Hillcrest Christian College shifted from reactively managing workforce pressures and expectations to deliberately designing ways of working that benefit both staff and the College.

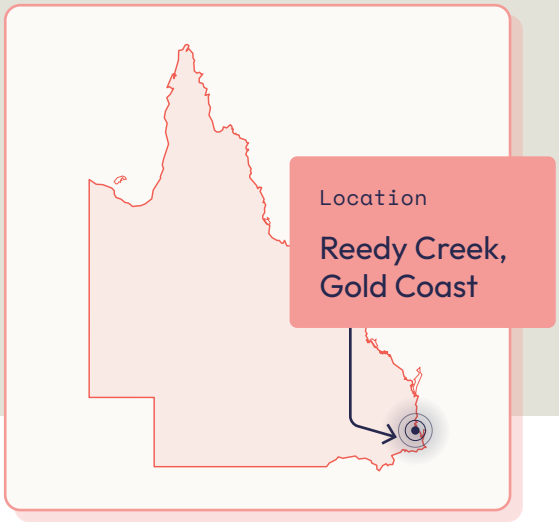
Flexibility-first by design.

School
Hillcrest Christian College

Type
Pre-Prep to Year 12

Size
~2,055
students





01. Context

What features of the school shaped the opportunity and constraints?

Hillcrest Christian College offers on-campus and Virtual Learning Community (VLC) from Pre-Prep to Year 12, as well as welcoming international students. It operates across four campuses, including a unique Year 9 experience where students spend a full year at its beach-adjacent campus.

The College was established in 1982, when Palm Beach Baptist Church established a Years 1–7 school with just two teachers. Today, it employs around 130 teaching and 118 support staff and is at capacity on its current sites, with demand exceeding available places.

With the College at capacity, off-site work for those who are able helps ease pressure on available workspace. Hillcrest Christian College is future-focused, with a Board that encourages innovation and calculated risk-taking and leadership that creates space to question existing ways of working and explore different - and hopefully better, workplace practices.

02. Challenge or opportunity

Why did flexibility become relevant at this point?

Maintaining a stable and engaged workforce became more of a challenge for the College coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Requests for discretionary leave (beyond existing leave entitlements) increased substantially, and the volume of requests escalated to the Principal for review became difficult to manage.

Around the same time, an enterprise agreement negotiation round saw staff seeking more pay than the College could afford, giving leaders more reason to look at other ways to meet expectations. Staff were also repeatedly asking for greater flexibility (via leave or alternative work arrangements), while rigid return-to-work arrangements weren't always meeting the needs of staff coming back from parental leave. As a result, the College faced a growing risk of losing people it wanted to retain, in the context of growing teacher shortages and associated recruitment challenges.

It was clear the existing arrangements weren't responding to the changing needs of the College and its workforce.

03. Design response

What flexible work arrangement or set of practices was considered or introduced?

The College's response to its changing needs could be described as flexibility-first, with initiatives ranging in scale from individual leave entitlements through to role and structure redesign.

Current initiatives

At the smallest scale, Purple Days give staff an annual discretionary leave day they can take without justification. The school introduced three initially, later moving to one per year with occasional top-ups. The idea was framed simply: "a purple day is a day you can take whenever you want without any question."

Staff working in the VLC have flexibility in terms of how and where they work: teachers started fully on-site to build culture and confidence, then were gradually granted more remote days. Now the model is established, most full-time VLC staff attend campus twice a week: once for staff meetings and once to use recording facilities, and work from home the remainder of the week. On a case-by-case basis this flexibility is extended where it meets an operational need; for example, a small number of teachers in specialist roles which are difficult to staff locally have been appointed to work entirely off-site.

Flexibility also extends into career mobility and part-time arrangements. By design, staff are encouraged to move between on-campus, VLC and hybrid roles to broaden their experience, facilitate knowledge-sharing across the College, and de-risk the impact of staff turnover.

Future initiatives

At the largest scale, the College is progressing a radical reimagining of roles and the operating model itself, creating a dual-stream teaching model to be implemented in 2027. The dual-stream model is designed to run two 'shifts' on its new campus each day - a morning shift from 7:30am to 12pm and an afternoon shift from 11am to 3:30pm - enabling two cohorts of students to use campus facilities each day, and providing families with the choice of shift that best meets their needs. Consequently, teachers working in the dual stream model would work longer days than in a traditional single-stream school, but have the option of working three days per week on a full-time arrangement, creating a degree of flexibility which is rarely seen in the sector.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate a commitment to flexibility operating at every level of the College, albeit in different ways for different roles.

> We are on an adventure... If it's going to be boring, let's just give up!
>
> – Executive Head of College

04. Implementation

How was it designed, communicated, governed and adapted?

Hillcrest Christian College's flexible work arrangements have continued to evolve over time, shaped by what works in practice and implemented with a test-and-iterate approach.

Leaders acknowledge that each initiative comes with a financial and operational cost; for example, Purple Days taken on a busy teaching day require replacement cover - and these costs are continuously weighed against the benefits.

Hybrid working in the VLC was introduced gradually: staff worked full-time on campus for the first term to build culture and connection, as well as technical confidence, before moving to the hybrid arrangement. Early roles combining in-person and VLC teaching were also trialled, but have since been replaced by dedicated VLC roles.

Individual flexible work requests continue to be referred via the relevant leader to the Principal for approval. Each arrangement is treated as a trial, with its impact on students considered first and staff preferences following rather than leading. It is then monitored to see how it works in practice.

05. Impact

What changed, for whom, and what remains uncertain?

To date, leaders at the College have observed the impact of these initiatives in terms of staff retention, recruitment and morale. Turnover is low, and it is understood that teachers who may otherwise have left have chosen to stay. Meanwhile, recruitment has shifted from no applicants four years ago to strong fields for each senior role advertised.

Purple Days have been associated with improved staff morale, and taking a Purple Day is now openly shared rather than concealed, suggesting supportive cultural norms are in place. Sick leave has also fallen, with staff able to manage situations like a mildly unwell child at home by teaching online where appropriate and taking part of a day rather than the whole day.

Student engagement remains high, with few behaviour issues reported. The College also receives unsolicited parent emails praising individual teachers almost every week.

That said, leaders don't attribute the recruitment turnaround to specific flexibility initiatives alone. The culture of the College and its reputation for innovation and a sense of adventure have both made flexibility initiatives possible to begin with, and made them more likely to succeed.



06. Learnings

What should another school take from this case?

Fortune favours the bold... when the bold act for the right reasons under the right circumstances.

When it comes to organisational change, being prepared to take measured risks matters, and so does having the support of the Board and Executive. The Hillcrest Christian College case demonstrates that getting things wrong need not be an issue, provided missteps are used as learning opportunities. Vulnerability, humility and openness to change are seen as culturally essential. Leaders need to be prepared to identify a need (with the student experience front-and-centre), try new things to address the need, learn from what doesn't work and adjust along the way.