

2020 ANNUAL REPORT: ALICE MILLER AND CANDLEBARK SCHOOLS



Photo by Cameron Kerr

With the utmost gravity I commence the 2020 Annual Report for that elusive entity known generally as Alice Miller School, although it could be argued that in many ways we are two schools, Candlebark and Alice Miller.

In 2020 Candlebark was in its fifteenth year and Alice Miller its fifth. Candlebark spans Foundation to Year 7, and Alice Miller has Year 7 through Year 12.

2020 was a wild and woolly year for the world, with coronavirus causing fear, illness and death in every country; in every continent except Antarctica. Its effects don't need to be specified here because they are well-known and well recorded. However, the pandemic did have a big impact on our schools, as it did on schools across the globe.

For two extended periods of time school was required by government to be conducted by way of distance education; in other words students were off-campus. Small numbers of students who were exempt from this requirement because of family situations, parental obligations, special learning needs or emotional difficulties did attend campus however, where they were looked after by teachers, on a rostered basis.

Most of the distance education which we provided was online, with students' days filled by one-on-one tuition, small group meetings and regular class sessions, accompanied of course by assignments and activities which were done around the home or farm, or around town too, where that was appropriate and legally permissible.

It was hard work for Candlebark and Alice Miller teachers, but they were spectacularly successful in creating innovative, engaging, meaningful lessons. This is greatly to their credit, as it would have been all too easy for them to simply send out a set of instructions once a week... 'Complete the last 10 questions on the worksheet, then do pages 83 to 89 in your textbook...'

They did not do that.

It was interesting to see that a number of students made better progress academically by staying at home and doing online classes; yet a number of students struggled to keep up. The reasons for these phenomena are pretty obvious: there are fewer distractions when people are working at home, but some students need frequent support from teachers, which is not always as easy to provide online as it might be in the classroom.

The obvious response to the statement that some students made better progress academically by working online is to say that those students should stay home every day and do all their classes online, but of course there is much other learning which takes place in the school context – such as emotional learning, social learning, and the acquisition of greater intellectual powers (which is often enhanced by the fast paced discussions, arguments and debates which can happen so easily in the classroom but tend to be much less successful when attempted online).

The rest of 2020 was mostly filled with the normal sort of events which characterise a school year and which I can go on about as I have been doing for 15 years now, in these annual reports, should some bureaucrat out there seriously believe that this will be a meaningful exercise and will contribute in a meaningful way to proving that we know what we're doing and why we're doing it and that such a report will meaningfully contribute to public knowledge and awareness of the school's operations.

As I've said with various degrees of apathy, cynicism, ferocity etc. during those 15 years, I believe these reports to be a waste of time and another example of the paralysis which has been gradually but successfully induced in Australia by bureaucrats. Although I used the words 'meaningful' and 'meaningfully' with extravagance in the one sentence, in the preceding paragraph, I can say with some confidence that these reports by schools are essentially meaningless documents..

I will however place on record here the utterly tragic death of our Year 8 student Lachlan Murray, during 2020. A boy who, through no fault of his own, had experienced difficult circumstances during infancy and childhood but had found a new parent and was being lovingly and caringly supported by her, Lachlan still, understandably, found the struggle too much.

*When daylight comes, comes in the light,
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright.*

Lachlan was not able to reach a point where he could look into the distance and be hopeful or even optimistic about the as-yet-undiscovered future.

Earlier in 2020 our ex-student, Xole Patterson-Vaoa, studying at the University of Tasmania, also ended his life. It's hard to think of anyone more loved than Xole was at Alice Miller, but it's also hard to think of anyone who had been hit with more challenges. With a significant hearing loss, deteriorating eyesight, a gender change from female to male, Xole, like Lachlan, had also suffered a harsh start to life for other reasons, and like Lachlan had found a new parent who had been greatly supportive. Xole was extraordinary in his warm and welcoming

approach to everyone at Alice and, as with Lachlan, so many people were devastated at his departure that it's hard to imagine that either of them would have chosen the path they took had they understood how much



Xole

they were treasured.

To move on to the mandatory stuff:

Enrolment at the two schools during 2020 was around the 370 mark. This year, we sought and obtained permission from the necessary regulatory authorities to raise the ceiling for the number of students enrolled at Alice Miller to a maximum of 280 instead of the previous figure of 200. We sought and obtained the necessary approvals to upgrade and improve the sewerage system at Alice Miller to make it even more beautiful and effective.

There were far fewer sporting battles with other schools than in previous years, because of coronavirus issues, and chess tournaments defaulted into online events, but we continued to compete with gratifying and even admirable success in these 'arenas'. Foxes continued to be foxily skilful at finding new ways to kill chooks at both campuses, although we think that we've now got them bluffed (although we've mistakenly thought that before).

An unusual feature of 2020 was a visit by 15 students and three teachers from the school in France which has become something of a sister school to us – Saint Jeanne d'Arc in Argentat. We had a wonderful time getting to know our guests, and we really appreciated their positive involvement with Alice Miller and the down-under world, which they approached with enthusiasm and apparent delight. I hope that visits between the two schools continue for a long time to come.

Concerning staff, with embarrassment and even shame I admit that we have not had a librarian at either school until this year, but we have tried to compensate by appointing an unusually brilliant one: Geri Coughlin, for many years the Librarian at Trinity Grammar School, is now the Candlebark Librarian and for two days every week in 2020 enlivened the school and motivated kids to read more. Experienced outdoor education teacher Lil Waters was employed for a year at Alice to cover the absence of Amy Naivasha, who was on a year's leave, and Lil proved to be so good that we have asked her to continue through 2021, thereby increasing even further our heartfelt commitment to outdoor education. Jessica Longmuir joined the Candlebark staff during the year, to replace Peta Domm when Peta took maternity leave, claiming she was pregnant; a claim she was later able to substantiate with very tangible and beautiful proof. Jessica has been such a success that we have asked her too to continue, at Candlebark. Aleisha Burke was employed at Candlebark to assist with students who have special needs, and has achieved results which could fairly be called miraculous.

Liam Tran, whom we've gotten to know well over the years, came on board at Alice Miller to teach Humanities, especially History and to be a great bloke around the place, which he is. Emily Gaughwin, who'd had experience in places as diverse as Devonport Tasmania and Canada, flew in from Colorado to join us as a wonderful biology, maths and general science teacher at Alice. Katy Penman and Conan O'Brien, who'd had experience in places as diverse as Ramingining (Arnhem Land), the Tiwi Islands and Canberra, have brought idiosyncratic and intriguing approaches to the teaching of subjects like general primary and art (Katy) and advanced maths and science (specialising in physics and chemistry) (Conan) at Candlebark and Alice respectively.

Alex Harrison has contributed warmly and valuably to helping students with special needs at Candlebark. Luca O'Flynn, a generous and friendly person with a great work ethic, joined the maintenance staff, also at Candlebark. Natasha Prewett, who has degrees in music and horticulture, left her position teaching music at the BRIT School for Performing Arts and Technology in London to come to Alice Miller. Amy Winehouse and Adele went to the BRIT School, and they still give Natasha 10% of their music royalties, to show their gratitude for her... no, that last bit isn't entirely true.

When I was in secondary school as a student, so very very long ago, at the end of each term we sang a hymn which began with the words *Lord dismiss us with thy blessing...* Please don't misunderstand the word 'dismiss': In that context it referred simply to the fact that we were leaving the surrounds of the school, in a physical sense at least, either for holidays or to move on to new adventures. During or at the end of 2020 we said – rather than sang -- goodbye to Mitchell Gandolfo, who has been a part of Candlebark life for a very long time, first as a student and then as a member of the maintenance staff, and who has now been accepted into the Australian Border Force. We farewelled art teacher Basil Eliades, who was one of the small group of teachers who started at Candlebark on the first day of the school's life, and later transferred to Alice Miller. Kris Rielly, who has done everything from organising clean-up rosters to looking after our orientation program for four-year-olds which runs throughout the year to prepare them for school, from showing prospective parents around to marrying the Principal, quit Candlebark after a spectacular argument one night with the Principal over the remote control for the TV (I wanted to watch *Antiques Roadshow*; she wanted to watch *First Dates*), but although we achieved reconciliation over the dispute and watched a repeat of *Selling Homes Australia* instead, she has decided to move on to fresh adventures, although we don't yet know what those will be.

Knowing Kris though, they will certainly be adventures.

Anyway, we thank them for their many wonderful contributions and wish them the best of blessings, as we do the students who left us. Those students included the graduating Year 12s, the biggest class we have yet had

Year 7s



charging headlong through VCE studies. They were a remarkable group; such a disparate bunch of individuals, and yet able to work together and socialise together with unusual success. It was a pleasure to see them in action, and although teachers who had them for their final year of secondary school had to do a lot of intensive work with teenagers struggling with different issues, as well as shepherd them through the course, they became very fond of them. The Year 12s' final evening with us, where they spoke about their time at the school, and teachers responded by profiling each student, was heart-warming and memorable. VCE results were excellent, with Arlo Murfett achieving 97.95. We had 35% of students with ATARs above 80, and a median study score for the school of 32. Nearly all students interested in tertiary study were offered their first choice of places.

As usual we committed to a huge range of outdoor activities for students, and excursions of various kinds. I have been quite specific about these in previous years' annual reports, but do not feel the need to go through all this again, except to make two points: firstly, our students are out and about more, we would suggest, than students at any other p-6 or 7-12 school in Australia. Secondly, we had fewer of these activities in 2020, because of restrictions put in place as a result of coronavirus. In particular, we did not have the giant six-week adventures for Year 9 students that we have had in previous years, but we hope to schedule these for both Year 9 and Year 10 students (at different times) in 2021.

From the first term in their Foundation year, when our students have a four-day three-night camp hours away from home, sleeping in tents, and throughout their subsequent years with us, they are kicked off campus frequently for everything from skiing to hiking, bike camps to canoeing, and a variety of visits to such places as galleries, indigenous sacred sites and University lectures in biology, to name but a few.



A visitor to Alice Miller Admin building

Candlebark and Alice Miller are going well and have proved over and over again that this model of schooling, based upon what is best for students in terms of preparing them for successful adult lives, is effective, although the 21st century problems with obsessive parenting continues to plague us. It is sad – terribly sad – to see children making very slow progress because they have parents who treat their children in ways similar to the ways puppets or dolls are treated. A puppet speaks with the voice of the puppeteer, even though the voice is disguised; it moves its arms and legs as determined by the puppeteer. It has no life of its own; only the life which the puppeteer a.k.a. parent chooses for it. What we see with some frequency is a parent (occasionally two parents) who deflect, deny or ignore any feedback about their child which indicates that there might be difficulties which need attention. They seem unable to process the suggestions we make. Among their responses are quick changes of subjects, no response at all, complete evasion of the topic, stubborn denial, blame of other figures for being the 'real problem', and/ or transferring the child to another school. (It's not uncommon for these children to become 'serial school enrollees', going to, typically, four primary schools in seven years, for reasons other than practical necessity.)

Our second big problem is that we that not yet been able to find a way to bring out the best in those boys in their mid- and senior-primary years who perhaps in other societies, in other eras, might have left school at 13 or 14 and become farmers or hunters or warriors. We do not ask these children to sit at a desk all day listening earnestly to the words of wisdom flowing from the mouth of the sage, nor do we ask them to write a thousand lines in Latin, like house captain Benjamin Sheave requires from a couple of boys involved in some bullying at their English boarding school, in the 1960 novel *The Offenders* by R. H. Ward. As civilisation has become more sophisticated, as the jungles recede and hunting is regarded as disreputable because of its environmental destructiveness, as occupations requiring physical strength become less and less common, we as a society have failed to find roles which match the personalities and passions of many of these boys. And when the lack of roles for them is combined with the kind of parenting I have described in the previous paragraph, the situation becomes worse.

Our third problem is the rapid spread of mental health difficulties among young people in the last few decades. So many of them have chronic problems, which can manifest themselves in such behaviours as self-harming, school avoidance, eating disorders, suicidal inclinations, unacceptable treatment of people to whom they believe

they are romantically and/or sexually attracted, addictions to electronic devices, infantile or childlike overdependence upon parents... this is a list which could go on for a long time.

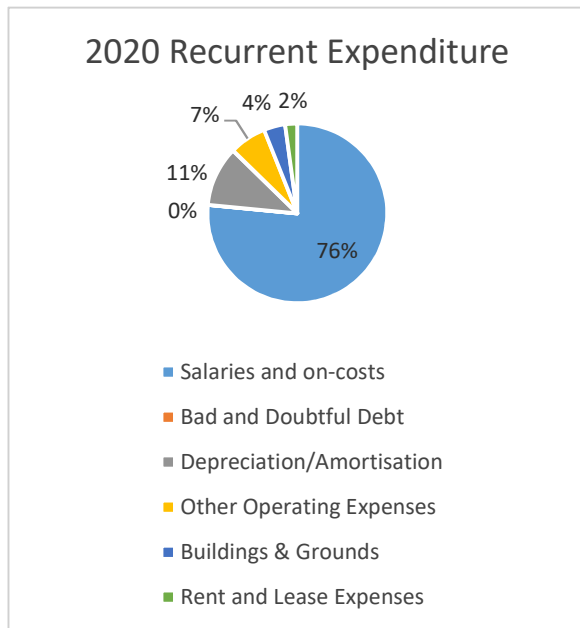
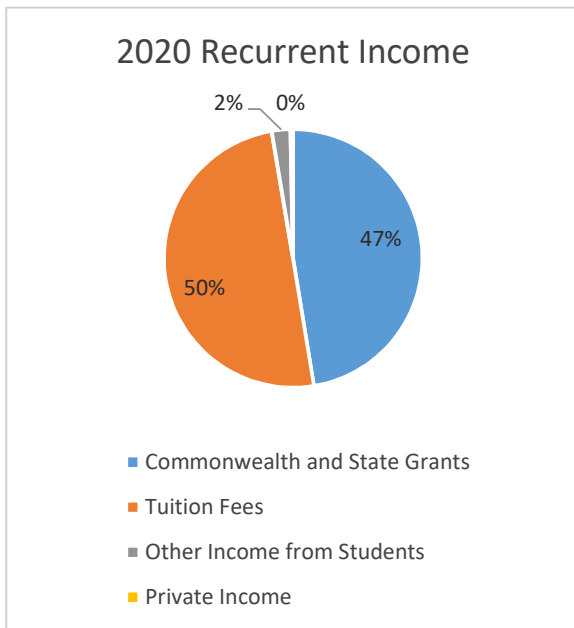
We work hard to support young people who are at risk, trying to assist them to unlearn certain attitudes, behaviours and beliefs, and to learn more helpful ones, but magic wands are few and far between in such situations. Parents who can find the courage to look honestly at their child or children who are experiencing severe difficulties, and to try different strategies, are much more likely to succeed in helping them to find ways forward.



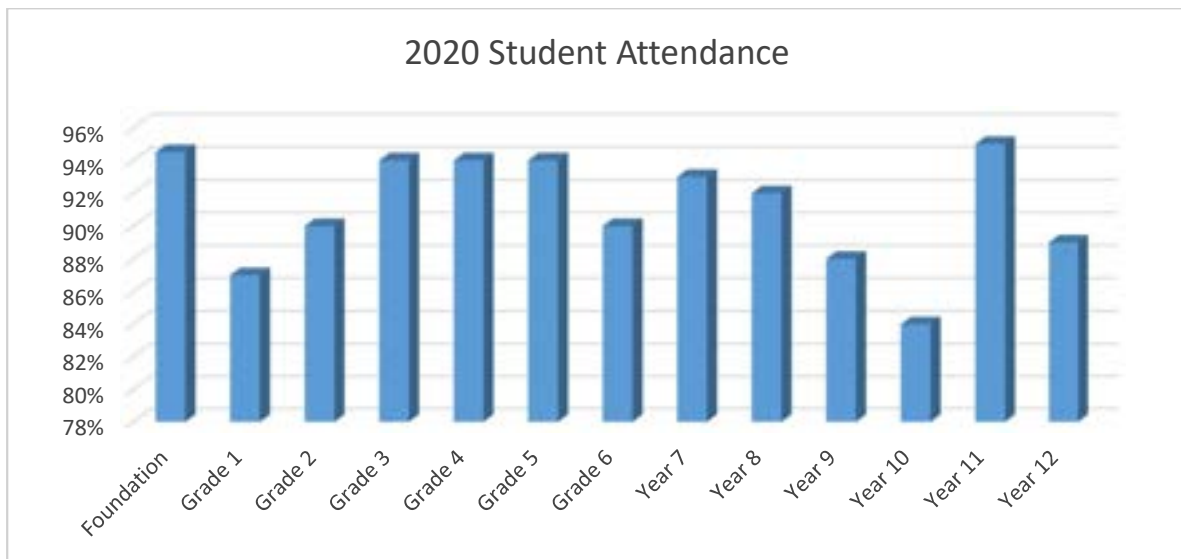
A typical Candlebark snack... maybe. We do love the orange décor. But I can't explain the shadowy figure lurking outside....

Finally, here is the Official Stuff that we are required to include, whether meaningful or not:

Income and Expenditure:



Student Attendance:



We are very keen to have minimal student absences and a strong adherence to punctuality. Given the natural sequence which so many learning programs follow, it is important for students to be at school consistently, unless of course illness occurs, or some other serious matter requires the student to be elsewhere. If there appears to be a need for a student to be absent for reasons other than these, parents are required to seek permission for absence from the Principal. Student attendance is recorded at the beginning of the day and again after lunch, and any absences are followed up immediately with parents. In our view there is however a continuing escalation of the anxiety pandemic in our society, and it can be an ongoing problem with certain families to get students to school each day. In these situations the school makes every effort to encourage parents to be more positive and assertive with their children, but occasionally formal referrals to appropriate authorities have to be made.



Is she preparing for a Naplan test?

Naplan Results:

No results to report. Naplan tests were cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19. Education would be significantly benefited were they to be cancelled permanently. In reference to the Naplan writing test for example, Lucinda McKnight, Senior Lecturer in Pedagogy and Curriculum at Deakin University, commented in a recent article (February 2021) in the magazine *School News Australia* 'Unfortunately, the NAPLAN regime has hampered teaching writing as a process that involves planning and editing. This is because it favours time-limited exam-style writing for no audience. Students need to practise writing in which they are invested, that they care about and that they hope will effect change in the world as well as in their genuine, known readers. This is what machines cannot do.'

Staffing:

In 2020 Alice Miller employed 24 VIT registered teachers, and Candlebark employed 18 VIT registered teachers. All are qualified and registered -- it would be illegal for us to employ them otherwise, because politicians and bureaucrats naïvely believe that no one without a university degree and a diploma of education – or similar – could possibly teach young people.

On the other hand, anyone with a university degree and a diploma in education – or similar – is obviously wonderful at teaching young people.

To call this set of beliefs 'naïve' is to be kind to the politicians and bureaucrats who cling to this point of view. I'll continue to be kind to them, and say merely that they have little understanding of life, humanity, the world.

Yes, registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) has made all the difference to the quality of education in this state.... now please excuse me while I go and lie down for ten minutes.

Workforce composition, including indigenous composition:

I've never known what this means, and I'm not rude enough to ask people about their 'indigenous composition'. However, as well as the teaching staff, in 2020 we employed a Business Manager, two registrars, two Property Managers, three maintenance staff, two gardeners, a lab technician, three chefs, two kitchen hands, and three part-time bus drivers.

Distribution of this report:

This report is distributed by email to all members of the school community, including parents, (currently all school parents have access to email), and the VRQA, and is posted on the websites of Alice Miller School and Candlebark School.

John Marsden



Year 7s