

# Author John Marsden to open arts-focused secondary school

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Children's author John Marsden has bought the former Macedon Grammar School site and plans to open a new secondary school focused on the arts.

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Children's author John Marsden loves bush settings. *Photo: Jason South*

When best-selling Australian author John Marsden first visited Macedon Grammar seven years ago, he was struck by the school's beautiful, bushland setting.

Last week Mr Marsden bought the site of the former Christian college, where he plans to open a new secondary school focused on the arts.

"There is such a huge passion for the arts among young people," the author of *Tomorrow When the War Began* said.

"It can be taken much more seriously nowadays. A generation ago it wasn't really a viable industry for most people, but now there are heaps of ways you can make a career in the arts. It is no longer something treated as airy-fairy or lightweight."

Macedon Grammar was closed by the state government in December after it accumulated about \$1.8 million in debt and was deemed financially unviable.

It will be the second school founded by Mr Marsden, who also runs the alternative Candlebark School in Romsey in the Macedon Ranges.

Mr Marsden said the school would open its doors to creative students by the start of 2016, or possibly even later this year "if the bureaucracy allows for that".

He plans to offer dance, drama, music, art, writing and design-related subjects from year 7 to VCE. Mr Marsden can already visualise year 7 students learning about the history of violin design, developing their woodwork skills and then building an instrument they can play in senior years.

School hours are also set for a shake-up and "adolescent-friendly" classes could run from 10am to 4pm.

"I know as a teenager I would have appreciated that," Mr Marsden said.

He bought the 36-hectare site, school buildings and fittings for an undisclosed sum from Dr Alan Rose, who had founded Macedon Grammar in 1979. It is understood external administrator Worrells will try to pass on funds relating to the sale of the school buildings to creditors.

Mr Marsden said the school would offer an alternative to the Victorian College of the Arts, in a rural setting. It will adopt the philosophy of his Candlebark School, where students received a hands-on learning experience, he said.

"So many children are learning or experiencing the world in a completely artificial way through computer games, [that] even relationships are conducted at a distance. We are very much the opposite way. We put kids into the bush, send them up mountains and down rivers and into snow."

About 200 students will attend Mr Marsden's new school, and fees will be about \$12,000 a year.

Discussions with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority about registering the new school have not yet begun. Mr Marsden said he was "energised and excited" about his new project and he hoped students from the Candlebark School, which goes up to year 10, would move to his new arts-focused secondary school.

"I have received countless emails from parents and students interested in coming here, as well as teachers who are interested in working here."

When asked if he had learnt any lessons from establishing the Candlebark School, Mr Marsden said there was a limit to how many damaged children could be accommodated in one school.

"The culture of the school has to be determined by the adults, and if you flood the school with damaged children then they will destroy that culture, through no fault of their own. We sometimes have had to say no to people, which is quite a painful thing to do."

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