



Figure 1: Year 9 hike with horses; photo: Sam Ford

One day I blinked and the next thing I knew, Candlebark was ten years old. How did that happen?

Yes, 2015 was our tenth anniversary and as usual the year had ups and downs, successes and failures, good times and bad times. Overall though I'm proud to have started an alternative school that has lasted ten years, given that the average life of alternative schools is about three-and-a-half days. Parent-run schools, anyway. They nearly all implode over critical issues such as whether to use organic flour in the cooking class, whether the children should wear aprons in the cooking class, whether they should have a cooking class at all.

About once a week during our ten years I've checked in with myself and asked the critical question: 'Have we kept to the path?' (which in our case, paradoxically, probably means 'Have we strayed off the path?' :))

But you know what I mean. Have we stayed true to the original concept? Is Candlebark still the kind of school it aspired to be at the start of 2006? (I refer you to the bicycle parable I wrote about in last year's annual report.) Are we still adventurous, creative, maintaining good values? Have we become stale, complacent, sedentary?

Although it would be the height of complacency to say that we have not become complacent, there is plenty of evidence that we continue to go in the right direction. I'll be citing that evidence in this report! I will of course ignore any



Figure 2: Una Mitchell; Photo: Chris Le Messurier

evidence to the contrary, as this report is prepared for public consumption, and I'm not completely indifferent to the way we are regarded by the world (fairly indifferent, but not completely).

2015 was a troubling year for the world, with environmental damage continuing to have an irreversible impact, and apparent surges in terrorism, fundamentalism, racism and prejudice. We talked a lot at staff meetings about encouraging students to feel that they can achieve change. There seems to be an increase in anxiety among young people in recent years, which is understandable, but it's important for them and for the planet that they not feel overwhelmed, helpless and defeated. I finished 2015 with a speech to the students, reminding them that no problem in the world is "somebody else's problem"; we all share responsibility for all problems.

When I was a kid I read a "quotable quote" in, of all places, Readers' Digest, which has always stayed with me. It was "Loving the world is easy; it's loving the guy next door that's difficult."

We can all talk sentimentally about the need for world peace and understanding, for universal love and brotherhood/sisterhood, we can all gaze adoringly at images of Nelson Mandela and Gandhi and the Dalai Lama, but how do we treat the annoying kid who wants to join our game even though he's not really up to our skill level? How do we treat the kid who, as a consequence of his poor social skills, has no friends? How good-natured are we in victory, and how empathetic are we with the person or team we have defeated and perhaps left wounded and hurting?

Equally, we can all talk beautifully about the need to reduce pollution and reverse climate change and take care of the planet, but during clean-up do we pick up the little bits of plastic and metal and glass that, left on the ground, may one day wash down to the creek and perhaps eventually travel all the way to the ocean? Do we make an effort to recycle paper, bottles, cans?

Everything starts at the micro level. It's fine to dream about being the saviour of the world, but it's also important to pick up the rubbish in your street. It's great to dream about inspiring humanity, but remember to ask the lonely kid in your class if he wants to come and play basketball. If everyone in the world looks after 10 square metres of the Earth's surface; if everyone in the world helps half a dozen struggling people every week, we needn't be too worried about the future of the planet.

These questions are as important for teachers as they are for students. The most powerful ingredient in Candlebark's success has been the choice of staff who treat everybody well – not just their students (that's the easiest thing in teaching), but their colleagues, and the vital backroom people who maintain the school's fabric and food and finances, and the parents, the ex-students, the backpackers from all over the world who work at the property, ... even the Principal.



Figure 3: Teacher Donna Prince and her daughter Erica. Erica came to school with Donna every day this year, and was delighted to make the acquaintance of 170 eager babysitters. Erica's presence showed how much a baby can enrich the life of a school. In hindsight I can only apologise that we didn't pay her a salary. Photo: Chris Le Messurier

These are people who behave ethically, whose lives are built on strong foundations, who talk about interesting stuff and who have a sense of humour.

It's a bummer when any of them leave, but that's the price you pay for hiring interesting, adventurous people. Someone said to me in late 2015 that no teacher has ever left Candlebark to go work in another school, which is almost true. It's a good comment on the job satisfaction people seem to get from working in an environment where contact with students is maximised and contact with bureaucracy minimised, even if it does make teachers reluctant to go on to more orthodox schools.

At the end of 2015 we did once again say goodbye to several staff. Chris Le Messurier decided to go to Montenegro to form a partnership with three friends and buy a dilapidated olive mill that they plan to restore as an accommodation venue and a cultural centre. Chris was wildly popular with kids at Candlebark (and with staff), and for all the right reasons. He was funny, thoughtful, ethical, and wise in his counselling of young people. I shouldn't say 'was' because I'm sure he'll go on being all of these things – just someplace else.

Chris was/is also a brilliant photographer and you'll see from the credits that the photos in this report are mostly his... as they were in last year's report. I'm afraid there's a real risk that the 2016 report could be quite lacklustre.



Figure 4: Grade 4 and 5 boys; photo: Chris Le Messurier

Tracy Ryan, one of our learning support staff, left to go to Swan Hill, where she and her husband are starting a business. Tracy took on some huge challenges

during her time at Candlebark and was stunningly successful. She has particular expertise with ASD and we as a staff frequently asked her for advice and information. Good-humoured, cheerful, patient and skilled, Tracy has been a great contributor to our school.

When Macedon Grammar School closed suddenly at the end of 2014 we were able to purchase it, and it will open in February 2016 as a secondary school. This meant the transfer of two staff members from Candlebark to this new campus, which has been named Alice Miller School. The first of these two is Bettina Lythgoe, who brought dedication, clear exposition and incredible patience to the teaching of secondary Maths at Candlebark.

The second is Basil Eliades, and this seems like the right time to record officially his contribution to Candlebark since the school's establishment. Basil and Wendy Wright and I are the only teachers left from that sweet opening day. For ten years, Basil's inspirational teaching of art, his mentorship of past and present students, his extraordinary range of skills and interests, and his colourful unabashed approach to life have changed the lives of many, and left none unaffected.

At staff meetings his comments are always among the most wise and perceptive.

Around eight years ago Basil approached me to say that he felt we were not teaching chess with enough purpose or zeal. He offered to take it on. Needless to say I was only too happy to say yes. The result of that conversation has been spectacular. Basil's mission to give impetus to chess reached its apogee at the end of 2015, when all our representative chess teams made it to the national championships, held over two days at the University of Melbourne. This achievement, astonishing in itself for a bush school of 170 kids, was then further capped when the intermediate girls were crowned Australian champions, whilst the intermediate boys finished 6th in Australia, and the junior boys 11th.

Meeting some of Australia's top schools, including selective high schools and famous private schools, over a chessboard and defeating their best players is not something that can happen overnight. It needs the establishment of a culture, the steady development of kids' skills, and a whole-hearted commitment by the staff. The accomplishment of all this is one of Basil's many contributions to Candlebark.

The good news is that he has handed the chess crown on to Andy Moffatt and Cam Kerr... and it could not be in better hands... or perhaps I should pay more attention to my metaphors and say "on better heads".

The saddest event of 2015 us for was undoubtedly the sudden death of Candlebark parent Hanh Tran. Among many other fascinating exploits in his life Hanh had been Head of Radio Australia. At a loose end in his retirement he applied, somewhat ironically, for a Candlebark bus-driving job, and I was delighted when he did. He looked after the kids on his bus with the same fidelity and conscientiousness that he brought to every task, but as well he helped us

with kitchen garden, chess, and of course by taking his wonderful photographs. He was a photographer of incomparable skill.

We were devastated for Hanh's beautiful children, of whom he was so proud: ex-Candlebark students Liam and James, and 2015 year nine student Maya.



Figure 5: Brigitte Astuto; one of the last photos taken by Hanh Tran



Figure 6: Hanh Tran, second from left.

Another sad occasion during the year was the death of Maestro Joseph D'Onofrio,

our first fencing teacher. Maestro had fenced for more than 65 years, and retired unwillingly when motor neurone disease slowly took its remorseless grip on him. Having nursed his wife through this terminal illness, he knew what was in store, but faced his plight with typical courage and spirit.

I can't remember how Maestro and Candlebark came together. I just remember him appearing in my office one day and telling me that Candlebark needed fencing. It was impossible to resist his lively eyes, his good humour, his heavily accented English, and his utter dedication to the sport. The magnificent moustache was probably a factor too.

Joseph really loved Candlebark, and the love was returned by the many students he introduced to fencing.

The last great favour he did us was to find us his replacement: Aleksey Danilov, who has continued the fine standards established by Maestro D'Onofrio. Fencing is a very popular sport at Candlebark, and in 2015 our students started to compete regularly in tournaments in Melbourne.

To go through 2015 in a little more detail: we began with five new staff, Andy Moffatt, Cameron Kerr, Tanya Rappatoni, Sam Thorpe and the aforementioned Dr Bettina Lythgoe. Tanya was appointed to replace teachers who were queuing up for sabbatical leave after seven years' service, but the delightful news of her pregnancy interrupted her tenure fairly quickly. She was replaced in second term by the sparky Kelly Dunne, and thereafter by Andrew Blizzard, who has now been appointed to the permanent staff for 2016.

We had around 170 students this year, which was a new record for us; not that it's a record we're interested in breaking, as we remain strongly committed to being a small school. I mentioned Macedon Grammar before, about to become Alice Miller School. Macedon Grammar had been operating for 36 years, but had its registration cancelled suddenly in the last few days of December 2014. It was a sad event for those involved, but the owners, Dr Alan Rose and Gillian Rose, were keen to see it continue as a school, and so in January 2015 we were able to reach agreement on the purchase of the property, with its buildings and many resources. This has opened up new possibilities for expanding Candlebark. In 2016 students in Years 7 through 11 will be at Alice Miller, and we will take a greater number of primary students at Candlebark, including a double stream in Prep – although we will retain a Candlebark Year 7 as well.

2015 saw us continue our vigorous commitment to camps, excursions and other trips, to ensure that 'school' is not seen as a set of buildings in a defined discrete area but rather is the whole world. At one stage during the year I was interviewed for an education journal, and this was my answer to one of their questions: *'The (Candlebark) timetable looks reasonably conventional, but it conceals the fact that we have so much extra "stuff" going on all the time. Today, we have two visiting kids from Alaska sitting in on Grade 4 and Year 8 classes respectively. The Preps and Grade ones have made dinosaur costumes and gone to Scienceworks to see a dinosaur exhibition. The Grade twos are at an orange juice*

factory in Craigieburn. Grade fives have a sleepover here tonight, for no particular reason... Yesterday we had a visiting string quartet from Singapore playing a concert for all the kids. Tomorrow night is a Grade one sleepover. These are just typical days in the life of the school.

I could have picked almost any week in the year and described an equally diverse and stimulating range of activities in which Candlebark was involved. Preps and Grade 1's were having sleepovers almost as soon as the year started, and in late February all the primaries went to Camp Jungai, at Rubicon, for four days. In early March the Year 9 and 10 students travelled to the WOMAD festival in South Australia, continuing an annual tradition. When they returned they (and other secondaries) competed in one of the occasional Candlebark triathlons, and only days later the Year 10's went off again, this time on a canoe trip, followed shortly afterwards by the Year 8's and 9's.

March also saw a very worthwhile visit from multi-talented author Nicolas Brasch, who spoke to the assembled kids about his approach to writing.

In April we participated in the first inter-school cricket competition for Year 7's, in the Macedon Ranges, and to our surprise won! Interestingly we were the only school to include girls in the team.

We also sent teams to inter-school cross-country, soccer and other sporting competitions, and the students showed time and time again a great spirit and an ability to match and often defeat teams from much bigger schools.

Early in second term we had a very welcome workshop with the Tasdance dance company, followed by a performance by them at Kyneton. The very next day came a workshop for older students with visitors from the magazine Dumbo Feather, who ran a great session on writing and magazine production. Year 9's then went to Mittagundi for a ten day course, during which they experienced some extreme weather. They handled the conditions with admirable strength and spirit.

Distinguished actor Kevin Hopkins ran a workshop on Shakespearean drama with the Year 10's in second term.

We had three evening sessions for parents during second term: one a chess night with Basil Eliades, one a talk from Chis Le Messurier about a trip he'd undertaken to Iran a few months earlier, and the third from me, about writing and publishing.

If I'm really proud of one thing in 2015 it's that I forgot the NAPLANS tests, in May. By which I mean that I forgot on the morning the tests started that 'today was the day', so I omitted to tell the kids. It was one of the students who asked me, as we were leaving the morning meeting, 'Aren't we meant to have NAPLANS today?' I had to yell out to the backs of the departing students: 'Oh, by the way, NAPLANS starts this morning!'

I hope this makes clear my contempt for the ridiculous waste of energy, time and money that NAPLANS represents.



Figure 7: Jack Cottingham; photo: Chris Le Messurier

Maybe one of my main objections to NAPLANS is an aesthetic one. It's such an ugly process. We get endless boring emails about the tests all year from

whichever smug government body administers them. The emails are full of dire warnings about cheating and security, and accompanied by templates we are recommended to use when communicating with parents: dreary letters to tell them how NAPLANS are the greatest advance in education since coloured chalk. Then the tests are delivered by armed guards in a convoy of tanks and armoured vehicles...

If a kid whispers anything to a friend during a test we are required to take him or her out in chains, and excoriate him or her publicly and privately for months afterwards...

NAPLANS is what happens when you take an industrial relations lawyer (Julia Gillard) and put her in charge of education; a subject she knew as much about as I know about industrial relations.

Anyway, for anyone who cares, I believe that our NAPLANS results show a spectacular upwards trajectory, which at least is nicer than showing a spectacular downwards trajectory.

Throughout the year, as can be inferred from the foregoing information about our chess teams, we continued with chess lessons, tournaments, and visits, including regular workshops with International Master Leonid Sandler, whose smiling face was always a welcome sight. Visiting tutor Tony Davis also helped us considerably.

Late in Term 2 we hosted the T'ang String Quartet from Singapore for a wonderful concert. Their playing, as well as their communication with their audience, was outstanding.

The term ended with our own soiree, an inspiring night of beautiful music. How well I remember the old farmer who had never been to the school before, sitting transfixed from start to finish, even though his grandchild was only in a couple of items.

A highlight of Term 3 was the Top Science presentation at Melbourne Museum. We've been to this event before – successful young scientists from around Australia talking about their research projects – and it's always worthwhile.

Our older kids also went to the Bendigo Writers' Festival, and younger ones hosted a visit from Preshil students. Preshil and Candlebark have much in common and the students from the two schools seemed to bond really well.

As well, in Term 3, we were absolutely delighted to be entertained by a visit from comedian and T.V. star Sammy J., aka Sam McMillan.

Grade 6's marched off on a hike, Year 7's went to Melbourne for a camp, Grade 3's also had a camp. Year 10's experienced work experience (the first time we'd organised this at Candlebark, as we'd only had a handful of Year 10 students in the past.)

Nearly the whole school went to the Australian Opera/Barking Gecko production of *The Rabbits*, and both young and older seemed to appreciate this remarkable theatrical event.

The winter term ended with another very moving soiree. Soon afterwards our small group of Year 10's boarded a plane for six weeks in London and France, with Candlebark teachers Basil Eliades and Wendy Wright. Here is a journal entry from one of the students, Siobhan:

*We have almost come to the end of our incredible 6 week trip that has gone way too quickly and I can't believe we only have 10 days left. We have done so much more on this trip than I could have imagined we would do and the things that we have done have been so amazing and so memorable. We saw a Shakespeare play that we studied brought to life at the Globe Theatre in London, we canoed down the Dordogne River and got to see all the beautiful different coloured autumn trees, we got to bike ride through the French country side, we got to experience a few days at an amazing French school while staying with French families, we got to visit a town called Oradour-sur-Glane which was destroyed by Nazis and (*thereafter) left pretty much untouched. They are only a few of the big things we have done on the trip so far, but I have to say I loved Argentat – I felt like I was at home, even though I wasn't. I have loved having the guys around, making me laugh, being silly, they always cheer me up, whether I'm feeling flat or feeling good, they make me feel better. And they know how to give me space, too, which is great, because it'd be too much if they were always in my face.*

The squirrels are my absolute favourite things of the trip! But I haven't seen a French one. And Basil has!!

Wendy has been wonderful. I'm so glad it's her. She's a mother figure, a friend, and she knows when I'm not feeling great and she checks in with me.

And Basil and Wendy have obviously worked their butts off to keep everything flowing, the money, the places, the travel, the relationships, the dishes, the food... everything!

I'm so sad that the trip's almost over, and I wish I could go back to Argentat, but I'm also looking forward to seeing everyone at home, and sharing the trip with them.

A highlight of the trip was our association with French school St Jeanne d'Arc, in Argentat, whose considerate and progressive Director Franck Farges allowed our students to participate in classes, and to stay with local families for a few nights.

The day before the Year 10's left Paris to come home was the day of horrific terrorist attacks in the French capital. The Candlebark students had left the site of one attack just an hour or so before the explosion. They remained calm through a long and challenging trip to the airport the next morning, and eventually emerged from the Melbourne Customs Hall, en masse, sporting berets, and with Gauloises drooping from their bottom lips, to a very warm welcome from their relieved families. (I could be joking about the Gauloises.)



Figure 8: Esme Hayter; photo: Chris Le Messurier

Term 4 featured Learning in Depth presentations by all students. Each child in the school, having had time to study a particular aspect of an assigned topic, was interviewed on that topic by a panel of adults and senior students. Their

knowledge and confidence was remarkable, and it was a pleasure to witness the depth and breadth of their scholarship.

The Year 7's canoed a stretch of the Murray River, Preps, Grade 1's, 2's, 3's had a Tour d'Alice bike camp, Year 9's went on a 'horse hike', greatly assisted by ex-Candlebarker Maddie Scott. Teacher Donna Prince recruited an eager group to participate in the National Novel Writing Month endeavour, where kids write as many words as they can in a month. NaNoWriMo, as it quickly became known, attracted nearly 20 starters, some as young as Grade 1, and by the end of the month they had achieved the truly grand total of 104,032 words.

If it's true that 'you get better at writing by writing' (and it is), then these kids have had a powerful boost to their writing careers. A parent who called in at the school during one of the NaNoWriMo sleepovers wrote to me later:

Every time I get an excuse to visit the Candlebark campus, I come away from the experience inspired by what takes place at the school.

On my last visit, which was for the sole purpose of dropping off a change of clothes and a writing book for my child's final NaNoWriMo sleepover, I was witness to something quite extraordinary. There, sitting under the awning of the kitchen/dining area, were the kids busy writing at a furious pace. A huge storm was beginning to dump a torrent of rain all around and yet everyone's focus was on getting as many words down before the expiration of the current stop-watched countdown. Obviously a highly competitive exercise. Yet, this competitive focus was accompanied by no stress. On closer examination, I noticed that the focus was being placed on improving upon one's personal word tally, rather than beating that of one's peers. This in itself was something wondrous to behold. Moving inside, at the completion of the final timed exercise, each child excitedly got up in front of the group to talk about the story they had been working on.

As a parent, it is usual to want to talk up the school your child attends. It can be a validating exercise. Yet, how many parents can claim, that given the impossible opportunity to return to one's youth, they would gladly be a child again if given the chance to attend Candlebark. I am deeply grateful for the influence that the school is having on (my child).

Other highlights of 2015 were swimming lessons at Gisborne Pool, the first aid course (Level II standard) for all older students, the trip by Year 8s to MONA in Hobart, the uproarious Trivia night organised by Year 10 parents and students, the Grade 6 hike, the Grade 5/6 bush camp organised and run in conjunction with Latrobe University Bendigo, and my favourite event, the annual Fete.

December saw graduation dinners for Grade 6 students, marking the conclusion of their primary schooling, and for Year 10s, farewelling Candlebark. Every student from these groups spoke about their experiences of the school. Their sincerity, eloquence, warmth and confidence left us, the staff, feeling that we hadn't done too bad a job, and could feel pride in these fine young people.

The dinners were followed within days by the world premiere of the most spectacular production Candlebark has ever staged: Valerie, President of the World, written, directed and produced by Donna Prince. Audiences travelled in carefully organised groups around the school to view each scene, which was performed numerous times by their student casts to delighted spectators. Lyrics and music by Taran Carter were a highlight of the play -- almost every scene included a musical number, backed by staff and student musicians. The songs were wonderful. Donna even incorporated the magnificent Murray Tucker flying fox into the production.

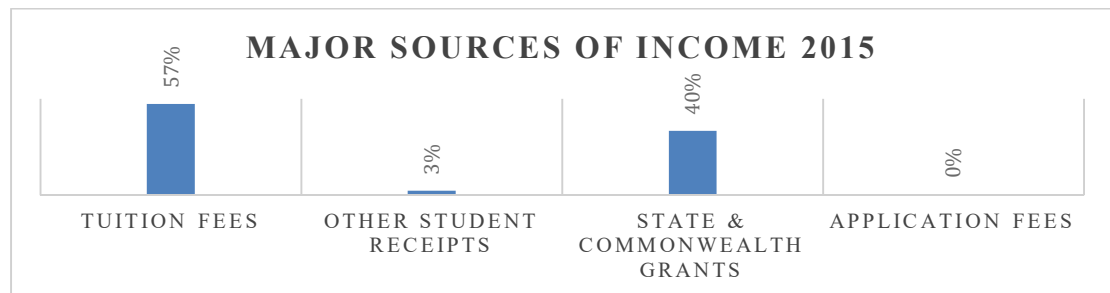
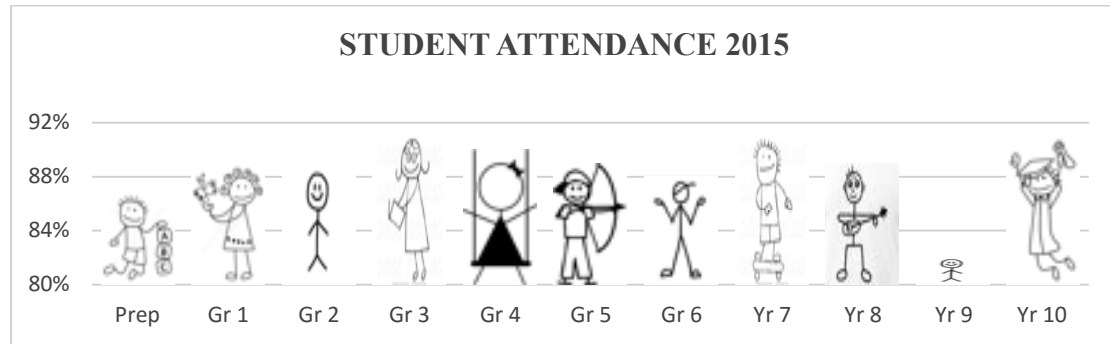
With huge help rendered by people like Bob Mitchell, Basil Eliades Sam Ford and John O'Rourke (set construction), Andrew Blizzard (special effects), and parent Anna Borghesi (costumes) this was truly a night to remember, and an epic finish to 2015. Andrew's condor puppets were made with such skill and were so beautiful to behold that at year's end staff were fighting over who would be allowed to put them on permanent display in their classrooms next year.

And so ended our 10th year, on that creative and exhilarating note.

John Marsden

(Principal)

Official Staff:



YEAR 9 NAPLAN RESULTS		Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
2015						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	0	0	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
2014						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	1	0	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	91%	100%	100%	100%	
2013						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	0	0	1	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	100%	83%	100%	
2012						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	0	2	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	80%	100%	100%	
YEAR 7 NAPLAN RESULTS		Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
2015						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	0	5	4	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	58%	85%	100%	
2014						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	0	0	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
2013						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	1	0	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	88%	100%	100%	100%	
2012						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	0	0	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
YEAR 5 NAPLAN RESULTS		Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
2015						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	2	0	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	67%	100%	100%	100%	
2014						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	0	0	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
2013						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	1	0	2	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	91%	100%	78%	100%	
2012						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	0	1	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	75%	100%	100%	
YEAR 3 NAPLAN RESULTS		Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation	Numeracy
2015						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	0	2	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	100%	86%	100%	100%	
2014						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	1	1	0	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	93%	93%	100%	100%	
2013						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	1	0	1	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	89%	100%	89%	100%	
2012						
Number of Students below National Minimum Standard	0	1	0	1	0	
% of students at/above National Minimum Standard	100%	91%	100%	91%	100%	