Connect locally, learn globally

Virtual Aurora College
Aurora College, the Department’s virtual selective school, commenced classes on 2 February, 2015. Since then, the school has been providing innovative, flexible learning in a whole new context, by allowing students to connect locally and to learn globally.

A key deliverable of the Department’s Rural and remote education – a blueprint for action, Aurora offers students in rural and remote government high schools a mix of online and residential school classes. Students in Years 7 to 10 gain entry via the NSW selective schools test. Being citizens of two educational communities, they study English, Mathematics and Science with Aurora and they study all other subjects in their home school.

The college also offers students in Years 11 and 12 the opportunity to study subjects that their home school cannot consistently offer. In 2016, Aurora’s first Year 12 cohort will sit HSC examinations in Physics, Mathematics, Mathematics Extension 1, Mathematics Extension 2, English Advanced, English Extension 1, English Extension 2, Economics and Agriculture. The bright lights of Aurora connect with their teachers and classmates in timetabled lessons through a
cutting-edge virtual learning environment which comprises web conferencing software, a learning management system, and a range of communication and collaboration tools. The college also operates one of the state’s first fully-digital school libraries. Anyone who has enrolled in traditional online learning courses will agree that it can be a lonely and isolating experience if it is not done well. Aurora College’s early success has been achieved by concentrating on the need that students have to feel connected to other like-minded students and to highly skilled teachers.

Our twice-yearly residential school program is obviously of great importance in forming quality working relationships, as is the choice of technology platforms. In what we believe is a world first for virtual schools, a major innovation has been Aurora’s three-dimensional virtual playground where students can hang-out with their Aurora College friends during recess and lunch breaks.

The role of Aurora College Coordinator (ACC), a position funded by Aurora in each of its current 56 partner schools, is critical to the smooth operation of the college. The ACC has a similar role to that of a Year Advisor in a terrestrial school. The role has an administrative component, but the primary focus is to support the educational, social and emotional needs of the Aurora students in their home school.

Another important measure of success for the college will be how well it moves students from being good online communicators to being exceptional online collaborators.

To achieve this, we obviously have to use the best technological tools available, but also have teachers who are pedagogical innovators with them.

Chris Robertson, Principal

Working with Aurora College has given me the opportunity to build my knowledge and skills in a range of areas.

Kaylene Taylor, teacher librarian

Like the students they connect with each day, the Aurora teachers are located in government high schools across the state. Their teaching loads allow them to teach classes with Aurora College and their base school. Aurora’s teachers were selected on the basis of their subject expertise and on their capacity to deliver engaging and innovative lessons in a virtual environment. Because technology is ever changing, Aurora teachers also make a big commitment to their own professional development.

Teacher librarian, Kaylene Taylor, is one such teacher. Kaylene divides her workload between Aurora College and Eden Marine High School.

Student voice is loud and clear at Aurora College and the majority of eBooks are purchased in response to student requests. Students feel very comfortable about emailing Kaylene to discuss a favourite book, to make a recommendation or to ask for assistance with technical matters related to Aurora’s library.

This year we have run a number of competitions to promote reading for pleasure and to enhance the balance and well-being of our students. Book Week and The Reading Hour were very strongly supported by students at Aurora College.

Kaylene Taylor, teacher librarian
Innovative partnerships

As well as being known for the unique way in which the curriculum is delivered, Aurora College will also be known for its innovative partnerships with business and with scientific, cultural and tertiary education institutions. In the short time the college has been operating, it has attracted an impressive list of local and international organisations that are donating their expertise.

Master classes are a key feature of both the online and residential school programs, providing students with real insights into the professional lives of individuals who are leaders in their fields. Master classes rate very highly in surveys of students' favourite things about the college. In response to the question *What did you enjoy most?* about a class delivered by the author Fiona Wood, a Year 8 student offered:

> I enjoyed how Fiona spoke so openly about her experiences and her novels. I found it very engaging and informative. It is such a great opportunity to have.

Year 8 student

Clear links to the curriculum are identified in the planning for all master classes. Resources related to each class, including those recommended by the master, are promoted with active links on the homepage of the Aurora library.

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**Student connecting with scientist Steven Goldfarb at CERN, Switzerland**

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**e-Mentoring**

A program currently in the pilot phase, which will grow significantly in the coming year, is e-Mentoring. Recently, college staff concluded a very large body of work with one of Australia’s leading authorities on youth mentoring practices. The result of this work is a suite of resources for 52 separate mentoring sessions to be delivered across Years 7 to 10.

Each session will include an informal catch-up between the mentor and mentee, a choice of three to four activities addressing the session objectives, and a wrap-up where the mentee reflects on lessons learned.

The e-Mentoring program aims to provide students with an awareness of their personal skills, attitudes and values, to enhance their career planning and long term academic outcomes, and to encourage their self-confidence and resilience.

Chris Robertson, Principal
Approaching the end of its second year of operation, Aurora’s future is looking very bright. To paraphrase the Prime Minister:

... there has never been a more exciting time to be a gifted and talented student in rural and remote NSW.

References and further reading


Libraries for future learners

As part of Learning Systems, the School Libraries team provides expert curriculum and policy support and advice to NSW Public Schools.

Our services include:

- a support website
- quarterly editions of Scan online professional journal
- resource reviews
- support for the implementation of the new Oliver library system
- enabling Lighthouse schools to lead the way in implementing Oliver for quality teaching and learning
- supporting school libraries to lead the way in innovative, future learning
- School Cataloguing and Information Services (SCIS) for NSW schools