Shannassy. "In Melbourne people ask, 'Where did you go to school?' In Sydney it's, 'Where do you live?'" He guesses this is due to the sheer number of independent schools in Victoria. "We've got 50 schools in Melbourne that charge over \$15,000 per year," he adds. "Pound for pound, that would be as many private schools as anywhere in the world, and therefore you've got a lot of people who went to them."

Well-known shorthand stereotypes exist for each institution, too. The upper echelons of the Catholic clergy came through Xavier College. Scotch College produced state premiers and cabinet ministers. Melbourne Grammar School was an old-money birthing ground for doctors and lawyers. St Kevin's College, earthy and middle class, was a football factory. Then there's Geelong Grammar School, the boarding school for the sons and daughters of the landed gentry, the alma mater of billionaires and royalty past and present, including Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Packer and Prince Charles.

Rohan Brown hugs students upon his return to the school.





Rohan Brown, at left, and principal Michael Davies on the day Brown returned to the school.

Trinity, by comparison, is viewed as lower tier – almost intentionally so. Its has always been a softer culture, neither an academic sausage factory nor a school for hard jocks. “It was seen as a place where your kid would be known and nurtured, and a bit less elite,” O’Shannassy says. “Despite them having the same fee structure as other schools, it was seen as a bit more egalitarian, it wasn’t full of super-wealthy rich kids.”

Still, Trinity, like all the aforementioned schools, is a multimillion-dollar organisation. In 2016 it had a gross income of \$46 million, with the bulk of this coming from school fees, charges and parent contributions. Set over several blocks, with roads dividing the junior and senior school, and associated Ruyton Girls’ School a short walk away, it resembles a mini university campus. Just 1 per cent of Trinity students come from the state’s most disadvantaged families, while 76 per cent come from the most advantaged families, according to MySchool data. The school has boys enrolled through to the year 2032, with families paying a one-off fee of \$110 just to get on the waiting list and substantially more to secure a place.

Parents at similar schools around the country have been known to try enrolling their unborn children – using the day of their scheduled C-section as the date of birth – only to be told that the child does in fact need to be physically born. Even the review of Brown’s dismissal had a top-end-of-town flavour. This was no little internal inquiry but an external investigation headed by a former Federal Court judge and a commercial barrister. Would public interest in such a spat be as high if it had unfolded at a state school in Melbourne’s outer north, or in Sydney’s far west?

Jo Slater, an e-commerce trader whose boys started at Trinity in year 5, has a son in year 12 and another in year 8. She remembers taking a call from her eldest on the day of the sacking. “He was sobbing. It was just horrendous. He was in shock. I was in shock. I just tried to calm him down,” she says. Her voice quivers even now, two months later. “When I think back to it, I’m beyond furious.”

Slater attended the Hawthorn Town Hall meeting, where her faith was restored when, at the end, about 100 boys gathered in a great

circle, arm in arm. They began singing a hymn popular within the school – *Lord of the Dance* – with the lyrics altered to include “Brownie” as the beloved titular protagonist. “I remember bursting into tears, the boys doing this, singing this song for this teacher that they loved,” says Slater. Had the dominos not fallen in Brown’s favour, she says she would have had her youngest switch schools. “With grief, but I would have done it. I had a shortlist.”

Of course, switching is no simple matter, and parents know this. Not all fees are refundable, and comparable schools are often full. Of the 50 or so elite private schools in Melbourne, the vast majority are co-ed or girls’ schools – just seven are for boys only. “It is almost impossible to leave and find a place in another boys’ independent school,” says O’Shannassy. “There are not a lot of options.”

For those willing to enter the public system, of course, there are plenty of options. Indeed, statistics show that an increasing number of Australian families, including many with high incomes, are turning away from private schools. For the first time in decades, the long-running exodus from public schools to the non-government sector has halted, with public schools’ share of student enrolments rising in each of the past four years Australia-wide to reach 65.6 per cent in 2017. The competition is not just within school sectors, either, but between sectors, as hype about sought-after and zoned state schools pushes up real estate prices in various pockets of Melbourne and Sydney.

Helen Proctor, an associate professor at the University of Sydney, suspects soaring private school fees and the rising cost of university degrees have swung the pendulum back to state schools nationwide. Greater transparency about how schools perform – particularly the MySchool website – has allowed parents to see that there’s not much difference between a lot of schools once socio-economic factors are taken into account. Such conversations have become barbecue stoppers.

“School choice has become a defining rite of passage for middle-class Australians,” Proctor says. “The idea that you look at schools and shop around and have a story about why your kids go to a certain school, that’s a phenomenon of the past 20 or 30 years.”

“The cliché is 100 per cent true. In Melbourne people ask, ‘Where did you go to school?’ In Sydney it’s, ‘Where do you live?’”

ULTIMATELY, THE main casualty in this battle was principal Michael Davies. More than three months after *snip snip snip*, after the armbands and the meetings, after almost 50,000 words had been written about the event in the media, he had made his decision. With a full governance review under way, a new interim school council soon to be appointed, and parents now being consulted about changes, he announced his resignation to staff at an early-morning meeting in a school theatre. He spoke about the pressures placed on his young family, and his desire to let the school heal. “I am now content that our hard work in recent weeks has helped the school return to a position where students and staff are enjoying the normal rhythm of school life,” he said in a statement.

While staff weren’t shocked by the news, many felt uneasy, and a group of parents is organising a dinner to thank Davies for his service to the school. “He was an asset to Trinity,” one mother says. Another parent says Davies was sacrificed for simply doing his job. “His position had become untenable because of the pressure. You wouldn’t wish that on someone who had murdered someone. Whether you thought he was good or bad, it was outrageous the pressure he was under. No one deserves that.”

Brown is back at Trinity, enjoying the school’s familiar beats and patterns – although no longer doing haircuts. Relief washed over him one afternoon in April when he answered the phone and was offered first an apology by new chairman Robert Utter, then his job back. The review into Brown’s dismissal concluded that the council had no authority to sack him. It pointed out that Davies, who did have the right to dismiss Brown, had chosen weeks earlier not to.

Many parents feel their sons have matured and that the chaos of the past few months has made their community stronger. The fight is not over for the old boys. They are closely watching the newly appointed interim school headmaster, former Carey Baptist Grammar School principal Phil de Young, who will lead the school until a replacement for Davies is found. The old boys are also keen to see who is appointed to the interim school council.

Independent schools continue to dissect the crisis. The message is that school councils do not own schools but are appointed to serve their communities, and therefore must know and understand those communities. If they don’t listen and consult, the communities can revolt.

ON A frosty autumn morning in April, Brown returned to Trinity. He was once more greeting students, patting them on the back, rattling off observations about their appearance. “Tuck your shirt in, the whole lot,” he told one boy. “You’ve had a shave,” he said to another. On his first day back, one of the school’s vice-captains embraced him, resting his head on the teacher’s shoulder and closing his eyes.

Then, the boy whose haircut triggered the entire episode bounced through the entrance. For weeks, the distraught young man had considered moving schools. But once his peers became aware that he had never wanted Brown sacked, he was overwhelmed with support. “He has found a real solidarity with the students,” his father says. “They have risen above this and formed a lifelong bond.”

The boy locked eyes with Brown, walked up to him, and warmly shook his hand. He was now sporting a much shorter hairdo. With a smile, Brown gave his appraisal: “Magnificent.” ■