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# SJIIM's Gary Cairns On Why Values-Driven Education Outlasts Good Grades

Words by TANIA JAYATILAKA



COVER Photo: Fady Younis for Tatler Malaysia

The head of school at St. Joseph's Institution International School Malaysia (Tropicana PJ Campus) also shares how character-building and service are indelibly linked to learning at this Lasallian school

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Opened in 2016, St. Joseph's Institution International School Malaysia or SJIIM (Tropicana PJ Campus) embodies a 300-year-old educational tradition rooted in the teachings of its founder St. John Baptist De La Salle. A brother school to the renowned St. Joseph's Institution and St. Joseph's Institution International School in Singapore, SJIIM places great emphasis on character-building, virtue and service.

The greatest outcome of this values-centred educational approach is that it produces well-rounded learners who go on to lead meaningful lives in society long after their school and university years. In school, they learn these values without neglecting rigorously high academic standards. SJIIM's 2022 IGCSE results are proof of this, with 75 per cent of IGCSE grades this year at A\*-A, 53 per cent at A\*, 86 per cent at A\*-B and 96 per cent at A\*-C.

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ABOVE SJIIM head of school Gary Cairns next to a statue of St. John Baptist De La Salle (Photo: Fady Younis)

“We are very proud of our students who sat their examinations this year, achieving remarkable results despite learning online for nearly two years,” says SJIIM head of school Gary Cairns, a member of SJIIM’s founding team and an educator with 20 years of experience.

“A big focus for us in 2023 is experiential learning. Now that they've learned online for so long, I want our students to have the opportunity to learn by doing. I want them to be out there in the community and experience, once again, what it is like to go on trips overseas and internships that help prepare them for their futures. Students shouldn’t just have to learn about the environment from a textbook when they could be actually exploring the world around them, conducting experiments and learning along the way.”

Cairns says families can also look forward to the recent launch of SJIIM’s new Lasallian Sixth Form, which will give students the opportunity to choose between the IBDP (International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme) or the Cambridge A Level as they prepare for university.

He tells *Tatler* about the benefits of this unique Sixth Form experience and how it relates to the school's overall focus on authentic values and service.



ABOVE Photo: St. Joseph's Institution International School Malaysia

**Tell us about the Lasallian Sixth Form that will be available at SJIIM.**

While we are committed to offering the IBDP—which is an excellent course and we have a fantastic track record of student achievement in examinations—we are also aware that some students prefer to narrow their studies and focus on three or four A Levels subjects, rather than cover a broad range of subjects as they do with the IBDP. Offering the A Level will provide a pathway to those students too. A Level students will also have the opportunity to work with IBDP students in service projects, conduct an optional research project in the form of the Cambridge International Project Qualification, and take part in The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award.

**What support does SJIIM provide students on university preparation?**

Like our IBDP students, our A Level students will work with our university and careers counsellor on their university applications and receive one-to-one support on all aspects of that process.



ABOVE Photo: St. Joseph's Institution International School Malaysia

### Why are service outreach activities so important to SJIIM?

One of the first things you see at our school are the words, 'Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve'. Service is a key component of Lasallian education, and it's important that our school carries on that tradition. This year, we celebrate 170 years of Lasallian schools in Malaysia and we are committed to ensuring our students develop the habit of service in line with the teachings of our founder, St. John Baptist De La Salle and the work of the Lasallian Brothers.

It's important that they understand the difference between fundraising and service. They put in time and effort in these projects, and they go out to interact with people in the community. We have a thriving Lasallian Youth Movement in our high school with over 50 students volunteering every Friday afternoon to devise and carry out service projects. This year, our parent service group, Kitar Kitar, also launched our new community garden where the students plant, grow and tend to the plants.

Service should be done for the right reasons. It shouldn't be done for likes on social media and it's not for building up your CV for potential university placements. To truly serve means to do so for the act of service itself.



**Research has shown that young people engaging in service are more likely to flourish as individuals and as members of society.**

— Gary Cairns

is there anything you're mindful to avoid as a leader?

We are part of a long Lasallian heritage and I am always mindful of ensuring my message is in alignment with that heritage. It's important to me that our values are not just words but lived through our actions and deeds. When we talk about character education, respect, integrity and moral courage, our actions need to mirror those words. We are the ones who model it for our students. That's evident in how we communicate with students at school and when the students witness us talking to all members of staff, whether it's colleagues, cleaning staff or canteen staff.

### What are some of SJIIM's milestones in 2022?

There have been so many that we are proud of. We had our first school production since the start of the pandemic, *The Jungle Book*. We took our students to Bangkok to compete in the World Scholar's Cup, an academic competition featuring debating. Our students were competing against over 1,000 students and won many top awards including first place overall team and first place debate team as well as overall individual, first place for individual debate and first place for individual writing. Thirty-one of our students are flying to Yale University to compete in the Tournament of Champions. Despite their success, our students modelled that Lasallian spirit throughout and I was proud of every one of the students that took part. All these events are important milestones for us as they signal a return to ensuring our students have a normal school experience once again.



### How does SJIIM make quality education more accessible to Malaysian students?

At St. Joseph's, we will be launching a scholarship programme for our Sixth Form in December. In my opinion though, the responsibility to support young people does not end when they complete their studies at the end of Year 13. We have an excellent track record of supporting our students to apply for scholarships at university too. We have had students receive scholarships to Princeton University in the US, Nanyang Technological University and Yale-NUS in Singapore, The University of British Columbia, University of Tokyo, New York University (Abu Dhabi) and Zhejiang University.

### If you could describe SJIIM in one phrase, what would it be?

Quality education, but in a values-driven environment. I've worked in many international schools around the world, where the focus was on the acquisition of grades above all else. While our St. Joseph's students get remarkable grades, our message to them has always been 'You are more than your grades. You are a Lasallian'.

*Call +603 8605 3605, email [enquiries@sji-international.edu.my](mailto:enquiries@sji-international.edu.my) or click [here](#) to inquire about St. Joseph's Institution International School Malaysia (Tropicana PJ Campus). Find out more about its A Level programme and enjoy the introductory price of RM60,000 per year for enrolment in August 2023.*

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