

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

They motivate, support and nurture Australian children every day – and they deserve our gratitude. Our Australia's Best Teachers series, now in its fourth year, celebrates the positive impact teachers have in the classrooms and school communities they serve. This is not a popularity contest or industry award, but a list that reflects the passion and talent teachers bring every day

HAVE FAITH, COURAGE, ENTHUSIASM

A serious car accident made Melbourne's Clorinda Maio step back and reflect on her approach to teaching

Story **BRENDAN CASEY**

There is rarely a direct path to find your way into any profession.

Not every graduate teacher can walk straight from university into a classroom of their own.

Before taking charge of one at St John's Primary School in Mitcham, Clorinda Maio spent years as a Learning Support Officer – a step she says gave her the patience, perspective and confidence many young teachers don't get time to build.

"Being an LSO was ... a foundation into becoming a classroom teacher because it gave me lots of insight into day-to-day classrooms," Maio says.

LSOs usually work in primary and secondary schools to support teachers and assist students with disabilities, learning difficulties, or behavioural challenges, to ensure these students can access the curriculum and participate fully.

However it isn't common, with Maio only knowing of one other teacher at her school who came through this route.

"You can see his confidence, through being an LSO. It's a valuable step before becoming a classroom teacher and (he



Teacher Clorinda Maio with students at St John's Primary School, from left, Hamish MacLean, 9, Abigail Roberts, 11, William Kruisheer, 8, Lola Boyd, 11 and Nat Baicic, 11. Pictures: Jake Nowakowski

agrees) it's the best thing that he did," the year 1 and 2 teacher says. "I was able to work alongside lots of different teachers who have different teaching strategies ... and then I could use that to adapt to my own teaching approach."

Getting through to children isn't easy in this modern world. Fortunately, two people influenced the 29 year old's choice to work in education, a career she began five years ago – her year one and year 12 teachers.

From "playing school" in her bedroom before she could actually attend, Maio's formative years were spent absorbing the craft she would go on to work in.

"My year one teacher really inspired me. I struggled a fair bit at school and she really built my confidence, and that's what I want to instil in my kids," she says. "When I got to year 12, I had another very inspirational

teacher and that's when I knew. I said yep, I definitely want to be a teacher."

And the biggest thing these teachers did that got through to her? Encouraged self confidence. Maio is still in touch with her year 12 teacher, Cathy Michael from St Peter's College in Cranbourne East – now more in a colleague/mentor capacity.

"She left me with advice I still carry today: have faith, courage, enthusiasm and be strong," Maio says. "Those words have guided me through every challenge."

Challenges continue to come her way. University was difficult for her, as was getting through to some pupils in her first year running a classroom at St John's.

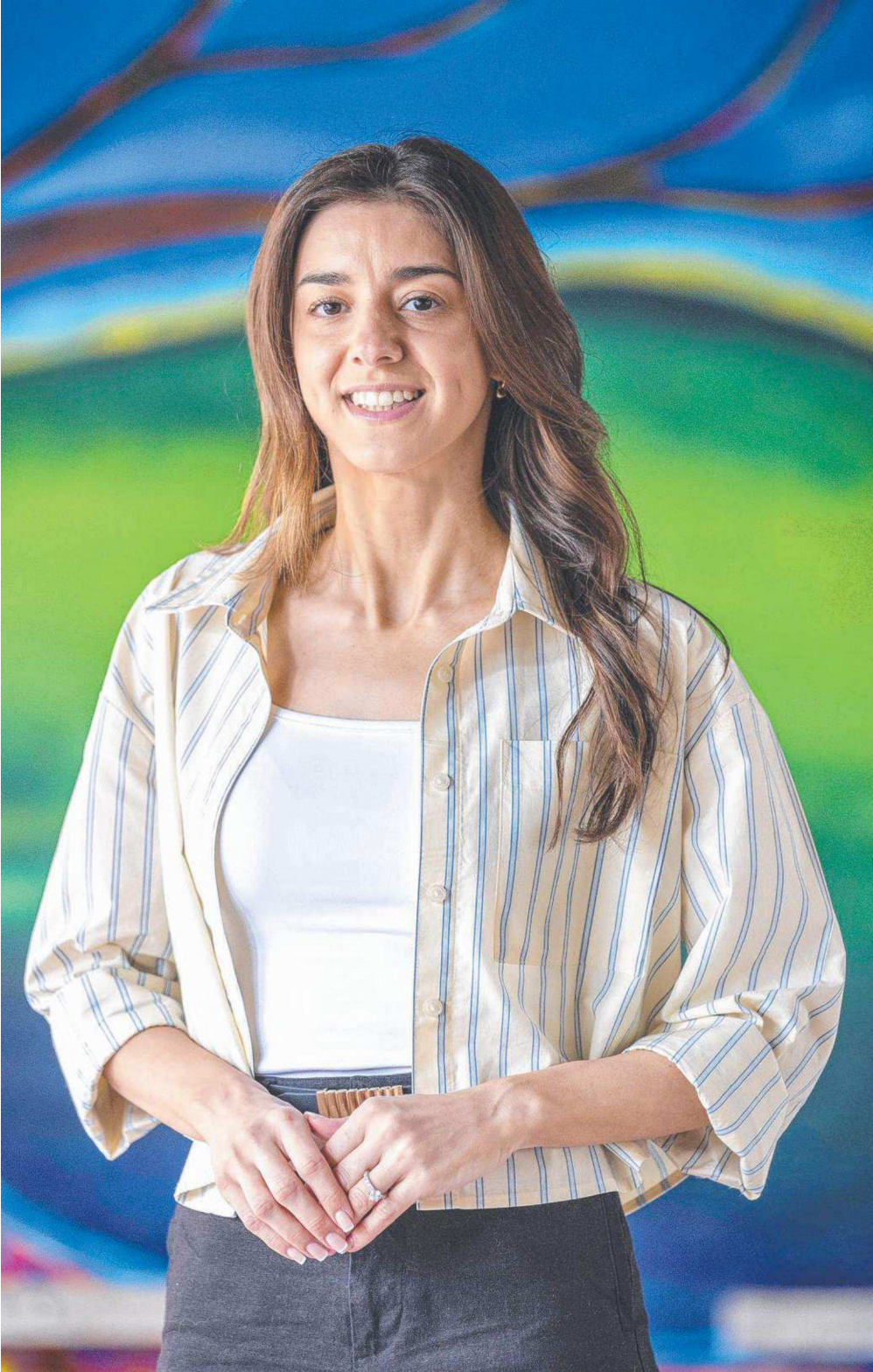
But then, a traumatic event changed everything. In 2024, the day before the first day of school, where Maio was due to start teaching a new year level, she was involved

in a serious car accident that took her more than six months to recover from.

"I injured my left elbow, I broke like seven to eight parts in there. It was quite horrific, I have a plate and some screws in there," Maio says. "The stress of not being able to move my arm really got me. I thought, 'If I'm not able to move my arm how am I going to come back to teaching?' The kids are what get you up every day."

Another big motivation during the recovery and rehabilitation was getting back to her community at St John's.

"When I did come back, it took a lot ... at one point it felt like I was starting my career all over again," she says. "It was an eye-opener that life is short and to be appreciative. Even though it was a very emotional and challenging time, it sort of built my resilience and made me appreciate



CAMPAIGN PARTNERS



VICTORIA

CHLOE FITZPATRICK

Western Port Secondary College, Hastings

Fitzpatrick is only in her third year of teaching, but she already has a leadership role at her school. With the school's backing, she felt she could give the role of year 7 maths team curriculum innovator a go, ensuring the maths curriculum is consistent across classes, in addition to being a VCE psychology teacher.

SUZIE MACDONALD

Our Lady of the Rosary Primary School, Kyneton

MacDonald is dedicated to her students in the classroom, and also champions them in the community. She praises the sense of community that comes from teaching at a small school in a country town, developing meaningful relationships with families and cheering on students playing sport, helping at local events, or working in town.

CHRISTIANA DAVID

Lauriston Girls' School, Melbourne

David goes above and beyond to ensure her students are exposed to the power of STEM. From forensics to airline routes and AI, the fourth-generation teacher is committed to making real-world connections that bring topics to life and expose their relevance to her students.

ALICE JURY

Canadian Lead Primary School, Ballarat

Jury's principal, Christina Drummond, calls her a "star". The winner of Outstanding Primary Teacher at the 2025 Victorian Education Excellence Awards credits the close-knit team at Ballarat's Canadian Lead Primary School for her individual – and their collective – success.

WILL KENT

St Francis of Assisi Primary School, Mill Park

Not only has the 33 year old worked as a classroom educator, he's also been a year level mentor, learning and teaching leader, and is now deputy principal. Kent is proud of many things including the school's safe and welcoming culture, alongside a jump in its NAPLAN numeracy results due to big changes he helped champion.

CLAUDIA NEALE

Sacred Heart School, Diamond Creek

Neale is a dedicated teacher and Learning Diversity Leader who is committed to ensuring every child can access and succeed in learning. Through personalised support, strong family partnerships and a deep understanding of diverse learning needs, she creates inclusive environments where students feel valued and empowered.

MICHELLE HOLLOW

Our Holy Redeemer School, Surrey Hills

Hollow is a much-loved prep/year 1 teacher who gives children a positive and confident start to school life. Known for her warmth, enthusiasm and ability to build strong relationships, she creates a classroom where every child belongs.

HELEN DESMOND

St Luke's School, Lalor

Desmond is an outstanding educator and instructional leader combining evidence-informed practice with a deep commitment to student development. She is known for identifying each learner's strengths and next steps, ensuring every child is challenged and supported to succeed.

RACHAEL PATRICK

Loyola College, Watsonia

An innovative Humanities and English teacher, Patrick's leadership in digital learning has enriched teaching and learning across Loyola College. Recognised internationally as a Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert, she uses tech to deepen engagement and enhance outcomes.

DAMIEN KAYE

Emmaus College, Vermont South

Kaye's dynamic teaching inspires curiosity, critical thinking and a genuine love of learning. He is known for designing engaging learning experiences, providing detailed feedback and investing additional time to support students both inside and outside the classroom.

QUEENSLAND

ELIZABETH WATSON

St Patrick's Primary School, Nanango

The early-career prep teacher is making a remarkable impact through her passion for learning, student-centred approach and commitment to her school community. Watson delights in seeing her students grow in confidence, recognising that each child learns in their own way.

MICHAEL SUTTON

Kumbia State School

With nearly 30 years of experience across rural, remote and southeastern areas, Sutton has journeyed from classroom teacher to guidance officer to principal. He loves how country schools serve as the heart of their communities.

LACHLAN O'CONNELL

Centenary Heights State High School

O'Connell's education ethos is rooted in his belief that "no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care". He lives by this principle, valuing the chance to support both staff and students in his role of deputy principal.

ALLI MAY

Star of the Sea Primary School, Cleveland

May is empowering the next generation to become stewards of the environment by bringing climate literacy to life. Through initiatives like the EcoWarriors program, the year 4 teacher inspires students to move beyond learning about sustainability and become active changemakers.

JOEL OTTOWAY

Northern Beaches State High School, Townsville

Specialist teachers often have to make a choice: stay in the community you love or teach the subject you trained for. Ottoway >

the community that I'm a part of. St John's is a beautiful place to be, the families and students and staff are also supportive and without them it would've been even more challenging."

Reflecting on it, she realises how close it came to impacting her whole career, and it become clear what the young teacher values above all else: relationships.

Relationships are the fundamental building block for success, Maio says – not just with the students, but parents as well.

"It's so important to have that foundation with the families, because if they know the teachers are working together and that their child feels valued and supported, they're more likely to thrive academically and emotionally," she says.

"Once I worked out that genuine relationships actually help students feel safe and valued, then you are more likely to see success in your classroom."

This mentality is not lost on her colleagues or her pupils' families.

Sarah Jensen is one of many parents

who nominated Maio through Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools, a major partner of Australia's Best Teachers. She describes how her child had found school overwhelming and struggled to engage. In Maio's classroom, all that began to change.

"He had a very difficult start to his schooling journey ... but Clorinda built a relationship based on trust, understanding and genuine care," Jensen says. "She took the time to see his strengths, understand his challenges and create an environment where he felt safe enough to take risks, try new things and believe in himself."

Maio created an environment where a child who once avoided writing began producing pages of creative work, and is now proud to share what he has achieved.

"She didn't just teach him, she helped heal a child who had lost confidence in himself and in school," Jensen says.

Maio says her drive comes from seeing a breakthrough like this: "Watching children grow, not just academically but as people, is truly, truly rewarding." ■

doesn't have to choose. Through the Queensland Virtual Academy, he teaches aerospace systems from Northern Beaches State High School in Townsville to students at Bowen State High School, 200km away.

JADE APPELKAMP

Redcliffe State High School

On finishing her studies in Brisbane, Appelkamp set her sights on Far North Queensland. After her initial teaching contract in Cairns, she headed to Doomadgee State School in a remote Gulf community in northwest Queensland. She embraced the challenges of rural teaching, gaining crucial experience, before returning to her old high school at Redcliffe.

BELINDA ALLEN

Cairns School of Distance Education, tunnel manager with Creative Generation - State Schools Onstage (CGEN)

For Allen, CGEN is more than a chance to support students as they take the stage. It has been a career-defining experience. Co-ordinating 2000 students at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre has strengthened her ability to collaborate, problem solve and work under pressure.

STEPHANIE ELPHICK

Kawana Waters State College

Inspired by her high school HPE teacher, Elphick aims to positively impact students. After a Relieve at Level opportunity took her from Brisbane to Mornington Island, she embraced all that remote teaching and leadership has to offer. She recently moved from Mornington Island to the Sunshine Coast and is looking to her next chapter.

KATRINA DALGLISH

Clairvaux MacKillop College, Upper Mount Gravatt

DalGLISH's leadership is transforming STEM opportunities for young people, particularly young women. In 2026, she was named Department Head of the Year at the Australian Education Awards and is a finalist in Brisbane Catholic Education's NGS Super Award for Excellence in Learning and Teaching in Secondary School, for her contribution to student learning and pathway development.

JOEL DAVIS

Miallo State School

Davis began his teaching career in Emerald after graduating in 2012 from James Cook University. He later taught in London and Cairns, fuelling a passion for leadership. Now, as the principal at Miallo State School, north of Cairns, he's back near where he grew up.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

CORY O'CONNOR

Penola High School

O'Connor has built a dynamic agricultural program spanning livestock, aquaculture, viticulture and crops. Students co-design projects, from building chicken coops to preparing livestock for the Royal Adelaide Show. His approach integrates agri-tech, expanding learning into digital spaces.

LEARNING TO HAVE AN IMPACT

It's not every day you get to meet your childhood heroes again when you're all grown up. But for this former student and teacher, it's a full circle moment

Story **BRENDAN CASEY**

An emotional reunion between Victorian principal Nicole Black and her former year one student-turned-prep teacher, Martina Duong, revealed how inspiration can come at a young age.

"She had such a big impact on my life," Duong says.

"She made me feel so comfortable and safe at school and I guess that's why I came back to teaching, because I wanted to recreate that for future students."

Now teaching the next generation at St Andrew's in Clayton South, Duong's interactions with her former teacher as an adult reaffirmed why she got into the profession.

"It feels very surreal and exciting, I'm just so grateful I get to see her again," Duong says. "She was such a kind and patient teacher and always so happy, so every day I felt very safe and comfortable at school."

For the past fortnight, News Corp Australia has recognised and celebrated outstanding teachers across the country for the positive impact they have in classrooms and school communities.



Our annual Australia's Best Teachers series, now in its fourth year, has celebrated hundreds of teachers since it launched.

This year, the series is supported by corporate partners Melbourne

Archdiocese Catholic Schools and Big Ass Fans, and News Corp's metropolitan mastheads the Herald Sun, Adelaide Advertiser, The Daily Telegraph and The Courier-Mail.

Black, now the principal at

St Mary's in Hastings, says Duong was always such a happy little girl when she was six, describing her as "so positive and bubbly", and says it was rare to see her former students and what they ended up doing in adulthood.

"It's rewarding because often when we teach them in primary school we never get to see them when they leave ... so it's a really special thing for me to get to know there has been an impact on the work I did many years ago," Black says.

"And it's exciting to see someone you've taught find a career in something you also have."

Now a principal of nearly two years and having worked in the education system for 21, Black highlights how the role of a teacher has evolved.

"The profession has changed in so many ways," she says. "The pressures and demands of teachers have lifted and I think it's a career you have to really love to maintain."

"(But) we still have those amazing relationships with students and work really hard to create kind and safe classrooms for everybody."

CASEY CAMILLERI

St Ignatius' College, Adelaide

Camilleri's compassion, professionalism, and commitment have made a significant impact since 2024. Drawing on her background in Inclusive Education, she creates a safe, nurturing classroom where every child is known, valued and supported.

TARIN ZURLINO

Newbery Park Primary School, Millicent

Zurlino's approach includes personalised professional development and data-driven strategies to tailor support for teachers. Her commitment to improvement and stakeholder engagement has built a cohort of educators empowered to excel.

JENNY BISHOP

Millicent High School

Bishop uses the arts to strengthen culture, creativity and student wellbeing. Her

projects make Aboriginal identity visible in classrooms and public spaces via totem poles, culturally inclusive netball uniforms and transformation of the Meeting Place.

ROB PASSANITI

St Ignatius' College, Adelaide

Passaniti's 30 years of service have shaped Saint Ignatius' College. As director of student wellbeing, he led a transformative pastoral care restructure. A dedicated religious education teacher, he models lived faith through his service to those on the margins and active parish involvement.

ROHAN CHEONG

Mercedes College, Adelaide

Students say Cheong is understanding, calm and "easy to relate to". He has a deep understanding of the curriculum and is incredibly supportive in making sure students understand what they are doing.

JORDON MOFFAT

Brighton Secondary School

Students identify Moffat as a trusted adult on their learner profiles, reflecting the positive relationships he builds through empathy, adaptability and respect. He is passionate about sparking curiosity by presenting concepts in innovative ways.

KIREEA CUGLEY

Port Pirie West Primary School

In just six years of teaching, Cugley has built a reputation for transforming student outcomes through powerful relationships, leadership and dedication. Her impact is reflected in consistently strong literacy and numeracy growth.

KATHY HENNIG

Kildare College, Adelaide

Hennig is an inspiring educator whose 36-year career at Kildare College reflects



Martina Duong, a prep teacher at St Andrew's in Clayton South, is reunited with her own prep teacher Nicole Black, now a principal at St Mary's in Hastings. Pictures: David Crosling

her deep commitment to Catholic education. As a longstanding pillar of the community, she enriches College life through nurturing connections and belonging in all.

PAUL BELTRAME
Kildare College, Adelaide

Beltrame's innovative 26-year career at Kildare College has shaped student learning, curiosity and care for creation. A highly accomplished biology, material solutions (woodwork and metalsmithing), science, STEM and pastoral care teacher, he drives outstanding academic outcomes.

EMMA DOLLING
Streaky Bay Area School

Dolling consistently displays a high level of professionalism in her work. With exceptional communication skills, deep curriculum knowledge and a talent for

bringing learning to life, she creates engaging, personalised classroom experiences that help students succeed.

LINNY MPANDAMABULA
Tintinara Area School

For many children, Mpandamabula is the teacher who shapes their first experience of school. As a foundation teacher, she creates a classroom where children feel safe, valued and excited to learn, taking the time to understand students' unique strengths, interests and needs.

NEW SOUTH WALES

EIRLYS MENDES
Toongabbie Christian College

This English teacher's personal and professional commitment to maximising student growth is unmatched. Mendes champions a rigorous "triangular

approach" to professional development, constantly refining her subject knowledge, innovating her pedagogical practice and deepening her pastoral care.

BRUNA DOMA
Maclean High School

Doma has taught language at Maclean High School for 28 years, and enjoyed a four-decade career in education. Winner of the 2025 Secretary's Award for Excellent Service, she established a long-running excursion for language study that has introduced hundreds of rural students to their first overseas experience.

JUDY CROPPER
Tara Anglican Girls School, North Parramatta

Cropper has had an extraordinary 41-year career, showing unwavering commitment to student learning and wellbeing as a dedicated and inspirational teacher.

KATHY CORBY
Jannali Public School

Corby has led instructional teaching rounds across the Small Schools Learning Alliance to support all staff to improve their literacy and numeracy practices in line with each school's School Excellence Plan. The Small Schools Learning Alliance received a Secretary's award in the 2024 Public Education awards, while Corby won a Sutherland Network Award in Leadership.

KENDAL BRYANT
Casino Christian School

As stage 6 head of learning, school VET co-ordinator, and hospitality teacher, Bryant oversees VET programs, work placements, and industry partnerships that create valuable pathways for success. Her dedication is reflected in student achievements – like Angus, who attended the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu residential cookery program in Sydney, won the Best Cuisine Award, and progressed to state-level competition.

MATTHEW NORTON
Heritage College, Port Macquarie

Norton is an inspirational teacher who has transformed his school's approach to wellbeing. He has led initiatives to ensure students feel valued and supported. His goal is to ensure every student feels a sense of belonging, and he regularly mentors staff, giving them practical tools to build resilience and support their mental health.

CRYSTAL MAWHINNEY-BLAKE
Clarence Valley Anglican School

Powerhouse Gumbaynggirr woman Mawhinney-Blake has transformed the school into a place of safety, love and cultural pride for Aboriginal students. She leads vibrant Goori Groups across primary and secondary campuses and invites local Elders to deepen the community's cultural understanding.

ANNEY SCHIEB
Tomaree Public School

Schieb came to teaching – at her old primary school – with a professional dance background. She has expanded dance and performing arts opportunities at TPS beyond the curriculum, with more than a third of all students now involved in dance.

WAYOWA TELFER
St Philip's Christian College, Port Stephens

As the school's VET co-ordinator, Telfer has inspired many students to pursue their passion and identify their purpose in vocational pathways. Her dynamic teaching of tourism, travel and events enhances student engagement while building their skills and confidence.

JODIE WHITING
Central West Leadership Academy, Dubbo

Whiting has an in-depth knowledge of her students' needs, with a proactive, adaptive, collaborative and resourceful approach to meeting their needs. Her sensitivity to their broad cultural and socio-economic backgrounds ensures they are engaged as learners and individuals.