

The Alice Springs Steiner Association (TASSA)

Chairman's Report – 2016 (March 2017)

Our Purpose:

To develop and maintain a successful school based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner.

Our Vision

A world class Steiner School in the heart of Australia.

Our Values

The Alice Springs Steiner School celebrates and cares for our community, our children and our place; we do so with integrity and we do so sustainably.

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Like the year previous, 2016 was largely a year of consolidation for the School, but also one of completion and forward planning. It saw continued strength in the School's finances; the start of a new double classroom that will complete the School's current masterplan; a renewed and still successful Fair; continued growth in our teachers' capabilities and leadership; a much appreciated level of stability in our teaching staff; as well as a new strategic plan to help guide us through the next six years.

Over the year, our teachers worked tirelessly to deliver on our vision of providing a world class Steiner education to the children of central Australia. In this, they were served by the generous and dedicated leadership of Brian Dodd, by the efforts of the school's administrative staff, by its parents and by a dedicated and engaged Board.

Towards the end of the year, however, we also encountered significant change, with first our Principal and then our Business Manager announcing their departure. The loss of our Principal, Brian Dodd, came as a particularly hard blow for he had been instrumental, over his six years with the School, in bringing us to where we are now: on solid foundations with a clear purpose and plan for the future. But it is a testament to Brian's hard work, and that of our teachers and staff and Board, that we were able to find worthy replacement for both roles and manage the transition with little effort and fuss. It speaks of our success in building a School of real value, one we can all find pleasure and purpose in as we move forward.

Infrastructure:

The Lands and Building Sub-Committee again had a busy year with special mention due for Marc Woods in leading this.

Early in the year, the School submitted a BGA application for funds to support the construction of a new double classroom (Class 4 and music room). This was done very late in the piece but on advice from the BGA that an application would be favourably reviewed, which it eventually was.

Construction started late in the year and when finished will make the School compliant for up to 175 students and complete the original masterplan.

This masterplan, developed more than five years ago now, has been critical to our success in securing public funds and guiding the planning and investment in infrastructure on our lovely site; and the board has committed to developing a new masterplan for the coming years to ensure future all future investments are equally considered.

The construction of the new classrooms also entailed the removal of the Pink Building, one of our last demountables, which is worthy of note as it reminds us of the expanding history of the School on this site as well as how far we have come.

Other infrastructure developed over the year included a new 30kW solar system and a wonderfully solid pizza oven.

Finance:

Our school is a parent-funded enterprise exposed to many external factors and an often unpredictable funding environment. To buffer this, we have over the years built up significant Cash Reserves – these reflect the hard work and wisdom of those who have preceded us at any point in time and their forethought to guarantee future stability. Cash Reserves give the School and future Boards, the power of choice. Future Boards with strong cash reserves will be empowered to survive downturns, invest in new infrastructure and the ability to ride out political instability in government funding arrangements. Current and future Boards have an obligation to respect and preserve Cash Reserves and must always do their homework and invest wisely.

The 2016 Audit reflects the consistency of our student numbers as well as our close management of expenses. Member's funds are represented by Land & Buildings and Cash Reserves. Our Cash Reserves at December 2016 were \$729,193. Once the \$200,000 investment in the two new classrooms is paid out, our reserves will be \$529,193 – a decrease of \$23,843 from last year.

The \$200k being invested in the two new classrooms from our cash reserves where needed due to BGA grants requiring co-contribution and having a capped maximum amount. In deciding to fund this project, as with any, the Board took care to assess the benefits of the investment as against the impacts it would have on our finances.

Looking forward, the operational budget for 2017 was set in December 2016. The number of funded students at the School - the prime determinant of the Budget - has remained steady for a number of years now (150), however, 2016 saw a slight downward trend in this and in response, the Board adopted a conservative approach to expected numbers. That said, the budget signed off has a positive (\$58,776) balance and includes all activities identified in the strategic plan paid for out of operating revenue with the only funding from cash reserves required the \$200,000 for the new classrooms.

Governance:

We started the year with a board made up of a number of both old and relatively new hands and two observers with Libby Prell as Chair (her sixth year in the role). In February, Libby notified the Board she would be leaving and in the April AGM formally stepped down. Also stepping down were Annie Farthing and Kate Lloyd.

Elected were Di Newham (previously an observer) and Michael Tuckwell (as Chair for a two year period), joining Sophie Staughton (Vice-Chair), Harshini (Secretary and Treasurer) and Marc Woods. This left the GB short 1 elected member, a position that despite efforts has continued to today due to difficulties in finding a suitable and willing additional member. To help address this, the Board continued with its policy of bringing on new TASSA members as observers, with Marli Banks and Stephen Schwer both joining in May 2016. Both Stephen and Marli have proved themselves committed members of the School community and great assets to the Board and we now welcome them as members standing for formal election.

Of note, the number of TASSA members has remained static and relatively low over the past few years. Having a broad membership base is important to the successful functioning of the school - TASSA membership is a prerequisite for election to the Board and for its effective operation, the Board needs a pool of individuals with a variety of skills and experiences to be able to draw on to constantly refresh its numbers and build and maintain its capabilities. The current Board is conscious of this and is working to implement strategies to improve membership numbers.

From an operational perspective, much of 2016 saw the Board's time and energies devoted to leading the development of a new Strategic Plan for the School – an exhaustive but ultimately rewarding and critically important piece of work that we are confident provides both a well-considered and pragmatic plan for realizing the aspirations of the School community.

Fair:

As the School's major fundraising event, the Fair deserves mention. As noted in the 2015 AGM minutes, a review of the Fair's purpose, management and delivery structure was initiated in late 2015 and completed in early 2016. Much came out of this that is still pending, however, the core result was a new organizational structure. This responded to the key identified issues of how challenging the Fair had become to deliver, as well as the changing nature of parent contributions to and involvement in the School. The 2016 Fair saw earnings profit reduced from the previous year but still high. More importantly, however, no one on the organising committee reported feeling burnt-out as previously and as such, this was deemed an overall positive result.

These findings have broader ramifications for how we engage with our parent body which the School administration and Board are working actively to accommodate, through greater flexibility and options for how people can contribute their time and skills.

Staffing:

Staffing requires special mention for a number of reasons.

Firstly with regards to the departures of both Brian and Roger, both in a very short time. Together, they provided strong stewardship of the School. Brian in particular provided the kind of warm and sure leadership that was utterly reflective of the ethos of the School: supporting and guiding the teaching and administrative staff as well as the Board and broader parent body. His loss was keenly felt and it is only proper that we formally acknowledge and give thanks for his contributions over his six years with us.

Fortunately, we were successful in finding Bruce Thurgood, a highly experienced Steiner educator and leader, as a replacement for Brian. We have now welcomed Bruce to the School and the Board has every confidence he can lead us with all the surety, consideration and vision that is needed.

Roger left in September after two years and a significant contribution to the School. With Brian's departure already imminent, Roger's departure posed a potentially significant challenge, but again we were successful in finding an eminently capable and committed replacement for him in Grenville Hawkins. Grenville took over the reins in October and since then has shown a competency and thoroughness that is very much appreciated.

Also worthy of note and acknowledgement is the continued commitment, dedication and conduct of all staff across the School, both those who have been steady at their tasks and those who have been stepping up into broader roles. As a small school we have at times faced issues of resourcing, requiring the Principal to devote time to managing this at the expense of other roles – and when this has occurred, others have willingly stepped in to provide the necessary support and leadership. Building our internal capacity to lead and organize ourselves is critical for our continued success and the Board commends everyone on their efforts in this.

New Strategic Plan:

As noted, one of the major activities the School undertook in 2016 was the development of a new Strategic Plan. A collaborative effort between the Board and teachers, Principal and Business Manager, with input from the parent body through surveys and consultations, the new Strategic Plan was finalized in December. It covers the coming six years (2017 – 2022) and articulates five key organisational objectives, supported by a detailed action plan to guide the development of the School's business plans.

A great amount of effort was put into the creation of this plan as it was recognized that having come so far – our School is now 20 years old! – we had reached a position of strength from which we could look forward with a confidence to dream of even greater things.

This plan is now the guide for the school moving forward in further realizing our Vision of being 'A world class Steiner School in Central Australia'.

I commend this Annual Report to you.

Michael Tuckwell – Chair, Governing Body.