As an identical twin, Peter Riordan knows all about teamwork. Now principal at Simonds Catholic College, Riordan has been a team player since honing his communication skills growing up with his twin, Michael.

The brothers had fun with identification mix-ups and still have the odd “twin” moment. “We were going to the races with some friends on Saturday and he turned up at my place and he had the same colour shirt,” Riordan says. “I had to change.” For the record, it was mauve.

Both were sporty, but Riordan followed their parents into education. Their father, Eddie, was a primary school teacher and principal and their mother, Patsy, taught in primary and secondary schools. The family lived in Bonbeach with younger siblings Tim, now a project manager, and Camille, a secondary art teacher.

Riordan’s childhood included plenty of summer beach visits, sometimes hitching a ride home on a council truck stationed near the family home. He also enjoyed fishing and caught flathead and whiting on the boat of his late maternal grandfather, Jim O’Donnell.

Riordan attended St Joseph’s School in Chelsea and played footy, cricket, basketball and did Little Athletics on weekends. After moving to St Bede’s College in Mentone in grade 5, he added cross country and golf.

His brother Michael became a golf course curator but Riordan decided to teach, partly inspired by the likes of humanities specialist Peter Wintle and St Bede’s principal, Brother Bill Firman, who knew the names of all 1300 students.

Riordan studied teaching at Christ College in Chadstone, now part of the Australian Catholic University, majoring in PE. “It just felt like the right fit,” he says. By third year, he was working one day a week as a PE teacher at St Finbar’s School in Brighton.

Apart from a stellar career, the best thing Riordan gained from university was his wife, Deirdre, who completed the same course. They started dating three years later and now live in Aspendale. Their son Patrick, 29, runs an electrical business and daughter Lucy, 26, works in advertising/marketing.

After graduating from university in 1980, Riordan got his first full-time teaching job at his old school, where he taught year 8 and 9 maths and PE. He spent 19 years at St Bede’s in roles such as year 8 home room leader, outdoor education co-ordinator, year level co-ordinator and assistant principal (student management).

Technology revolutionised teaching during that time but pastoral care remained important, with a “vertical” model introduced that combined year level groups into one home room. This engendered a strong school spirit, something Riordan values at Simonds.

He also appreciates further education, completing a graduate diploma in student welfare at ACU and then a graduate diploma in education administration and a master’s degree in education (educational leadership) at the University of Melbourne.

In 2000, Riordan moved to De La Salle College in Malvern as head of its Tiverton grade 4 to year 10 campus. He became deputy principal in 2005 and acted as principal for three terms in late 2009 and early 2010.

In 2013, Riordan joined Simonds Catholic College as principal. The school has 490 boys at campuses in West Melbourne and Fitzroy North. It was formed in 1996 when St Mary’s Boys’ Regional School in West Melbourne merged with Cathedral College in East Melbourne.

The East Melbourne campus closed and a Fitzroy North VCE campus opened in 2010 on the site of St Brigid’s Primary School. The 170 senior students thrive in its personalised environment, achieving above-average VCE results. Both campuses are also handy to the city and its learning possibilities.

When Riordan replaced Bernie McFarlane, who was principal for 27 years dating back to St Mary’s, he was joined by existing staff Helen Koutoulogenis and Robert Anastasio as deputy principals. Koutoulogenis is in charge of the St Mary’s campus and Anastasio the St Brigid’s campus.

“The three of us started as a new team,” Riordan says. “We all bring different skills to the leadership team.”

While fees have remained affordable at $2000 a year – including an iPad, camps and excursions – Riordan has instigated changes, including a refurbishment of the 101-year-old main school building and several new camps.

In a new year 9 program, students attend a technology-free camp at Mount Baw Baw, complete a city experience, volunteer with a community service program and enjoy a recreational Phillip Island camp. Year 8 students have a Safety Beach camp, year 10 students do work experience, and VCAL programs have been introduced in years 11 and 12.

Sport choices have also been widened, a full-time school counsellor appointed and retreat days introduced. Riordan wants his students, who hail from many backgrounds, to be ready for the real world as well as further study. He encourages them to be the best they can be, rather than feel pressure to be the best.

“It’s really important that we give students hope for their future,” Riordan says. “We see Simonds as a school where your son is known, supported and challenged.”

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