

Annual Report 2019



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A message from key school bodies



Message from the Chairperson, School Board

Welcome to the inaugural Annual Report of The Small School!

2019 has seen The Small School grow from what was just the germ of an idea three years earlier, into a lively learning community where all members: young and old, students, teachers and parents alike are genuine participants. This has been made possible in no small part by the perseverance, hard work and deep commitment to this vision of the School Manager, Carla Wilson. On behalf of the Board, I offer Carla and the whole of The Small School community my most heartfelt congratulations on this wonderful achievement.

The first year of operation for a brand-new, independent school brought with it a very steep learning curve and a good number of challenges. Despite some serious bumps along the way, The Small School now takes its place in the education landscape of the Northern Rivers region. Families now have an opportunity to be a part of a holistic, creative and democratic learning community, that demonstrates what's possible within the frame of formal schooling.

I look forward to watching the school and its community mature and grow stronger for many years to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Paula Shaw'.

Paula Shaw
Chairperson, School Board



Message from the School Manager

There's no doubt our first year of operation in 2019 was rich in challenges, rewards and tribulations. There is so much to do to start a school! Beginning with town planning and building regulations through to policy and curriculum development

and everything in between. The creation of TSS was the culmination of three years of work to bring evidence-based, progressive education to Murwillumbah.

Once we were off and running in January 2019, our focus was on staff and children getting to know each other, developing our culture and building relationships with families, setting up resources, learning how to use spaces and embedding layers of procedures. The list goes on. It was at times, it must be said, a strain for the adults involved, but throughout the year we were buoyed by the happiness of the children and the commitment of the parents.

We now have a school where we didn't have one before and there are people I would like to thank for that.

Ms Paula Shaw, Chair of the Board, has served our school community with dedication and commitment time and time again. Her role in the school has brought richness to the education, and consequently the lives, of young people in our community.

Our School Board was also supported by Dr Louise Kolff and Ms Sabrina Stokes who showed their community mindedness in supporting the establishment of the Board. A special mention to outgoing Director, Dr Louise Kolff, who provided 3 years of service to The Small School Board, before passing the baton to Ms. Kristy Shore and Ms. Sara Hicks as the parents of enrolled students began to take on the role of Directors.

The professionalism and dedication of all the Directors has provided inspiration and a powerful reminder of the spirit and capacity of everyday human decency, honesty and fairness. Skills which have been well placed to develop a Board fitting of a democratic school. It is with great confidence that I can say every member of the Board (and every staff member) has acted absolutely in the best interests of the children and the broader community we serve.

The Small School has its own emphasis and initiatives in our educational philosophy, however, we are here in large part due to the work of those who came before us in the tradition of democratic education in Australia and around the world. The schools of the Australasian Democratic Education Community (ADEC) have inspired us and helped us, with a special mention to Ms. Fiona McKenzie, Principal, Phillip Island Village School, who provided the hand up we needed and helped us to believe we could do it.

Our understanding of children and their social, emotional and educational needs was made richer by Robin Grille, psychologist, author and member of our advisory committee. We were very fortunate to benefit from Robin's interest in the betterment of the human family at large.

There would also be no school without the Councillors at Tweed Shire Council who voted us into existence. Thank you for believing that children have a place here and that a range of educational options are important to our town.

We were also very pleased to become members of the NSW Association of Independent Schools (AIS) in our first year of operation. We are very grateful for their expertise and the benefits this has offered to our school community.

Finally, to our school inspectors, who provided a gruelling process of registration but inspired us with their respect for our efforts and for our educational philosophy.

To the children and the parents and communities who care for them, we are proud to provide you with our little school. From little things may big things grow.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carla Wilson'.

Carla Wilson
School Manager

Contextual information about the school and characteristics of the student body

The Small School is a new independent school in the heart of Murwillumbah, beginning operation for the very first time in 2019 with 12 students in Years 2, 3 and 4 and one full-time teaching position.

We are committed to the philosophy of democratic education, which prioritises children having a voice in their own school, and to providing an environment where children feel safe and empowered to speak about their feelings and thoughts.

We have a focus on developing self-direction in learning, hands-on learning, project-based learning, self-reflection for both students and staff and the development of a community to support each other and our children to navigate our modern world.

We truly value and welcome parents and community mentors to participate in our school. We want children to experience being at school and learning at school in connection with their families and wider community as much as possible.

The Small School has a multi-age setting and in 2019 offered one class for all students, Years 2 to 4. Teachers modify or extend material commensurate to a child's capacity and readiness. Teachers' ability to deliver the curriculum with this kind of flexibility allows for a wider spectrum of abilities which is not defined by age.

At the school's inception we chose to structure our philosophy based on *guiding principles*. The guiding principles provide firm ground and clear direction for the school while still allowing for the philosophy to continue to develop along with the school community, while the school is so young.



Katie at work.



Student Initiative - The Small School Shop.

We have 6 guiding principles in our educational philosophy:

1. Relationships with each other and with the environment are of paramount importance.
2. Learning is theme-based (integrated and emergent curriculum) and real-world focused (experiential).
3. Children thrive when they have some say in how they spend their day and what they learn (Democratic Education).
4. Families are part of the school (family-centred education).
5. We learn cooperatively not competitively (non-competitive environment).
6. Playing is learning too (free play and play-based teaching and learning).

Contextual information about the school and characteristics of the student body continued...

There are 3 learning frames in the TSS Educational Program. They are:

Frame 1: Focused Key Learning Areas (KLAs).

Stand-alone English and Maths instruction takes place daily with a focus on differentiated curriculum, small group lessons for explicit teaching, and independent learning, games and activities to reinforce concepts. Independent learning can be completely independent or in pairs, small groups or with parent helpers.



Personal Interest Project - Bearded Dragons.

Frame 2: Thematic Learning Units

One theme is selected for a school-wide approach to learning each term. Themes include most, if not all KLAs, and each has a strategic focus, key concepts and assessment tasks. The themes are identified in a collaborative process by the teachers. Each theme is broad enough to accommodate each individual child's interests and passions. This ensures that teachers can focus on real student engagement, a key benefit of this approach. In addition to the strategic focus, there is a continuing focus for teachers to identify and use English and maths learning opportunities within thematic units.



Beach Art.

Themes for 2019

	Theme	Strategic Focus	Key Concepts
Terms 1 and 2	Gardens, Seasons and Rainbows	Developing relationships in our school community	Colour Weather Seasons Life Cycle World Mythology
Term 3	Castaways	Materials and Building	Self-sufficiency Awareness of nature Building shelters Co-operation
Term 4	Migration	Using ICT as a research tool	What is migration/why do animals and people migrate? Performance/presentation

Frame 3: Core School Community Program (CSCP).

Our school values are clearly expressed in our CSCP. The CSCP consists of 3 parts and has a strong focus on skills development, family involvement and community building. The 3 parts are: Nourishment, Mind and Tinkering and are outlined below:

Nourishment: food and gardening program.

The food and gardening program is intended to provide a vital link to the Earth. Research abounds on the benefits to children of connection with their natural world in terms of their long-term choices as well as habits of mind such as resilience, collaboration and confidence. This program assists students to develop a practical understanding of sustainability and an appreciation of the labour involved in food production.

Students were involved in planting a variety of food plants, watering, fertilising, and protecting them from pests. They were also involved in harvesting, preparing and cooking food, eating together, and in composting organic waste.

Our focus is for children to learn practical life skills as well as use maths and science concepts in everyday life. Throughout the year, the children assisted in the development of the school's kitchen garden.



Helping in the kitchen as part of the Kitchen Garden Program.

Mind: Daily mindfulness exercises, critical thinking and self-directed learning (development of meta-cognition skills)

Yoga, meditation and relaxation techniques to develop mindfulness were offered to students in the form of yoga classes and mindfulness activities to assist with transitions. This practice complements circle times



Making Shelters for Castaways.

(daily morning circle and school meetings) where students have an opportunity to share information and express their ideas or concerns. Circle Time is a critical component of our approach to student leadership as children are encouraged and supported to voice their opinions and concerns, participate in decision-making and take responsibility for carrying out their ideas.

Tinkering

Tinkering includes the development of skill sets (wood and metal work and repurposing of materials) and opportunities for experiential learning and creativity. The school maintains tinkering facilities which provides students with the opportunity to experiment with materials and tools. Most of the materials are re-claimed and recycled items. Tinkering happens in unstructured play times and/or can feature as a major component of thematic learning units or personal interest projects. Tinkering featured heavily in Term 3, making shelters out of recycled materials and in Term 1 for possum boxes for the garden. The practice of tinkering carried over into science class, where we played with robotic spiders made from the motors salvaged from broken printers.



Investigating what can be salvaged from broken printers.

Student outcomes in standardised national literacy and numeracy testing

A small number of our students were eligible to sit Year 3 NAPLAN but the parents of eligible children withdrew their children after due consideration.



Robotic Spiders! Using the fan motors from broken computers.

Teacher professional learning, accreditation and qualifications

Our founding teacher, Ms Katie Power, is a provisionally registered teacher. In 2019, our professional development focus was for Katie to begin her training with the AIS to enable her progression towards proficient status.

Ms Katie Power and School Manager, Ms Carla Wilson, undertook a week-long study tour of democratic education by attending the Australian Democratic Education Conference, held in Sydney in 2019 and hosted by Currambeena to celebrate their 50th anniversary. This was a great opportunity to see the potential longevity of schools, to be inspired by the common ground in the values we hold dearly and for mentor relationships with experienced educators and principals to grow. Phillip Island Village School provided us with the opportunity for a 3-day observational visit. Katie and Carla brought back many new ideas from their trip, which assisted in the early growth of TSS.



Ms Katie Power (right) with Ms Ellie World (centre) and a parent helper (left).

Workforce composition

In our first year, we had one full-time teaching position available. This position was job-shared between teachers, with the lion's share of the founding responsibilities being carried out with integrity and tenacity by Ms Katie Power.

Our 1 full-time teaching position in 2019 was shared with Ms Belinda Pursey, who was forced to resign from her position after sustaining serious injuries while bushwalking when on holidays. We miss her and what she brought to the school and we are blessed to see the strength she has to recover.

Our kitchen is managed, our gardens gardened, and teachers supported by Ms Ellie World, mother of 5, part-time circus trainer and lover of all children and dogs. Ellie contributed to the school in a way that the school community will be indebted to for many years. Working long hours, many of them voluntary, Ellie's dedication and resolute hard slog made the school not only possible but clean, green and well fed.



Ellie at our first camp!

The role of School Manager, Carla Wilson, involves business manager and office administrator, developer of relationships in our school community, supporter of teachers and observer and promoter of the school culture and philosophy. Carla is also responsible for planning, reporting and compliance.

We have a 1 day/week administrative assistant, parent helper, Ms Monica Munro, who worked on a volunteer basis throughout the year. Monica contributed to the development of the many procedures in attendance record keeping and financial administration and made a very valuable contribution to the school.

The Small School Business Service provides for the financial management needs of small, independent schools, including ours. They have acted as outsourced financial administration to the school and they brought expertise and rigorous expectations to our financial management.

Finally, we are grateful to the many parent volunteers who read books, helped in the garden and cooked and served food. There will be no replacing the parents who showed up and contributed the way they did in our first year of operation.

Student attendance

The following student attendance data is based on our attendance records for Semester 1 (Terms 1 and 2), 2019.

Grade	Attendance Rate
Y02	90.95%
Y03	92.18%
Y04	92.74%
Total	92.20%



Community Day Term 1.

Overall Attendance	Non Indigenous Attendance %	Indigenous Attendance %	Non-Indigenous proportion of students attending at least 90% of the time	Indigenous proportion of students attending at least 90% of the time
92.20%	93.33%	85.71%	69.96%	32.86%

The following excerpt from our *Enrolment and Attendance Policy* outlines our approach to non-attendance:

Strategies for improving regular attendance

Resolution of attendance difficulties will be carried out in accordance with the school's commitment to early intervention and support for families and the school's Wellbeing and Safety Policy.

Early intervention is the most effective way to resolve irregular attendance. Mostly irregular attendance will be resolved through prompt follow-up with parents, face-to-face if possible, during drop-off or pick-up. If a face-to-face conversation is not possible then contact will be made by phone call, email or SMS (in that order of preference). This can be carried out by the School Manager or teaching staff.

Early intervention strategies are informal although they are recorded in the Student File by the School Manager or the teacher. Teachers and the School Manager must inform each other of discussions/contacts they have had with parents. This can be done informally or at staff meetings.

The discussions (or written contacts) will invite parents/guardians to discuss any concerns or barriers that may exist for the child and/or parents about the child being at school and offer to devise strategies to address them. Strategies could include:

- Having an informal meeting with parents and if appropriate the child, to discuss any concerns or barriers that may exist.
- Asking the child or parent if they know what might help them feel more comfortable at school.
- Providing one-on-one time with the child and a trusted staff member at school.
- Reminding a parent they are welcome to stay with their child at school while their child settles in.

- Investigating a different teaching approach for the child.
- Addressing concerns about a relationship with another child (if relevant) and facilitating the development of their relationship or if not possible, providing them with strategies to be separate at the school.

Where informal early intervention methods have not resulted in an improvement of a student's attendance an Attendance Improvement Meeting will be arranged where a child is considered to have unsatisfactory attendance.

A child is considered to have an unsatisfactory school attendance when they have:

- Regular absences without explanation/satisfactory explanation (despite follow-up from the school) for more than 15-20 days in a term.
- Regular absences and explanations provided by parents which are not accepted by the School Manager.
- An extended period of absence without an explanation or the explanation is not accepted by the School Manager. An extended period of absence may be consecutive or irregular patterns of non-attendance.

At Attendance Improvement Meetings:

- Any matter discussed at an informal early intervention meeting will be reviewed.
- A documented school-based Attendance Improvement Plan is developed.
- Parents will be reminded of their legal obligation under the Act and the School Manager's obligations under the Act to keep accurate records of attendance, decide whether reasons given for absences are justified and to address issues of non-attendance, which could include the involvement of outside agencies.
- Referral to outside support agencies is arranged where necessary.

Where Attendance Improvement Meeting strategies do not work to improve school attendance, the School Manager will work collaboratively with other government or non-government agencies including the NSW Association of Independent Schools to arrange for a Compulsory Attendance Conference if this is recommended.

The Compulsory Schooling Conference is the final school-based intervention that can be taken to address matters of unsatisfactory school attendance. The School Manager must explain to parents that the school may refer the case to the Department of Education Legal Services to take further action where children of compulsory school age continue to have unacceptable unexplained or unjustified absences from school, despite attempted interventions at the school level.

If a child's attendance at school remains unsatisfactory the Department may apply to the Children's Court for a Compulsory Schooling Order. The Children's Court magistrate may order a Compulsory Schooling Conference to be convened.

The School and the Department legal staff will remain committed to working in partnership with parents to address the issues which are preventing a child's full participation at school. In circumstances where a breach of compulsory schooling orders occurs further action may be taken against a parent in the Local Court. The result of court action can be the imposition of a community service order or a fine.

Extended unexplained absences where it is believed that the child has left the school will be followed up in accordance with the requirements outlined in this policy, namely evidence that a Department of Education Officer with home liaison responsibilities has been notified of the child's full name, date of birth, last known address, last date of attendance, parents' names and contact details, an indication of possible destination, other information that may assist officers to locate the child, and any known work health and safety risks associated with contacting the parents or child.

Enrolment policies

The *Enrolment Policies for Families* is available on our website at:

<https://www.thesmallschool.org.au/policies-procedures>

This provides families with a full description of the enrolment process.

The *Enrolment and Attendance Policy* is a policy which is for internal use, it is consistent with the *Enrolment Policies for Families* and describes in detail the school's procedures for enrolment and attendance. This policy is attached with this Annual Report to the NESA submission through RANGS Online.



Having fun at our first camp!

Other school policies

TSS has policies concerning student welfare. They include:

- Behaviour Management Policy;
- Anti-Bullying Policy;
- Raising a Concern or Complaint Policy;
- Well-Being and Safety Policy.

As a democratic school we are committed to procedural fairness for children, parents and staff alike in all our day-to-day activities. We do not allow corporal punishment of any kind in our school and have policies to guide our actions to ensure that we uphold procedural fairness when disciplining children. This remains the case in the event of suspension or expulsion, where adherence to policies is critical.

Our Behaviour Management Policy is concerned with supporting a culture of relationship building and connection, with a view to always wanting to create a feeling of belonging in school life. Misbehaviour in most cases is seen as developmentally normal and usually responds to consistent, gentle and supportive redirection.

Participation of children in the development of the school's behavioural expectations (rules) is critical. Agreements are reached through discussion of the what, why and how and of dissenting views.

Bullying occurs when we feel frightened, unsafe, embarrassed, angry or unfairly treated as a result of someone's behaviour towards us. It can be confusing and isolating. At TSS we talk openly about bullying – what it is, how it affects people and what we can do about it.

Staff understand that bullying can have complex dynamics and that children who display bullying behaviour may be experiencing difficulties in their lives outside of school or may be responding or retaliating to another undetected or unreported incident.

Special Circles provide a forum to address concerns about bullying. However, this is not a carte blanche approach. Each incident of concerning behaviour is different as are the feelings of the child affected. Some children may want to address issues in a Special Circle. For others this is too confronting, and teachers must support children to have their voice in a different way, usually by speaking on their behalf until they have the confidence to speak for themselves.

Our close relationships to children and consequent close observation of their relationships with each other, provides very strong protection against any systemic behaviour going unnoticed or unaddressed.

The following table provides further summaries of our policies relating to student welfare.

TSS Policies	Changes made in 2019	Access to policy
<p><i>Well-Being and Safety Policy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describes the culture and overarching principles TSS ascribes to for the well-being and safety of both children and staff. • It references other TSS policies related to physical health and health plans, codes of conduct for children, parents, staff and child protection. • It outlines the framework which supports the physical, emotional, intellectual and social safety of children. Similarly, for staff, it outlines the foundation of the rights of staff to work in a professional and safe environment and references the <i>Work, Health and Safety Policy</i>. 	No changes were made during 2019.	On the school website, link below*.

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Other school policies continued...

<p><i>Anti-Bullying Policy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides clarification of what a safe environment is for children, what the effects of bullying can be, the responsibilities of staff, children and parents in relation to the prevention of bullying, how we monitor the nature of relationships at the school and how we address problems using principles of restorative justice as far as possible. Restorative justice principles include guided discussion and negotiations. This process is described more below in <i>Behaviour Management Policy</i>. 	<p>No changes were made during 2019.</p>	<p>On the school website, link below*.</p>
<p><i>Behaviour Management Policy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> First and foremost, the <i>Behavior Management Policy</i> outlines the duty of care and kindness adults have to children, the responsibility of adults to model respectful behaviour and relationships in the school and it expressly prohibits the use of corporal punishment of any kind. It outlines the school's commitment to conflict resolution, procedural fairness and restorative justice as the basis for behavioural management. It references the codes of conduct and describes our priorities: modelling by adults; teaching methods which are responsive to individual needs, rule development as a collaborative and relationship-building exercise and an understanding that most misbehaviour is developmentally normal and responds to clear and calm redirection. It outlines the principles for responding to breaches in the codes of conduct: procedural fairness, record management, restorative justice and prohibition of corporal punishment. Restorative justice allows all affected parties of a social/behavioural problem, to have their experiences heard in a mediated process, to assist children to take meaningful responsibility for their actions. Restorative justice principles are used informally in Special Circles where non-serious breaches of the Code of Conduct are addressed. They are also used more formally in meetings between staff, parents and children to address serious or repeated non-serious breaches. 	<p>As a new school, this policy was actively reviewed by staff as the school began operation in 2019. It was updated in March 2019 for our NESA submission.</p>	<p>On the school website, link below*.</p>
<p><i>Raising a Concern or Complaint Policy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sets out the process for raising concerns or complaints about any aspect of the school's operations. States the goal of creating a culture of openness in receiving constructive complaints with a view to strengthening the school through their effective resolution. Provides the steps for making a complaint. 	<p>No changes were made during 2019.</p>	<p>On the school website, link below*.</p>

* <https://www.thesmallschool.org.au/policies-procedures>

School determined priority areas for improvement

In 2020, we intend to improve:

- Parent Communication, including production of a regular newsletter and a Family Handbook.
- Collection of parent feedback through more formal (and confidential) parent surveys.
- Our implementation of the guidelines for the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) for children with a disability.
- The purpose and implementation of Frame 3 of our education program, the Core Community Skills Program.
- Opportunities for professional development for teachers.
- Learning supports for children in need of additional support.
- More formal approaches to the development of social and emotional skills.



Community Day Term 3.

Initiatives promoting respect and responsibility

Throughout the whole year of 2019, our small group of children came together with staff and parents to create a culture of respect and responsibility.

Expectations and agreements about behaviour were developed and explored with children in regular discussion in daily circle time, special circles and school meetings. Over time, and with the guidance of staff and parents, the children developed their own agreements about respectful behaviour, particularly as it related to conduct in circle times. These agreements were developed into classroom agreements, amendments to the code of conduct and expectations for participation in circle time were made into child-friendly posters and displayed in the school.

Rights are balanced with responsibilities at TSS and there is an expectation that children will contribute to a tidy and well-functioning learning environment. The development of a list of jobs and a fair way to allocate and roster jobs was also conducted and refined throughout the year.



One of our bush days - Terms 2 and 3.

Parent, student and teacher satisfaction

Student feedback is constantly sought by teachers in circle time and school meetings, as well as via ad hoc discussion in the classroom where children's feedback is treated with respect and as far as possible, acted upon. When not acted upon teachers will explain why to a child. Special circles have been called by teachers specifically to get feedback on a particular class or approach that was delivered.

Parent feedback was actively sought in whole-school meetings which were conducted at the end of each term on Community Day, when all parents were invited to spend the day at school with their children.

Whole school meetings were conducted to find out how parents were experiencing our new school. These were positive and productive conversations concerned with the development of the school.

In addition to the whole school meetings, ad hoc parent feedback was received throughout the year. All staff are responsive to parent feedback and as with students, if it can't be acted upon, an explanation will be provided. Formal and confidential mechanisms of parent feedback will be introduced in 2020.

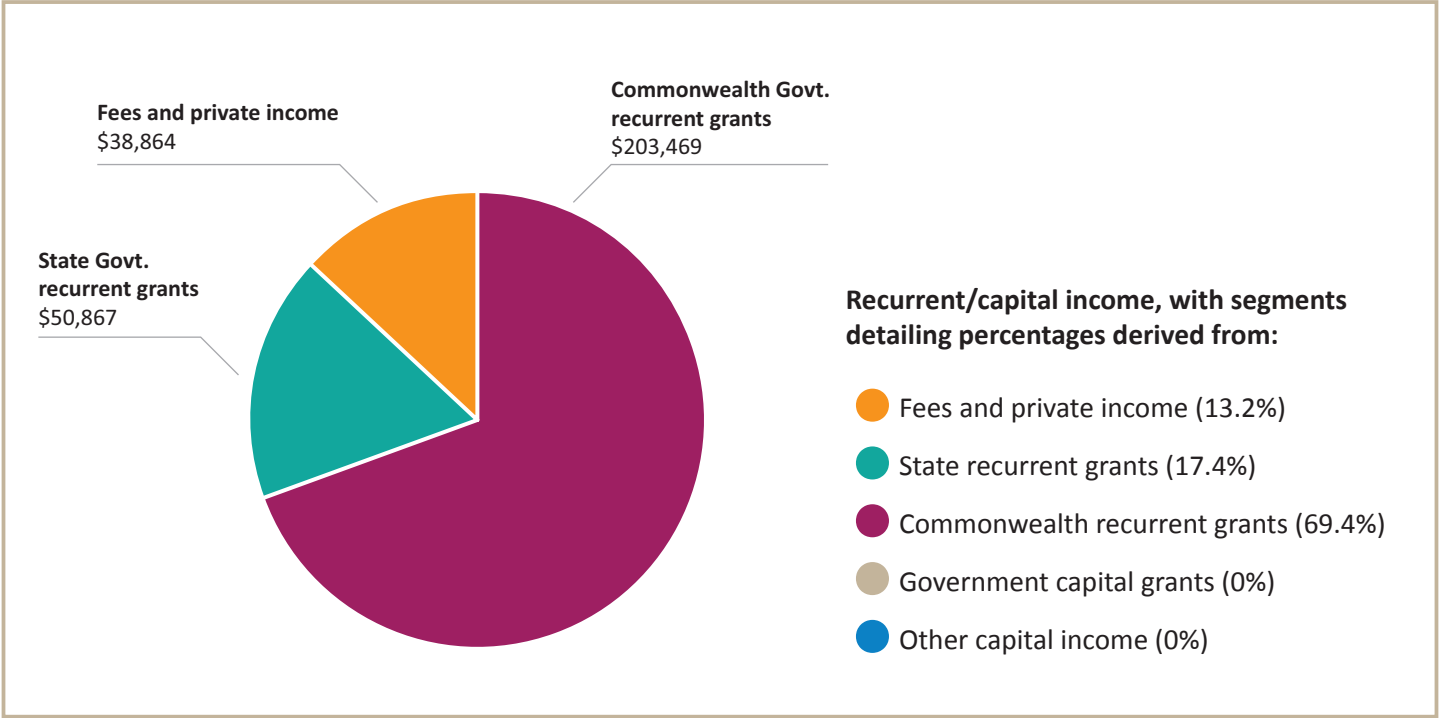
Similarly, with teacher satisfaction, ad hoc discussions after school along with more formal discussions in planning meetings are facilitated. A culture of openness and mutual respect is very important at TSS. Teachers are seen as expert professionals who carry out a complex, vital and demanding job. We want to do everything we can to support them to do their job to the best of their ability, so that we can provide the children at TSS with the best educational opportunities we can. The management and operation of the school is conducted in a collaborative manner with teachers, who contribute to decision making with the School Manager. The respect and autonomy afforded to teachers contributes greatly to their satisfaction and consequently the satisfaction of the children in their care.



Student choice science experiments.

Summary financial information

Recurrent/capital income



Recurrent/capital expenditure

