

MAGS is multi-racial haven

by Peter White

Mt Roskill Grammar School is at the centre of one of Auckland's largest multi-racial communities, and principal Ken Rapson says it is a shining example of how the education system is working for new immigrants.

Rapson is proud of the results his school has achieved, including winning the title of secondary school of the year in 1999 and 2000, and integrating more than 60 different cultures into one harmonious unit.

The school has 2350 students and is the sixth-largest secondary school in New Zealand.

"There are more than 60 flags in the main hall representing each nationality at the school, and 60% of students have English as a second language," he says. "Many come to us with no language skills whatsoever and they need ESL (English as a second language) teaching. So we have classes where they do nothing but learn the language and New Zealand customs to help integrate them into the school."

Mt Roskill Grammar is rated a decile four school, based on a socio-economic rating scale, and in recent years has out-performed decile 10 schools like Auckland Grammar in per-ratio numbers of scholarships awarded to students.

"We are below average on the schools' rating scale yet we achieve results on any measure with the eights and nines. We may not have the best hops but we make a pretty good beer," says Rapson.

The school offers initiatives not offered by many other schools. "We have teachers who look after our 100 refugee students who have other problems because of the trauma they may have suffered. Some of them haven't even been to school in their own countries so they're not literate in their first language, which creates real difficulties in trying to teach them literacy in English."

To cater for the diverse languages spoken, Mt Roskill Grammar employs people from

different ethnicities, either as teachers or teacher aids, such as a lady from Saudi Arabia who speaks four Middle Eastern languages.

Some of the school's highest achieving students began in the language classes — one was New Zealand's top male scholar in 2003, Peter Shiu Cheung Lau.

"We have tried to give people a lifeline so they can start to learn at school because a large number of our students come from places like India and China. The vast majority are really committed to education and are supported at home, so they make faster progress than you might imagine," says Rapson.

The NCEA system has been under fire recently, but he says it encourages students who previously had barriers to learning.

"We are able to select courses and target students at something they can achieve. For example a maths teacher taking a refugee group is able to pitch them at unit standards where their numeracy standards are rewarded and they get some achievement," he says.

"That didn't happen before when we only had external exams. The steps were too big so NCEA is enabling people to achieve."

"We still have our bullies and the same problems you get in any society, but I also know we learn how to get on with one another."

Rapson says he gets great pleasure from seeing groups of friends from various ethnicities playing together — it is what makes his school special.

"We understand each other. We still have our bullies and the same problems you get in any society, but I also know we learn how to get on with one another — whether it's for ethnic, language, religious or physical differences."

Mt Roskill Grammar forms part of a "mini-city" of 4000 stu-



PHOTOS: SHARON MARRIS

HELPING HAND: There is a lot support for students at Mt Roskill Grammar who come from many different cultures and backgrounds.

dents comprising primary, intermediate and secondary schools on the same campus.

Rapson says initiatives to have consistently high standards throughout all age groups have been successful.

Mt Roskill Grammar's approach to education finds favour with 16-year-old Megna Murali. She is a year 12 student from Mumbai, India, who is one of 90 student mediators appointed to stop small disputes between different groups escalating. Megna says the school is a very positive and caring environment.

"We do get good studies here but it is not just that. You actually enjoy coming to school — the teachers are so helpful."

Tiffany Chen (16) from Kaohsiung, Taiwan, is a year 11 student who loves the multi-cultural environment of the school and Mt Roskill area.

"I have friends from many cultures and when I am with them I don't think of the different countries they are from — I just think they are my friends."



PHOTOS: SHARON MARRIS

Deaf community finally has language recognised

by Lucy Campbell

After 20 years of trying, the deaf community in New Zealand may finally have their language recognised.

The NZSL (New Zealand Sign Language) Bill received unanimous support in Parliament after its first reading.

The legislation will make NZSL an official language and will provide the right for it to be used in legal proceedings.

An estimated 28,000 New Zealanders use NZSL, of which about 7000 are deaf.

Brent Macpherson, community relations officer for the Deaf Association of New Zealand, says NZSL has only recently

been considered a legitimate language.

"If you look back about 20 years ago, in those days it was only starting to emerge as another language and a lot of people saw sign language as a sort of monkey language," he says.

Sign language has its own grammar and syntax rules and varies from country to country.

Macpherson says it is only after years of lobbying government about the importance of NZSL to deaf culture that anything has happened.

Although official recognition of NZSL is a big step forward for the deaf community, Macpherson says there is still a lot of work to be done and the

Bill is two-sided.

"It's worrying because official recognition may make the Government sit back.

"There needs to be an advisory board to act as watchdog and make sure recognition is implemented," he says.

However he does believe recognition will help pave the way for more rights for deaf people.

"It's a matter of what we do with it and how we implement it," says Macpherson.

Although the Bill places no specific obligations on the private sector, Macpherson says it can be useful in encouraging action from businesses.

If passed, the Bill will take effect mid 2005.



WAY OF LIFE: Sign language is used by 28,000 people.