



Cloe Betts; photo by Donna McCrum

Alice Miller School, embracing, figuratively speaking, its older sibling, Candlebark School, had another year typical of any small or medium-size community. Really, that one sentence could

reasonably be said to constitute the 2021 annual report, but as always, one manifestation of the ineptitude of the bureaucrats who govern education in Australia is the requirement that school principals write the meaningless document which will eventually follow this paragraph.

If this were the only meaningless document we were required to write each year I could tolerate it, but every year the quantity of mandatory meaningless documents increases. The bureaucrats who administer education from their quiet and comfortable offices deep in the heart of the CBD have so little contact with the realities of school life that we rarely see them from one year to the next – I think it's about 18 months since we last had a glimpse of one, and that was in an episode so silly that it could have been a scene from *Red Dwarf* or *The Goons* or the revival of *Sex in the City*.



Central Australia

But one result of the bureaucrats' need to be busy is that the people out there doing the work – I mean, the real work, as in teaching children and teenagers, taking care of them, liaising with their families, and managing everything from lost sun hats to problems arising from mental illness, from explaining the role of prepositions in prose and poetry to developing computational and algorithmic thinking in students, from supporting young people who are gender transitioning to leading groups of students on adventurous trips to places like the Tiwi Islands, the Larapinta Trail, and the Womad festival in Adelaide – yeah, those people – are spending a greater proportion of their time each year on complying with the robotic and frequently inane demands of those bureaucrats, as members of the latter group try to justify their existence.

There are many examples, but here's one, taken from the Victorian Education Department website, which states that 'for local and day excursions (not including adventure activities), schools are strongly encouraged to document their risk assessment.' It is worth dwelling on the words in

brackets: **not including adventure activities**. A template is kindly provided by the Department, but as I am not employed by the Victorian Education Department, I am not able to access it. But here are a couple of real-life case studies from websites of schools and early childhood centres which I was easily able to track down on-line.



Camp at Bright

EXAMPLE 1:

Activity: walking across car park.

Hazard identified: tripping while getting on and off the bus.

Risk assessment: low

Elimination/control measures: children ask (sic) to be careful

Who: children/educators

When: all times

EXAMPLE 2:

Activity: Freshwater Life – students visit ponds and use dipping nets to catch freshwater invertebrates. They discuss adaptations, feeding relationships and water quality.

Potential risks: student falls into the pond and is at risk of drowning or hypothermia (winter months).

Level of risk: moderate

Proactive strategies to prevent/reduce: ponds are constructed in shallow water bodies with gently sloping sides. A minimum of two leaders. Adult to student ratio 1:6 for Reception-year 2; 1:10 for Years 3-7; 1:15 for Years 8-10. Model balanced netting technique before students start netting. Identify safe sampling sites around the pond edge for students in lesson introduction. Brief client staff and parents on the need to monitor students at all times. Teaching staff notify principal if ground staff need to carry out maintenance of pond edges. Reaching poles are stored at each pond.



Shelter from the rain

Procedure if incident occurs: remove student from water. Administer first aid if necessary. If resuscitation needed, have client adult ring ambulance and notify office. Arrange immediate change of clothing if necessary. If the weather is cold a warm shower might be needed. Client teacher to supervise for signs of hypothermia. Following the management of any critical incident, record incident on accident report form.

'Removing a student from the water' is probably quite a good procedure to follow should a child accidentally fall into a pond.

EXAMPLE 3:

Activity: Personal Fitness Venture (this is a high school program for students in Years 8 through 12)

Hazard identification: injury due to incorrect performance of activities

Risk controls: Students to follow the guide set by teacher-in-charge. Teacher-in-charge to check student programs to ascertain suitability. Parents to monitor students when performing activities.

Likelihood: E (there is no explanation as to what the letter E stands for)

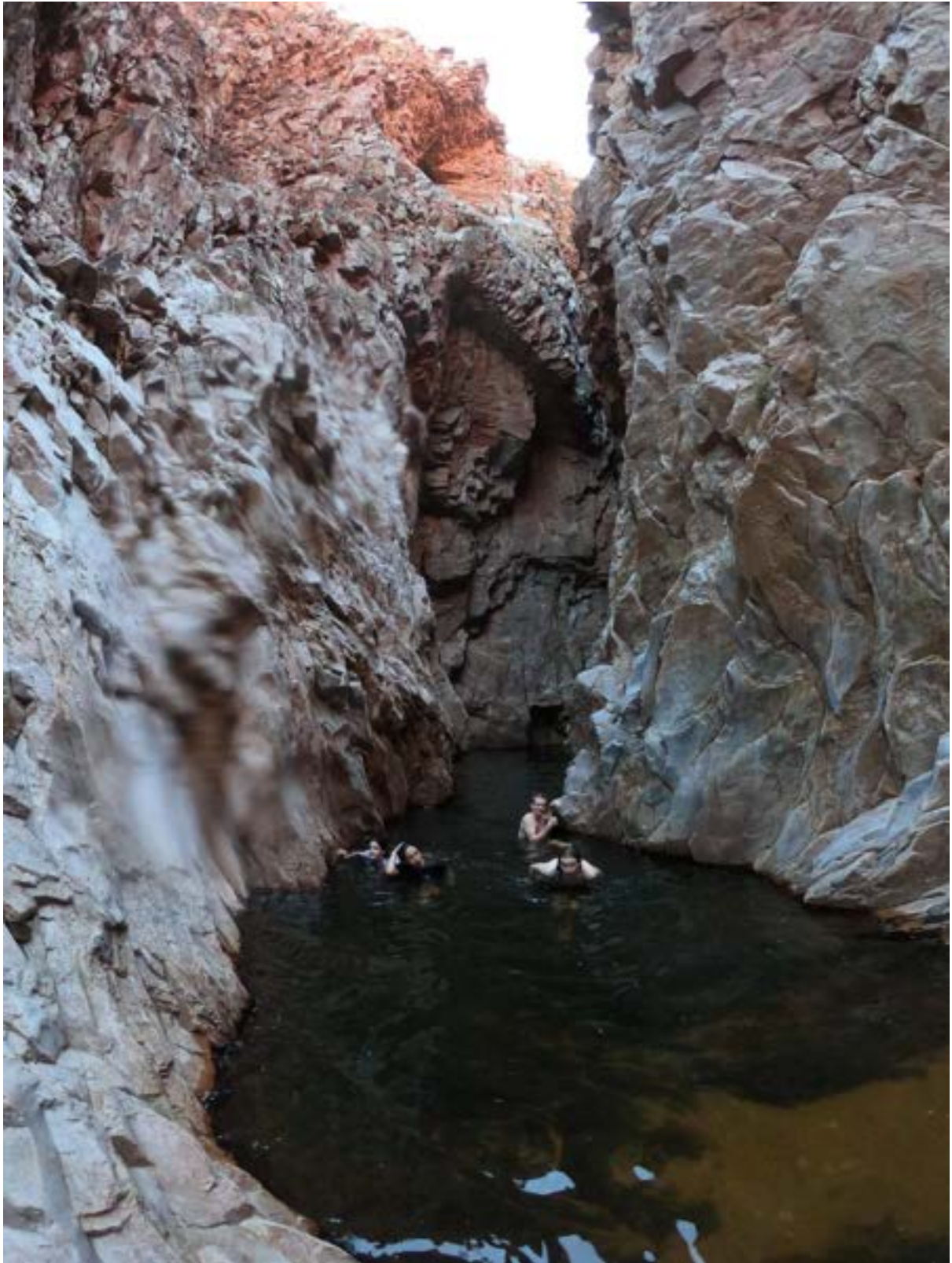
Consequence: 1/2 (again there is no explanation of what this means)

Risk Rating: Low



Basketball tournament, Year 10s in Darwin; photo by Sarah Tacconelli

It will be a terrible day for the world – the universe – when students don't correctly follow the guides set by the teachers-in-charge. Fortunately it has never happened so far.



Central Australia

For excursions which do include adventure activities, the Department goes on to say: ‘all risks need to be evaluated using the Department’s risk rating matrix. Risks rated low or medium do not necessarily require further treatments and are considered acceptable.’

In other words, teachers are expected to ponder all the potential risks, but can then ignore what may reasonably be supposed to be quite a number of them.

This kind of language is just bureaucratic gobbledygook. It emphasises the fatuous nature of so much of the work assigned to teachers in the 21st-century. It is hard to convey to members of the public just how much teacher time – and we could reasonably recognise that this time has potential value to society – is wasted with this interminable writing of meaningless documents and the filling in and filing of inane forms.

So, I will now, in my usual docile and obedient way, proceed with this meaningless annual report.

Everyone associated with the school in 2021 – that’s students, staff members, parents and sundry



Year 10s in the Tiwi Islands: photo by John Philip

other individuals – had thoughts and ideas, experienced feelings, performed actions and spoke words which could be considered worthwhile in terms of moral value or when judged by other criteria. Everyone associated with the school in 2021, including me, had moments of greed, selfishness, anger, dishonesty, laziness, cruelty, foolishness and moments of loyalty, courage, generosity, honesty, initiative, empathy, hard work and so on. Just like every member of every other community on this planet... and I’m not only talking about human beings. The other day I was reading an article in *National Geographic* magazine about treehoppers, insect so tiny that they can

hardly be seen by the human eye. The article described the behaviour of the treehopper mothers, which use fierce tactics to guard their offspring from predators: 'Springing into action, the mother confronts the invader, furiously buzzing her wings or punching with her club-shaped back legs.'

Go, you good treehopper things, go!

Anyway, moving on: because the only real function of an annual report from a school is to enhance the school's image, I will of course concentrate entirely on the wonderful, amazing and spectacular achievements. These included our Primary school students coming sixth in the primary school division of the Australian National Chess Championships, Year 12 student and archery-world-record-holder and international champion Hugo Lobb being adjudged the Macedon Ranges Youth Awards winner, money being raised for charities by primary school students running either one or two kilometres an hour (their choice) over a twelve hour period (collectively the 16 students ran 425 km and raised \$5700.44), the running of a 24-hour marathon (running one mile every hour for 24 hours) by secondary students (also as a charity fundraiser), money being raised for the care of dingoes by



the creation and sale of tie-dyed T-shirts enhanced with the image of a dingo, an extraordinary work of art which has turned a dull grey wall into a welcoming creation featuring native creatures (it is a tribute to indigenous Australians, as the title of the work, Wominjeka, indicates), a six-week trip by our Year 10 students through the Northern Territory to the Tiwi Islands, a canoe trip down the Murray River by our Year 7 students (not quite the full length of the river though!), lots of rock climbing expeditions (mainly to the Arapiles and Gariwerd), our ranking as the second-highest achieving school in regional Victoria (and in the top 30 schools in the state) for VCE results (starring a 99.05 score by Bridget Bourke, and with a median study score for the school of 34.45), the winning of the highly valued Hachette Prize for Non-Fiction by Ruby Wiggins in Year 10 for her searching essay on autism entitled Watching the Wheels Spin, Arie Sawyer's winning of the Macquarie Group Award as the outstanding piece within the highest marked VCE Studio Art pieces for 2020 (achieved by Arie as a Year 11 student), the expansion of the Alice Miller campus by the acquisition of an additional 40 acres adjoining that campus which we propose to develop as a sanctuary for native

flora and fauna, the stunning production of 'What rhymes with cars and girls', a full-length play by Aidan Fennesy (which was one of the most mesmerising and compelling plays I have ever seen), the



Cradle Mountain Tasmania; photo by Bettina Lythgoe

victory by Year 10 student Aaliyah Roadknight in the 2020 'Battle of the Bandwidth' (previously Battle of the Bands) and a scholarship to attend the FOCUS UK music conference, the winning of the Out Loud Poetry Slam competition at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne by Year 7 student Red Brazil with an extraordinary poem called The Watches' Revenge, soirées at both schools for piano and strings, guitar and drums, wind and bass, and voice, a school-organised Adventure Race for parents and students which went for a week and included trekking through snow, cycling, white water rafting and running in the mountains and valleys of north-east Victoria, visits to ex-Candlebark/Alice Miller student Max Tucker's blacksmithing forge, the making of a feature length film called Just Like George (which will premiere in 2022), a trip to Adelaide (and back!) by our Year 9s for the wonderful and thoroughly worthwhile WOMAD Festival, the winning of the Telstra ARIA Music Teacher Award by our cello teacher Zoe Barry, a visit to Candlebark by Nobel Prize winner Tim Wright, the winning of a Kwong Lee Dow Scholarship by Year 10 student Piper Carter-Williams (amongst other benefits, this gives her guaranteed entry to Melbourne University), the excavation of a massive pit to create an underground kiln for firing pottery by Candlebark primary school students who were replicating techniques used by Etruscans between 2500 and 2700 years ago, the acceptance by student Patrick Buckler into the prestigious National Gallery of Australia's Summer Arts Scholarship program, a Year 8 hike to the Bogong High Plains, a Year 11 camp at Anglesea which included surfing and community/environmental service, various other camps along the coastline of Victoria including a week spent learning to surf as well as engaging with agroforestry and lamb farming, teacher Amy Naivasha and her Sustainability students achieving an Environmental Youth

Action Scholarship under the 2021 Victorian Landcare Awards (which will enable them to create a Pollinator Patch Program to improve pollination possibilities on the school's property), the band to which one of our guitar teachers, Tom Martin, belongs receiving ARIA nominations for Best Independent Release and Best Blues and Roots Album, a four-day camp at Bright for all our primary school students...

Thus ends what is possibly the longest sentence I have ever written, although ending it with an ellipsis could mean that it has, potentially at least, infinite length.

But gee, we are good, aren't we? We must be!



In between all this other stuff – much more than I've listed in the long paragraph above – we also carried out the classroom teaching expected of schools and required by bureaucrats, and we carried it out with skill, creativity and bloody hard work, despite the depredations of coronavirus which so significantly affected the presence of students on campus and our ability to deliver lessons in the manner to which we in western countries have so long been accustomed. And hey, it's not just me saying that. Here's a comment from an unsolicited email from a parent: *Candlebark teachers are*

famous for their deep engagement with the world around them, and their sense of curiosity and adventure. You wouldn't think this would translate smoothly to online education – but it has.

Staff Departures: Candlebark

Wendy Wright has finally pulled the plug on full-time teaching and has 'retired', although I'm not sure that her definition of the word would match most people's definition! It is especially emotional for me to see Wendy departing from Candlebark, as she is the last of the teachers who were here on the day the school opened... 16 years ago. I still remember our initial interview. Wendy was the person we wanted and needed: an experienced classroom professional who also had the adventurous and creative spirit which I feel is essential for teachers. When I met her she was teaching in Thailand, after a stint in Brunei, and during her time at Candlebark she and her partner Ross took three years out to go and teach in Fiji. And that's not to mention their cycling trip through North and South America. I hope I managed to keep the tremor out of my voice as I offered her the job on the day of our first meeting, but I was excited and delighted to know that someone like Wendy would be prepared to take a risk at a school which at that stage did not even exist.

Wendy is one of those invaluable people who can successfully teach anyone, anytime, anywhere, regardless of the circumstances. To see her expertise in the classroom was endlessly refreshing. Something unique in our 16 year history happened at the final school meeting on Wednesday: when I talked about Wendy's departure, the students showed their feelings about her by responding with a spontaneous standing ovation.

Cathy Snowdon, our dearly loved Candlebark teacher of children who need a bit of extra help in subjects, also left at the end of 2021, to move with her partner to the coast, to live. I've met few teachers in my life who understand the needs of kids with learning difficulties the way Cathy does. She is hugely knowledgeable and hugely dedicated, and many students have been able to make transformative gains in their literacy and numeracy as a result of her unremitting efforts.

For 2022, Wendy Powell, who has decided to cut down to three days a week from her full-time role, so that she can have more time with her family in Melbourne, has kindly agreed to take on much of the special education portfolio from Cathy, and I know it could not be in better hands. Wendy is a teacher whose dedication and devoted care of her students is an inspiration, and she also has the necessary knowledge for helping to remedy difficulties with literacy and numeracy. So, the torch has been passed on, in the manner of the Olympic one, and we are very fortunate in that way.

Vivacious teacher Sarah Tacconelli, a.k.a. Shredder, left Candlebark at the end of 2021 to transfer to Alice Miller School. Sarah will replace Amy Naivasha at Alice Miller; Amy is expecting her first child and is taking 2022 off to fully savour the parenting experience.

Another of our adventurous teachers, Kate Tucker, will take long service leave for Terms 1 and 2 of 2022, during which she will, in her characteristic way, involve herself in many different areas of life. We wish lots of wonderful things for her, and look forward to seeing her 'back on deck' halfway through next year.

Staff Departures: Alice Miller

Daniel Park finished up with us as our Biology and Maths teacher, having accepted a position at Ballarat and Clarendon College in a similar role, starting in 2022. He has been a terrific contributor in the classroom and outside the classroom – Ballarat and Clarendon is lucky to have him! He is one of those committed teachers who has never stopped researching, learning, and seeking new ways to



Candlebark students mapping one of their trips

improve his practice. Daniel has also sought to involve his students in as many real-world learning opportunities as possible and has taken his students to countless university seminars in the field of biology, restored the school dams to improve biodiversity, and worked with the local council on habitat surveys undertaken on our bush campus.

Alice Miller Office Manager Penny Gronset also left at the end of 2021. Penny has been with Alice since a few months into our first year in 2016. Her impact on the school's culture and organisation has been immense. She has generally been the first person everybody encounters when arriving at

Alice Miller. Her warmth, compassion, adaptability and sense of humour are legendary. We wish her and all other departing staff the very best for their future journeys.



Abi Lee

Here endeth – apart from the statistics which follow, and which are compulsory for us to include – this document, which no doubt will live on in the annals of education for many centuries hence. I remember as a child being startled to find that valueless and invaluable had opposite meanings. If something is inert, it is not ert, surely? If a problem is insoluble, it has no solution. If a person is inept, they are not ept. Therefore ‘invaluable’ should mean ‘having no value’. I’ll leave it to you, dear readers, to decide whether this annual report is valueless or invaluable or something else...

John Marsden

May, 2022



Bogong High Plains; photo by Amy Naivasha

Official Stuff



YEAR 9 NAPLAN RESULTS		Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
2021	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard (Alice Miller)	96%	75%	83%	100%	100%
2020	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard (Alice Miller)	NAPLAN DID NOT PROCEED IN 2020 DUE TO COVID-19				
2019	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard (Alice Miller)	82%	58%	63%	74%	75%
YEAR 7 NAPLAN RESULTS		Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
2021	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard (Candlebark)	100%	92%	100%	92%	100%
	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard (Alice Miller)	90%	82%	91%	91%	90%
2020	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard (Candlebark)	NAPLAN DID NOT PROCEED IN 2020 DUE TO COVID-19				
	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard (Alice Miller)					
2019	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard (Candlebark)	100%	67%	67%	89%	80%
	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard (Alice Miller)	92%	58%	75%	92%	100%
YEAR 5 NAPLAN RESULTS		Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
2021	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	90%	80%	100%	100%
2020	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	NAPLAN DID NOT PROCEED IN 2020 DUE TO COVID-19				
2019	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	93%	100%	93%	93%
YEAR 3 NAPLAN RESULTS		Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
2021	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	88%	100%	75%	100%	100%
2020	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	NAPLAN DID NOT PROCEED IN 2020 DUE TO COVID-19				
2019	% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%