

**CANDLEBARK**



ALICE MILLER

2024  
ANNUAL  
REPORT

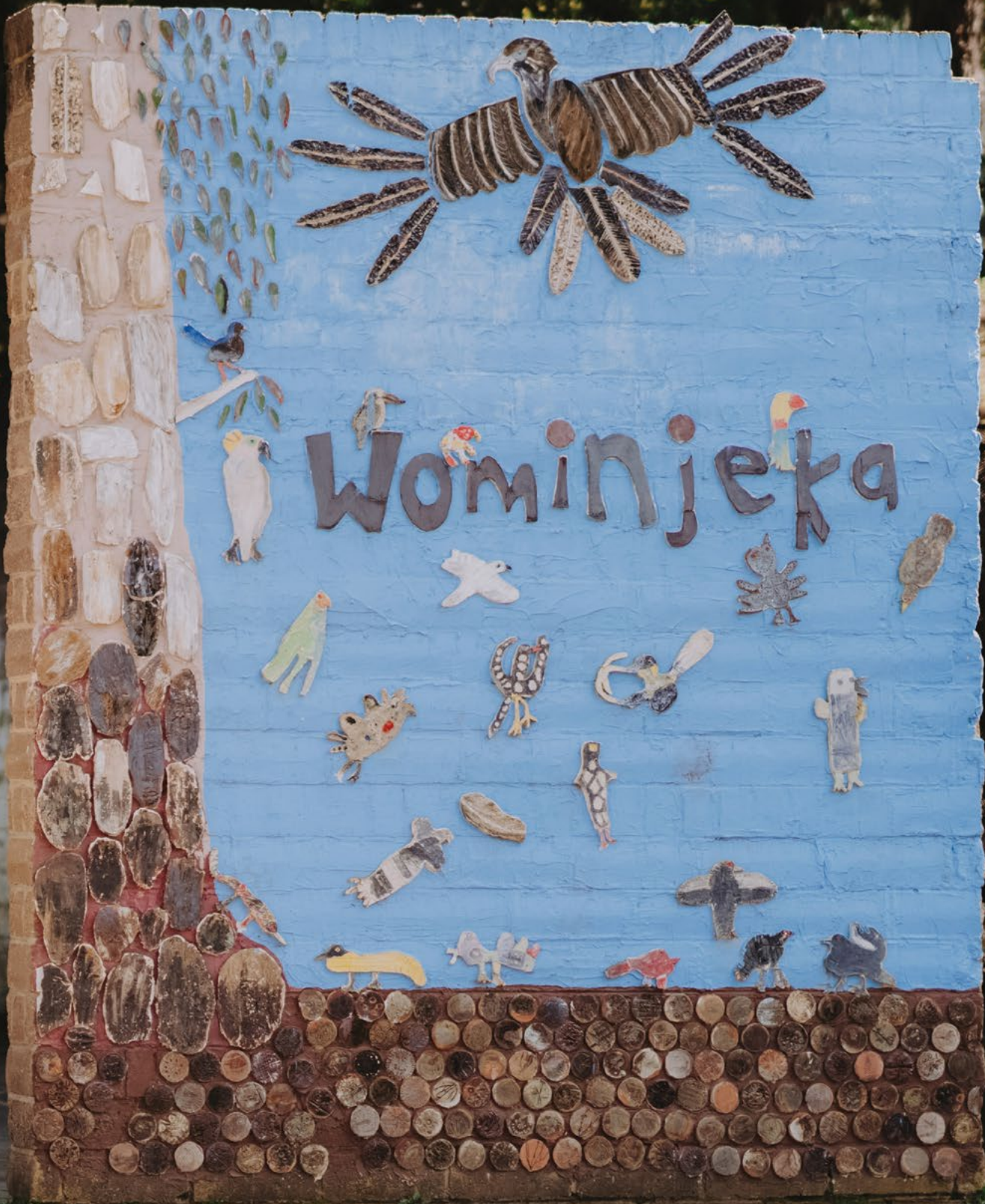


**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY**

Alice Miller School and Candlebark are situated on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people. We are mindful of the great privilege it is to learn and play on this beautiful country and recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

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## PRINCIPAL'S REPORT



“Society is indeed a contract...  
not just between those who are living,  
but between those who are living,  
those who are dead,  
and those who are to be born.”

– Edmund Burke

Candlebark was founded in 2006 by the late, much-loved writer and educator, John Marsden. Alice Miller School, our senior campus, was established ten years later in 2016. Over these twenty years, John begrudgingly completed annual reports as part of VRQA compliance. These reports, adroit, dry and subversively entertaining, became lengthy provocations against one of John's most long-standing bugbears: bureaucrats.

John's 2022 Annual Report opened with the observation, “For various reasons I have read quite a number of other schools' annual reports this year. It's an experience which has induced mild hysteria (of the laughing variety) in me, as the more of them I read the more obvious it is that the concept of schools compulsorily filing annual reports is indeed farcical – but just one of the many farcical practices with which it is compulsory for schools to engage.”

The year prior, he wrote, “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.”

John's 2023 annual report ended with: “So, dear bureaucrats, I present you with the 2023 annual report. You can either take it or leave it... I couldn't care less.”

And, just like that, John Marsden signed off. We had already agreed that it would be John's last annual report; at the end of 2023, he stepped down as principal and handed the school's operation to me, supported expertly by campus leaders Sam Thorpe (Candlebark) and Mark Johnstone (Alice Miller). John returned to his great love of teaching, taking the Candlebark Year 7 class for English, whom he described as one of two standout classes he'd ever taught in their wit, curiosity, and intelligence. He lived on the Candlebark campus and shared lunch with the students and teachers most days.

After working tirelessly for twenty years and having spent many decades prior contemplating the perfect school, we were relieved that John was finally able to relax and revel in what he'd created. John spent much of 2024 in deep conversation with students and staff, his face lighting up when a young student showed him their work or an interesting bug they had found.



Our schools are more than institutions, which is why annual reports are such an awkward expression for us.

We are a close community, with staff and families attracted to the schools as a greater possibility of what education can be. The school is a sanctuary for many. John was more a philosophical guide, or a community grandfather, than a school principal.

John's passing on the last school day of 2024, the 18th of December, feels impossible to capture in a document like this. More than anything, it felt violently too soon. John was 74; not a young age historically, perhaps, but young in a wealthy country like Australia, where we have become accustomed to being with our elders for longer. It is perhaps naive for any of us to think that we always have more time. John is deeply missed, and there will likely never be a person or educator like him.

In this new phase of the school's life, I acknowledge the contract that exists, in Burke's description, between all of us as living members of a deeply special community. This contract is also with John, who dreamed of a new kind of school and brought it to life, and with the Candlebark and Alice Miller students still to come, including those yet to be born. May it continue long into the future.

Rest peacefully, John, and thank you.

**Sarita Ryan**  
Principal



## WHO WE ARE

Candlebark is a Prep to Year 7 school in Romsey, Victoria, situated on 1,100 acres of mostly virgin bush. Alice Miller School, our senior campus, accommodates students in Years 7 through to Year 12, close by in another bush setting in Macedon, Victoria. In 2024, the school enrolled 388 students across the two campuses. We teach the standard Victorian curriculum, leading, potentially, to the award of VCE at the end of Year 12.

## This is what we're about.

Candlebark and Alice Miller School place a high premium on first-hand experiences.

We believe a school should be open to the world, with daily traffic between the two. A school should seek to enrich the world, and to be enriched by it. To this end, we have more camps, excursions, sleepovers and international trips than any other school we're aware of. We also believe in getting our hands dirty, both literally and metaphorically. We explore the bush, get muddy, feed the farm animals, and build things. At the end of the school day, teachers and students work together to clean the school. We don't believe in hiring adults to clean up after children and, instead, prefer young people to one day join the adult world with these skills acquired.

We honour learning. We promote rigour in the classroom, high levels of academic achievement and intellectual work and discussion, and the development of self-disciplined study. At the same time, we recognise that everyone has different abilities and that nothing is more degrading to the human spirit than constant failure. We have a broad definition of success and are committed to ensuring that our students experience it.

We recognise that relationships are at the heart of meaningful learning. Students learn more when they feel understood and appreciated by the adults in their lives. At the same time, the dominant school culture should not be one where inexperienced young people determine its values, but one in which mature, thoughtful and creative adults set high standards and model appropriate behaviour.



We treat the concept of 'the whole child' very seriously. Our job is to nurture the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical health of our students.

Students should feel safe in school, but at the same time, we believe school can and should be adventurous. "Take care, take risks" expresses the idea of adventure without recklessness, looking after oneself and others without timidity.

## 2024 ADVENTURES

2024 was a characteristic year of adventure at Candlebark and Alice Miller School. Here are some of the highlights.





2024 ADVENTURES

At the start of Term 1, our Year 8s hiked the Alpine National Park, not far from the Candlebark Year 7s hiking Mount Feathertop. Our Grade 2s attended the Titanic exhibition, and our Candlebark Year 7s also went on camp to Melbourne for 'city camp'.

Student bands from both campuses, along with the Candlebark Choir, performed against a backdrop of rolling hills, giant sculptures and the setting sun for what is becoming an annual school tradition of live music at local winery Mount Monument.



VCE student Lucas Taylor had two pieces selected for the prestigious *Top Designs* and *Top Screen* awards. In illustrious company with the highest-ranked students of VCE Media and Art in 2023, Lucas's works were exhibited at ACMI and the Melbourne Museum. Only 14 VCE Media films were selected for the Top Screen program from over 350 applications.



We took half of Candlebark at a time to Marysville for a campout in tents. During one of these camps, the rest of the campus spent the week immersed in the study of world religions.

Our Year 9s went to the WOMAD Festival in Adelaide. Our Grade 3/4s hiked the boundary of Candlebark over 24 hours, which included them running in places to meet the deadline of the afternoon buses. The Unit 3/4 Outdoor and Environmental Studies class rock climbed and camped at the Gariwerd National Park.

There were chess and sports tournaments and numerous sleepovers, including for students to attend the Ocean Film Festival, play Dungeons and Dragons, and mend clothes to give them a new lease of life (as part of a Humanities unit on Fast Fashion).

In sporting news, Alice Miller Year 8 student Claire Melville won the Victorian Cross Country Mountain Bike Championships, becoming State Champion in the under-fifteen-year-old division. Claire later finished seventh in the nationals. Year 9 student, Poppy Taylor, finished eighth in the nationals for bouldering, having taken home a silver in the state championships. Of their own volition, Year 10 students Sasha Kennedy, Eva Hurst and Essie Faust raised \$2,000 for youth mental health in Australia by running nineteen kilometres around MacKenzie Falls in Gariwerd National Park.



Our community came together over a number of weekends for tree planting days at Nulla Vale and Alice Miller, which also involved tackling pernicious pines and gorse bushes.

We closed Term 1 with our Year 7s (both campuses) paddling down a section of the Murray River over five days.



# 2024 ADVENTURES

At the start of Term 2, the Year 7/8 Outdoor and Environmental Studies elective explored Port Philip Bay over three days by bike, tram, and foot. At Candlebark, there were visits to a cemetery to inspire writing projects, the Paris exhibition at the Bendigo Art Gallery, a camp out on the school property, and a collaborative camp and workshop with the Music students of Preshil.

The Year 9s split off into three week-long camps: climbing, hiking, and paddling. Grades 3 to 6 engaged in a planting blitz at Nulla Vale, planting between 600 and 700 native saplings. Combined with the earlier planting sessions, it's estimated that the school community



planted 2,500 young trees in 2024. The Unit 3 Drama students devised a full-length absurdist and physical theatre piece based on the imagined disappearance of the ultimate 'whodunit' author, Agatha Christie.



Midway through Term 2, the Year 8s explored Hobart and the MONA Gallery for a week-long camp, the Year 9/10 Outdoor and Environmental Science elective paddled down the Murray, and our Preps went to camp in Healesville. The Grade 3/4s went on a Storm Boy-inspired adventure to the Coorong. Students from various year levels at Alice Miller attended our annual 'Tractor camp', which involved working with a local community group to restore an old Ferguson tractor for charity.



There were sleepovers for 'Cyberpunk' roleplay games, astronomy, music recording, and Big Trip preparation, to name a few.

We celebrated the humble talent of Year 11 student Angus O'Farrell, who was awarded 11th in the world in Irish Dancing. We also took home several gongs in the Divisional Round of Interschool Cross Country, with three firsts, three seconds, and every other Alice Miller student coming in the first ten or eleven.

The Grade 6s went interstate and spent a full seven days in Sydney, camping on Cockatoo Island, seeing the big lights of VIVID Festival, and hiking the harbour.

Candlebark's Year 7s were fortunate enough to spend two full weeks in the Northern Territory. The 7s attended the Barunga Festival, an indigenous arts and sports festival, and spent three days in cultural immersion on the Tiwi Islands. This trip is the culmination of the ambitious adventure program that commences in Prep at Candlebark. As always, we're very grateful to the communities (including, this year, the Portaminni family on the Tiwi Islands) that host our school in the Top End. It's a privilege to spend time in that part of the world.

Closer to home, the Grade 3/4s hiked the You Yangs Regional Park. The entire Alice Miller School – apart from the Year 12s and the Year 11s sitting the GAT – all headed off on various excursions around the state, all on the same day. These included IMAX, Lume, the NGV, and the Melbourne Museum. As winter set in and the term drew to a close, both campuses kept our hearts singing by hosting Winter Soirees.





## 2024 ADVENTURES

**Returning in Term 3**, the Grade 5s took off to Canberra for a week of Capitol fun. The Year 10s completed their work experience, while various Alice Miller electives headed off on excursions to the Magistrate's Court, the NGV, and the Arts Centre.

We experienced great success in interschool Mountain Bike Orienteering, with Seb winning the Year 5 competition, Rainer and Finn placing first and second, respectively, in the Year 6 division, Jethro coming second amongst Year 7 boys, Banjo and Louis tying for gold in their event,



Djed winning her race, Charles taking home the silver, and Jonty putting on a masterclass for a commanding victory against some fierce contemporaries. Overall, we finished second amongst all schools.



A record number of Candlebark students also participated in chess (roughly half the school), with Hudson, Mars, Ishaan, Matilda and Marley making the state finals.



Students ran a Mile An Hour at the Alice Miller campus, completing an entire marathon over the course of 24 hours. They also completed homework and other projects during this time, making it likely the most productive 24 hours they'd ever experienced. As part of Adelaide's Illuminate Festival, Donna Prince of Alice Miller took a group of students to help make and operate large-scale puppets at the Adelaide Zoo. The Unit 3/4 Outdoor and Environmental Studies class spent a week skiing Mount Stirling.

If that wasn't enough, with August came our Month of Micro-Adventures, with students from both campuses undertaking adventures contained within 24 hours or sometimes just overnight, returning to school for normal classes the following day. The adventures included: the 'War of the Buttons' (involving a nighttime treasure hunt for buttons across the Macedon Ranges), 'The Big Draw' (a large-scale art project on the Candlebark basketball court), two cold water swims (in the Nulla Vale dam and Port Philip Bay), 'Alone' at Candlebark, surfing, 'Band in a Bubble' (recording an EP over 24 hours), and running 'Every Single Street' of Macedon.

The Candlebark Year 7s had a sleepover to fire their clay pots in a large fire pit.

Three Candlebark teams competed in the Tournament of Minds, with one group coming first in the regional heats.



We visited the Bendigo Writers' Festival, rode bikes to Ballarat and back, watched Bangarra Dance Company, and held a fine dining feast prepared by Year 7s and 8s from both campuses. The Alice 7s also made the trip up to Canberra.

We closed the term with the Alice Miller production *Rhythm of Life*, a theatrical triumph directed by Anne Browning, with musical direction by Taran Carter, and choreography by Claire Byrne.

During the Term 3 holidays, our three Year 10 Big Trip groups headed off for their six-week adventure to Japan. Over this time, they hiked Mount Tokachidake, rafted the Si Sorapuchi River, luxuriated in onsens, watched stadium basketball in Kyoto, and experienced true hospitality when hosted by Japanese families in Matsumoto, to name just a few experiences. In a time of limited 'rites of passage' available to young people,

the Big Trip gives Alice Miller students a chance to travel and grow together that is real and serious. The trip is about increasing independence and maturity and serves as a marker between students' schooling up to that point and the beginning of their final challenge, the VCE. We are enormously grateful to our Japanese hosts, particularly the families who accommodated our young people in Matsumoto.



# 2024 ADVENTURES

Back at school in Term 4, the Grade 3s spent a week camping at Gariwerd, with 1/2P travelling to Mount Alexander and Oak Forest. The 3/4s went on a ‘Colonisation of Australia’ city tour of Melbourne, with the Grade 4s later riding the Southern Bike Trail.

The Grade 6s and the Year 7s from both campuses went on an epic week-long bike camp in the Macedon Ranges.

Over at Candlebark, the Grade 5s went on a week-long camp to Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary, the Preps hiked the school boundaries, we held graduation ceremonies for the Grade 6s, and ended the year with an open air production of *James and the Giant Peach*, directed with spark and heart by Donna Prince.



In November, the Grade 1/2s camped at Angelsea, with the Grade 6s going on boys and girls hikes (to Cape Paterson and Wilson’s Prom respectively). 1/2P developed a production of Robin Hood that went ‘on tour’ to Alice Miller. The Preps had their very own Bike Week. We also held the Candlebark fete, an entirely student-run initiative that raises money for a charity of the students’ choice.

Following their exams, the Year 12s went on one final paddle down the Murray River. Three Alice Miller bands, plus one Candlebark band, went on a statewide band tour named Tram Tracks after the Alice Miller tram recording studio. The tour culminated in a homecoming show at the Toff in Town in Melbourne. Alice Miller finished the term with the Alice Fete and Alicepalooza, our very own music festival at this highly musical school.



Throughout the year, there were countless excursions and sleepovers: the Melbourne courts, to pottery workshops, to Scienceworks, to the Gutsy Girls Film Festival, to the NGV’s Pharaoh exhibition, and back at school to help students better connect and study.

In 2024, as in every year, we sought to both enrich the world and be enriched by it. This is all made possible by the creative, adventurous, and skilled staff, the good-natured students (who, by and large, are a pleasure to travel with), and the various people and organisations who host us. Thank you to all.



ACADEMIC RESULTS

VCE

VCE, for students who choose to complete it, should ultimately be a program of focused and rewarding study. It is one of the closest expressions of a ‘rite of passage’ available to young people in our society.

Despite our small size, Alice Miller School has always sought to offer a wide range of VCE subjects and exceptional tuition. We encourage students to select their VCE subjects based on interest and ambition, rather than rankings that might inform an ATAR. Alice Miller’s VCE is available to every student who wishes to undertake this course and is academically non-selective.

Fundamentally, all students who graduate from Alice Miller should have their desired careers in reach, whether this is to be a pastry chef, a lawyer, an engineer, or a professional artist. We tailor our academic program to help students identify their pathways and passions, and then support them to excel in their chosen fields.

Alice Miller’s 2024 VCE results demonstrated, once again, that a warm, exhilarating, and creative schooling environment can also deliver a top-notch academic education. In 2024, Alice Miller School was the highest performing VCE school in the Macedon Ranges and amongst the top regional schools in Victoria.

**Dux – Aidan Ford with 99.05**  
**Dux Proximus – Mia Klein with 98.75**  
**ATARs over 90 – 26%**  
**ATARs over 80 – 45%**  
**Percentage of study scores over 40 – 12.5%**  
**Median study score – 33**

The class of 2024 modelled wonderful leadership within our school. In their playfulness, kindness, and maturity, they showed our younger students how to manage the demands of VCE while relishing the experience. They made the most of all that our school has to offer while giving back generously. The 12s sought out wise mentors within the school community and, in turn, mentored those in younger years. They deserve their outstanding results and all that is to come.

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12.5%

Median study score

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ACADEMIC RESULTS

NAPLAN

Candlebark and Alice Miller do not place significant emphasis on NAPLAN.

The results arrive too late in the year to meaningfully provide diagnostic information and inform academic adjustments. The tests are also a limited representation of the range of learning that students should be acquiring in school. We've long resisted the increasing weight assigned to NAPLAN as a measure of a 'good school'.

Apart from familiarising our students with the test format, we don't spend much time on preparation and certainly don't gear our teaching towards NAPLAN outcomes.

Nevertheless, our students tend to perform extremely well.

Results for the years 2024 and 2023 are as follows. Note that pre-2023 data is no longer comparable to the updated NAPLAN test and is not included in this graph.

The overall findings are:

- In 2024, the majority of students in all year levels across Candlebark and Alice Miller School were in the Strong or Exceeding category for every test.
- Numeracy continues to be an area of strength within the school's academic program. In almost every class, 100% of the students were at the Strong or Exceeding band for Numeracy. Alice Miller Year 7 was the only class that didn't achieve this result; however, 94.5% of students achieved this high standard.
- Grade 3, 5 and Alice Miller Year 7 results improved significantly across all tests in 2024 compared with 2023.
- Candlebark has been focusing on improving Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation standards with the introduction of Sound Waves for Grade Prep to 6. Grades 3 and 5 showed a significant improvement in these areas in 2024.
- In six out of 25 tests, 100% of the students were in the Strong or Exceeding category. 20 out of 25 tests demonstrated that 80% of students were in the Strong or Exceeding Category.

Statistics

Percentage of students in the Strong or Exceeding proficiency levels in NAPLAN

Grade 3 Results



Grade 5 Results



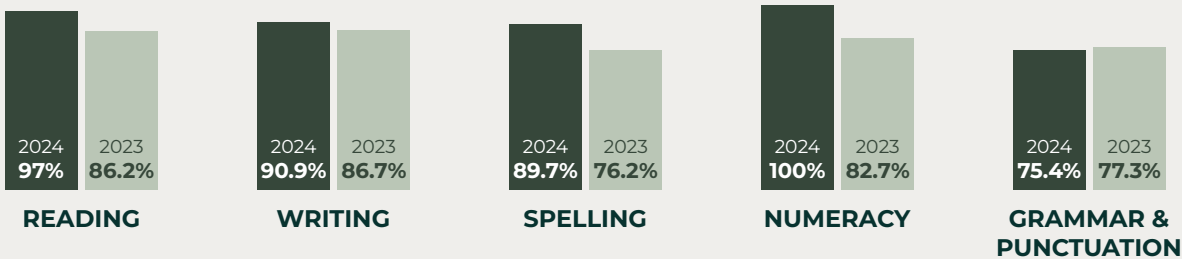
Year 7 Results – Candlebark



Year 7 Results – Alice Miller



Year 9 Results



Note: The NAPLAN test was revised in 2023 and results no longer comparable to previous years. Hence, the 3 year average has been removed until 3 years of data is available.





ATTENDANCE

We promote strong attendance, particularly in light of the school’s busy camp, sleepover, and excursion program.

We discourage students from having ‘rest days’ from school and support them to build resilience on days of tiredness. Our attendance motto, if we can be said to have one, is “The future belongs to those who turn up!”

School policies are in place to ensure that student attendance is monitored and that any attendance issues are managed. Alice Miller School and Candlebark use Compass to track student attendance and to allow parents to communicate attendance matters to the school. Attendance

matters are followed up, at first instance, by the Business Manager (Candlebark) and Administrator (Alice Miller), with ongoing attendance issues dealt with by the pastoral care teachers (Candlebark) and year level coordinators (Alice Miller), supported by the relevant Head of Campus.

The school’s average attendance rate for 2024 was 88.6%. This includes absences for illness, family holidays, and parent choice.

Candlebark attendance rate by year level (2024)

Prep	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7
93%	90%	88%	90%	89%	91%	88%	88%

Alice Miller attendance rate by year level (2024)

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12
87%	87%	86%	87%	88%	no data



## STAFF

# In 2024, Candlebark and Alice Miller School employed 76 staff

In 2024, Candlebark and Alice Miller School employed 76 staff, comprised of 49 classroom teachers (including the Principal and the two Heads of Campus), 18 general staff, and nine instrumental music teachers.

In 2024, we welcomed the following teaching staff to the Alice Miller campus: Michelle Ainley (English), Taran Carter (who took on a cross campus Music Coordinator position), John Collins (Humanities), Danny Dakak (Mathematics), Conor Dimasi (Physical Education Coordination), Dr. Will Mulvaney (Science), Meredith Penman (English), and Dr. Matt Troutman (Science and Year 11 Coordination).

Candlebark welcomed Jules Meltzer to the teaching staff and Doug White to a cross-campus Transport Coordination role.

In the same year, the Alice Miller campus said farewell to Andrew Blizzard (Learning Support), Danny Dakak (Mathematics), Liam Tran (Humanities and English), and Rob McCarthy (Mathematics).

In 2024, Candlebark farewellled Geri Coughlin (Library), Kate Campbell (Humanities and Learning Support), and Jenni Cooper (Bus Driving). As described earlier in this report, John Marsden, who taught Year 7 English at Candlebark in 2024, sadly passed away.



## FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES

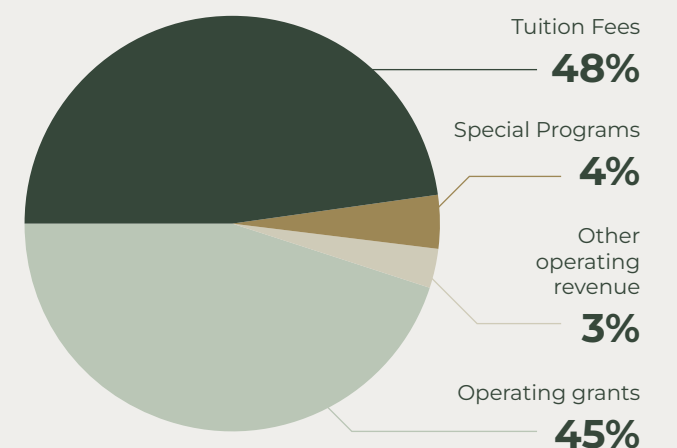
Candlebark and Alice Miller School trade under the entity Blyton Pty Ltd, a not-for-profit entity established for educational purposes.

Any surplus that may be generated is reinvested into the school in the form of capital expenses and operational costs.

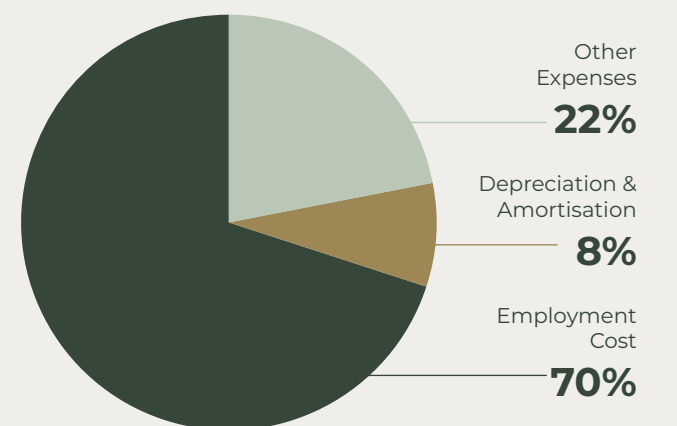
Our revenue comes from a combination of tuition fees and state and federal operating grants. The majority of the school's operational expenses are costs relating to employment. In 2024, Blyton remained debt-free.

The Alice Miller campus has not invested significantly in capital improvements despite a rapidly growing student population between 2016 and 2019. As the school has achieved stable enrolments since this time, we are now considering the future building needs of the campus. In 2024, we began working with Law Architects on a Master Plan to identify the capital improvement needs for the Alice Miller campus. We also opened a tender for a solar project to augment the campus's power supply, which operates on two-phase and is inadequate for the school's capacity and needs. Following the tender process, the school chose to work with Central Spark, a solar energy company based in Castlemaine, for the rollout of the solar project in 2025.

### 2024 REVENUE



### 2024 EXPENSES





**TAKE CARE, TAKE RISKS**

[candlebark.vic.edu.au](http://candlebark.vic.edu.au)  
[alicemiller.vic.edu.au](mailto:alicemiller.vic.edu.au)