# 2023 Annual Report

THE NATURE SCHOOL



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A world where nature and learning create a sustainable future.

ission

A community where children learn and shine through authentic experiences in nature to become engaged global citizens.



**Connect:** we value connected learning opportunities, connecting with our community, and connection with nature.

**Protect**: we value childhood, protect the rights of children, and advocate for protection of the environment.

**Respect**: we value self respect, respect for others, and respect for the natural world.



# SECTION 1: CONTEXT 1.1 Chair Report

I would like to acknowledge the Birpai people as the traditional custodians of the land on which The Nature School was founded and on which our community now lives, learns and grows - land that always was and always will be Birpai land. On behalf of The Nature School Board of Directors, I pay my respects to Birpai elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Aboriginal peoples who live, learn and grow in the spectacular Port Macquarie region.

This has been the 6th year of TNS Primary and our first year offering Secondary with



our Year 7 class. During 2023 we said goodbye to one of our directors on the board, Beth Madgwick. I would like to thank and acknowledge not only Beth but all our directors for their commitment and dedication to seeing the success of a progressive, innovative organisation, thanks to the contribution of their combined skills, experience and insights. We welcomed John Cooke as an ordinary member of the Board with his wealth of experience including in the legal and human resource spaces. We also welcomed Mark Wilsons' years of business experience and his vast network of local businesses. I am thankful to Scott Upston for stepping into the role of Vice Chair of the TNS Board, with his wisdom and integrity gained from his miltary, political, business, community service over the years. I am immensely grateful to Chloe Tugnett for stepping into the role of Secretary of the TNS Board. She has been instrumental in ensuring that the Board continues to thrive efficiently and effectively as she applies her honed skills to our Board of directors. Jessica Morris has continued faithfully as Treasurer of the Board, bringing her attention to detail and CPA experience to our organisation, ensuring our sustainable growth into the future.

The Nature School has reached yet another milestone this year. After much consideration, planning, investment, plus some stress. we embarked on a new challenge - *teenagers*!

Some may ask the relevance of nature pedagogy in the Secondary education sector, however I believe that now more than ever there is a growing need for our children to "learn and shine through authentic experiences in nature". We know the positive impact these experiences have on our health and well being. This aligns with our holistic and natural approach throughout The Nature Schools philosophy, vision and objectives. We owe a debt of gratitude to all who contributed to the establishment of our Secondary program, including those Association members who previously participated in our Future Schools Subcommittee, as well as all the teachers, staff, and parents. You know the role each of you have played so far, and we recognise that the achievements and milestones accomplished this year are the result of so many. Thank you!

In terms of tangible measurables this year, here are the highlights.

We invested \$3.5 million in facilities with a total of \$1.1 million coming from grants and the remainder funded by donations, building levy and loans. As a result, we completed:

- Year 7 Building for secondary school for the commencement of 2023
- Concrete shed floor for additional outdoor learning space and new shed roof
- New leased area on neighbouring property for Secondary School students play space
- Reception area and Admin reconfiguration

Upcoming 2024 planned Capital Works:

- New toilet block, outdoor learning space, Kindy deck roof, and connecting walkways
- New year 8 building

Finally I would like to thank our dedicated executives. Business Manager, Karen Marlin, has overseen the Early Years program as well as the Business Manager role to facilitate the organisation's constant growth and navigate the associated growing pains that accompany. Catherine Shaw, our Head of School, has not only nurtured the school from its early beginnings but this year has established TNS Secondary with a number of our Year 6 cohort progressing into Year 7 as well as new families seeking an education unlike any other for their children. Both our Executives work tirelessly and go above and beyond to ensure that The Nature School children and facilitators flourish. The quality of staff passionate about being a part of TNS is testimony to the culture that these Executives cultivate every day.

It is always a compliment for others to recognise the calibre of our team. This year Business Port Macquarie recognised our Head of School Catherine Shaw as the "Outstanding Business Leader" for 2023. Catherine was also acknowledged as an Excellence Awardee and finalist this year for the 2023 Australian Education Awards (Primary School Principal of the Year- non government).

For a progressive independent school of humble beginnings we are leading the way in the education sector by not only demonstrating a better way, but also being recognised on multiple levels.

I am excited to see TNS continue to thrive as an organisation in 2024 and beyond, knowing that we have proven to have a dedicated Board, passionate and experienced staff, and inquisitive and resilient children and families. Together we can create a world where nature and learning create a sustainable future.

## Nigel Tang

**Board Chair** 



## 1.2 Head of School Report

"Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." (Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll)

"It always seems impossible until it is done." (Nelson Mandela)

As always, I begin this report by acknowledging that The Nature school stands on Birpai Country, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



When we opened The Nature School Primary in 2018, we had an almost insurmountable task in front of us. *To grow a school*. Despite humble beginnings we did just that. From two teachers and twenty students, we grew to become a remarkable team of educators and over a hundred primary students. As Nelson Mandela famously said, "It always seems impossible until it is done."

Somewhere along the way parents began to ask whether we would continue the adventure into Secondary education. We surveyed the community, and with an overwhelming YES from parents and students, the decision was made by our Board. Yet again, a seemingly impossible challenge made us dig deep as learning community. We listened to what families wanted from a progressive, independent Secondary school with a nature focus. We made strategic plans, financial plans, building plans, curriculum plans, and wellbeing plans. There was a **lot** of planning. And then in January of 2023, the first highschoolers stepped into TNS Secondary – with boots on their feet, khaki bush shirts in natural

bamboo fabric, and their distinctive hats. You can't miss a TNS Secondary student.

Our Secondary team have experienced a lot of 'firsts' in the past year. The first Field Studies days saw students wading through mangroves, trekking to waterfalls, and exploring the coast's GeoTrail. The first SM<sup>2</sup> (School Meeting Squared) saw students taking responsibility for decisions in our school. They raised agenda items, took minutes, discussed topics openly and voted democratically. They were articulate, thoughtful and respectful in their interactions.

Thanks to the *Sponsorship Grants for Student Science Engagement and International Competitions*, many of our Year 6 and 7 students were privileged to participate in a Sydney Science trip. This opportunity enabled them to visit Google, the Powerhouse Museum, SEA Life Aquarium, and experience Taronga Zoo by twilight. While there, one of our Year 7 students was able to present at the Young Creators Convention. It was a very special trip indeed.

Our Primary and Secondary students participated in many community and environmental projects throughout the year, including Clean Up Australia Day, the Great Southern BioBlitz, and Bird Week. We even held our inaugural bird calling competition, with the champion demonstrating a brilliant Brolga call. Year 7 held a Business Fair and raised over a thousand dollars for the local Koala Hospital with their entrepreneurial endeavours. Our Secondary students also shone in the community in their own areas of strength. Some paddled our vessel to victory in the Rotary Cardboard Boat Regatta, while others bravely shared their poetry at the Roto House Youth Poetry evening.

We invited a number of guests into our school during the year. Daniel Burton from Educated by Nature (WA) joined us for a week of shared professional learning. Natural history author and illustrator Sami Bayly visited us during Book Week. To celebrate the NAIDOC theme, 'For Our Elders', students invited a special elder in their life to join us for tea and yarning around the fire. Our State Member, Leslie Williams, visited to view the Year 6 travel showcase. Year 7 hosted students from Bobin Public School as part of the Swarovski Waterschool Project. Special events such as the K-2 Bushdance and our biggest ever Winter Warmer brought families into the school, and parents also visited each term for our Tuesday Chooseday Showcase.

At the heart of all we do is learning. All day, every day, inside and out, we never stop learning. At The Nature School we pride ourselves on designing robust learning programs that are highly engaging for students. This requires significant expertise from our dedicated teachers. My deep thanks to our team for their commitment to professional practice across all grades at TNS. I particularly want to acknowledge Lloyd Godson, Kellie Hall and Shannon Kelly for their pioneering work in developing our Secondary curriculum. We also strive to prioritise the wellbeing of our students, and I am grateful for the additional support our Teacher Aides and School Counsellor, Claire Busby, provide in this space.

With the increase in student numbers, and the increased logistics of managing both Primary and Secondary school students, I am incredibly grateful for our Administration team. Karen Marlin is an extraordinary Business Manager and we are all grateful for her ability to manage the resources and facilities we need within budgetary constraints. My thanks also to our Board of Directors, capably led by Chair Nigel Tang, who volunteer their time, skills and experience to diligently govern our School.

It seems at times, like Alice in Wonderland, our team have "believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast"... and pulled them off. I couldn't be prouder of our learning community as together we continue to build The Nature School.

## **Catherine Shaw**

Head of School

## 1.3 Contextual Information

TNS is a progressive independent school with a focus on nature. Learners at TNS are scientific thinkers, curious questioners, and articulate communicators, capable of affecting change now and in the future.

Based in beautiful Port Macquarie in regional NSW, **The Nature School** (TNS) was established firstly as a Primary School, catering for approximately 120 students across Kindergarten to Year 6 in single stream classes. In 2023 the adventure continued into Secondary with our first Year 7 class. The Nature School Secondary will grow year-on-year with our oldest cohort, reaching Year 10 in 2026. TNSS is Registered and Accredited to ensure students are eligible for the Record of School Achievement (RoSA).

At TNS learning is regularly taken beyond the classroom. In the Primary years, teachers take students outside on a daily basis during all KLAs, as appropriate to the lesson. Primary Adventure Days are fortnightly offsite excursions into local natural habitats or the local community. Adventure Days are planned in conjunction with Integrated units of work and require a high degree of teacher planning and understanding of curriculum. In the Secondary years, teachers are encouraged to consider the most appropriate contexts for taking learning outdoors in each subject. Field Studies Days provide Secondary students with a weekly opportunity to apply skills and knowledge in natural environments.

At TNS Secondary, creativity, problem solving, independent thinking, communication and collaboration continue to be fostered. Building on the strengths of the Primary program, Secondary teachers extend the *Learning Naturally framework* to design a robust academic program. Fortnightly Field Studies trips to offsite locations are integral to the curriculum model, allowing students to take hands-on learning to new depths. TNS Secondary students explore opportunities for social enterprise and consider their role as global citizens.

#### 1.3.1 Characteristics of the Student Body Students Total enrolments: 139 Full-time equivalent enrolments: 139.0 Boys 71 Indigenous Language students Girls 68 background other than English 4% 4% Yes (4%)

# 1.3.2 Priority Areas for Improvement

No

(96%)

Not stated (0%)

Target	Comments	Achieved?
Registration of Year 7	Five year Registration granted Year 7	
		$\checkmark$
Accreditation for RoSA	Five year Accreditation granted for Record	
	of School Achievement (RoSA)	✓
Initial Registration of Year 8	Initial Registration granted for Y8 2024	
		~
Increase enrolments	The school increased enrolments from	$\checkmark$
	119 students to 139	•
Employ further staff	Additional classroom teachers and aide	
	employed	$\checkmark$
Teaching and learning: focus	Professional learning undertaken to	
on implementation of new	familiarize and implement new syllabus as	$\checkmark$
syllabus documents	required by curriculum reform schedule	
Facilities and resources: build	Year 7 building completed for beginning	$\checkmark$
and fit out Secondary	of 2023. Year 8 building to be completed	and
classrooms	during 2023 for 2024 school year.	ongoing
Facilities and resources:	Sandpit size increased, shed concreted	$\checkmark$
improve grounds	and roof replaced, ongoing improvements	and
	to outdoor learning spaces	ongoing
Facilities and resources:	Admin area reconfigured and new	
admin and reception	reception space created with line of sight	$\checkmark$
	through to sick bay	
New website	Completed during 2023	~

# 1.3.3 Promoting Respect and Responsibility

Respect is a key value in our organisation and one of the three foundations underpinning everything we do at TNS (Respect – Safety – Learning). From Kindergarten our students are taught to respect themselves, others and the environment as outlined in the school rules. All members of our school community are expected to do the same. Students are also given a great deal of responsibility from a young age, as they move towards becoming "engaged global citizens" as outlined in our Mission statement. Year 6 students lead our quarterly Primary School Meetings, which include sharing big ideas, collecting maintenance reports, celebrating success and sharing gratitude; while our Secondary students run their own SM<sup>2</sup> (School Meetings Squared) where they raise agenda items, and Chair and document their own decisions.

Some examples of ways we promoted respect and responsibility across The Nature School in 2023 included:

- Adventure days and Field Studies trips to a wide range of community locations
- Community produce swap
- Koala Smart Program
- Harmony Day
- National Schools Tree Day
- Cleanup Australia Day
- Aussie Backyard Bird Week
- National Recycling week
- Great Southern BioBlitz
- Connection with The Lost Plot Community Gardens
- Caring for our own kitchen gardens, worm farms, chickens, lizards, and bees
- Weekly Community Cleanup school grounds

- Reconciliation Week Activities
- NAIDOC Week Activities
- Buddy Reading
- Gratitude circles
- Return & Earn
- Cultural Burning
- National Day of Action Against Bullying & Violence
- STEMSpreneurs
- World Ocean Day
- ANZAC Day
- Sorry Day
- Rotary Cardboard Boat Regatta
- Biggest Morning Tea
- National Simultaneous Storytime
- Rotary Photo Competition
- Local Spring Fair
- Year 6 Travel Showcase including local dignitaries
- Year 7 Water school Workshop to local public schools
- Annual Tree planting ceremony



# 2. OUTCOMES AND RESULTS 2.1 Student Outcomes in Standardised National Testing

Extract from TNS Assessment and Reporting Statement:

The purpose of assessment is to gather valid, reliable and useful information about student learning. At TNS we adopt an integrated approach to teaching, learning and assessment, and as such assessment is an ongoing and integral part of the teaching-learning cycle. Quality assessment tasks enable students to demonstrate what they know and can do while providing teachers with opportunities to gather evidence about student achievement in relation to syllabus outcomes.

At TNS we are committed to standards-referenced assessment that:

- is based on syllabus outcomes
- enables students to demonstrate their learning in a range of task types
- is free from bias
- is inclusive of and accessible for all students, with appropriate differentiations or adjustments provided as necessary
- is part of an ongoing process where progress is monitored over time
- is respectful of each child and sensitive to their age and developmental stage

A range of strategies may be used to assess student learning. The type of assessment activity and the means of gathering evidence will depend on outcomes, context, and students' learning needs. At TNS assessment strategies include:

- o teacher observations
- o anecdotal records
- o rubrics for rich assessment tasks
- o checklists

- o peer assessment
- o *self assessment*
- learning portfolios (a growing collection of student work samples from throughout the semester)
- o inquiry based research questions
- o hands-on activities or practical demonstrations
- o presentations

A 'test' should only be used when evidence of student knowledge and understanding cannot be collected any other way. At TNS we prefer authentic assessment tasks and work samples collected in the context of the usual school day and not under 'test conditions'. As such, we do not teach children how to perform in standardised tests or expect them to complete assessment tasks within strictly enforced time limits. While we fully cooperate with all legislative requirements regarding standardised tests, we are philosophically opposed to standardised testing and do not sacrifice valuable teaching time for practising past papers or teaching performance techniques.

\* \* \*

In 2023, many Y3 parents and some Y5 and Y7 parents withdrew their children from NAPLAN testing on philosophical grounds. NAPLAN participation for 2023 at TNS was 43%. The Y3 cohort did not meet the threshold for data to be publicly available in any area. Comparison data is not available, however data from Y5 and Y7 are tabled below:

2023					
Compare to	Compare to 🧿 Students with similar background 💿 All Australian students				
	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar	Numeracy
Year 3	-	-	-	-	-
Year 5	514	482	476	495	500
Year 7	567	561	570	557	540

The following is noted regarding students who completed NAPLAN testing at The Nature School in 2023:

- In Reading, both Y5 and Y7 scored above average when compared with students from a similar background and compared with all Australian students
- In Writing, students in Y5 scored similarly to their peers, while in Y7 students scored above average when compared with students from a similar background and compared with the national average
- In Spelling, Y5 scored slightly below while Y7 scored above average when compared with students from a similar background and compared with all Australian students
- In Grammar, both Y5 and Y7 scored similarly to their peers, and Y7 performed above the national average
- In Numeracy, Y5 scored slightly above average while Y7 performed similarly to their peers

## SECTION 3: STAFFING 3.1 Accreditation Status

Category	Number of Teachers
	- as at end of 2023
Conditional	3
Provisional	0
Proficient	12
HALT (Highly Accomplished / Lead – voluntary)	0
TOTAL	15

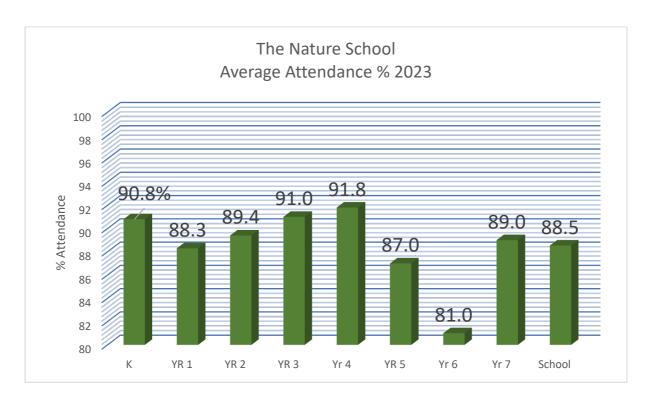
# 3.2 Workforce Composition

TNS School Staff – as at end of year 2023	
Teaching Staff	15
Full time equivalent teaching staff	10.8
Non-teaching staff	12*
Full time equivalent non-teaching staff	10.4

\*Currently 1 staff member (Non-teaching) identifies as Aboriginal.



# SECTION 4: ATTENDANCE 4.1 Student Attendance



In 2023, average attendance for the whole school was 88.5%. This is similar to the previous year where overall attendance was at 88.1%. The above graph also shows the attendance percentage breakdown by grade, ranging from 81% to 91.8%, which again is a similar range to the year previous. One cohort (Y6) continued to have an attendance rate considerably lower than the rest of the school, as was observed the previous year when this cohort was in Y5. Two post-covid factors continued to impact attendance overall: the first being parents not sending children to school with any cold and flu symptoms, and the second being families taking up postponed travel plans.

# 4.2 Managing Non-Attendance

The school implements policies and procedures for the management of student nonattendance. A daily record of school attendance of each student is maintained throughout the term. Parents/guardians are asked to communicate directly with the class teacher/administration office if their child is not attending school for any reason. This is preferably done through email but can also be done either in person or by phone. Any unexplained absence is followed up with the parents/guardians, firstly, to ascertain the safety and wellbeing of the child and, secondly, to remind them of the necessity to communicate with the school.

Initially if there are concerns with poor attendance the Head of School will meet with the parents/guardians to identify and discuss strategies and possible support to address the attendance issue. If the problem continues, the Head of School may develop a School Attendance Improvement Plan for the student and their family or may need to work collaboratively with other government or non-government agencies including AISNSW to escalate or arrange for a Compulsory Attendance Conference. The parents/guardians will be informed that continued days of absence could result in a mandatory report being lodged. All meetings with the parents/guardians and student will be documented and kept in the student's file.

# SECTION 5: POLICIES

The following TNS Policies are all available via the School's website:

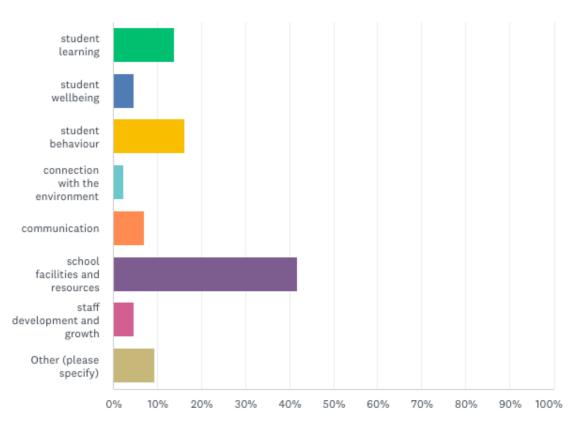
https://tns.nsw.edu.au/policies-and-reports.html

Policy	TNS Reference and Policy Name
Child Protection policy	TNS-003 Child Protection Policy
Anti-bullying Policy	TNS-035 Bullying Prevention Policy (Students)
Discipline Policy	TNS-012 Behaviour Management & Discipline Policy
Complaints Policy	TNS-014 Grievance Resolution Policy
Enrolment Policy	TNS-022 Enrolment Policy

# SECTION 6: STAKEHOLDER SATISFACTION

The annual survey provides an important avenue for families to give feedback on the school. Survey results highlight areas of strength, and opportunities for further growth. Our current parents continue to report high levels of satisfaction with the School overall, with 51% of parents reporting that the School 'meets expectations well' and a further 36% reporting that it 'exceeds expectations'. Only two parents reported dissatisfaction. As with previous years, parents were asked to evaluate how well the School supports their children's learning, wellbeing, and connection with nature. Consistent with previous surveys, 94% of parents feel that TNS supports connection with the natural environment extremely well or very well. 87% of parents reported that the school supports student wellbeing extremely well or very well. In considering student learning, 85% of parents feel that their children's learning needs are well supported overall, which is a 10% improvement on previous years. 12% report that learning needs are only met 'fairly well' and one parent is dissatisfied with learning at The Nature School.

Consistent with previous years, parents again overwhelmingly highlighted facilities and resources as the priority growth area for the School (42%). This was followed by Student Behaviour as a priority area (16%) and Student Learning (14%). Most 'other' comments highlighted the lack of a bus service provided to the School.



In which area do you think TNS most needs to continue improving?

Results of the 2023 staff survey revealed even greater emphasis on the priority area of facilities and resources (80%). Student Learning and Student Behaviour did not rank in 2023, reflecting significant improvement in these areas. Overall, staff are proud to work at The Nature School as reflected in their comments below.

#### Survey comments 2023:

	Survey Comments 2023
Parents	Schools sometimes give children the impression that they need to wait for their lives to start, that they should be restricted in all sorts of ways until adulthood and then they'll be able to do and achieve things. I love that The Nature School gives my child wonderful experiences and opportunities at school and in the community right now. It's not about children waiting to start living; they're living great lives now. TNS has completely transformed our child's learning experience. The hands-on approach to education fosters creativity, curiosity, and a deep connection to the environment. We love how our kids come home excited to share what they learned outdoors. Our children are thriving academically and emotionally by learning in such a nurturing, natural setting. The teachers are passionate and dedicated, creating a community that encourages our children to flourish. The Nature School provides a supportive, caring and ahead of the times learning community that really enables getting the best out of our children and their education, wellbeing and health. The mutual respect between teachers and the children sees children taking control of their learning environment, rather than being told to conform to one set way of learning that is set by the adults. It is an inclusive environment where the community works together as one with the greater good of our children in mind. The care shown by the staff, extends outside of school where there are information sessions with teachers and parents on managing certain tricky development steps at home that the children may be going through (eg technology use for the teens) as well was wanting to know what challenges may be occurring outside of school, in the home, to better have an
	understanding of your child when at school. The staff take the time to get to individually know each child, their strengths and weaknesses and their capabilities. I've never had a school be so involved in the individual learning and experiences of each child and it's been a life changer for our family.

Students	"I like building cubbies and climbing trees!"
	"Our school is special because we have Adventure Days and Tuesday
	Chooseday and Playworks."
	"I'm proud to go to The Nature School because of all the
	opportunities we get here."
	"My favourite subject is Food Tech."
	"The teachers really listen to students here and our voice matters.
	They trust us to make decisions in SM2 that affect the school."

Staff	I have always thought that this was the best school in Port Macquarie
	well before working here. The school has such a good reputation in
	the area. So when people ask me where I work I cannot wait to tell
	them and to tell them about everything that we do. I am proud to
	work for a school that looks at learning through a different lens. It is a
	privilege to work in a space that feels like they are making a change
	to the way people view student learning.
	Kids get to be kids. They get to be themselves, express themselves
	and share ideas. The focus on nature and exploration is inspiring and
	the out of the box approach is much needed in today's world.
	TNS has such a fantastic reputation as an outstanding school. The
	reaction you get from the public when you mention the school is gold
	and reflects how well we do things here.
	I'm proud of the amazing experience we are providing. People always
	say that this is the way all schools should be and I am so proud to be
	a part of this trail blazing group.
	Being a part of a school that genuinely wants to make change in
	education, not just for our students but for all children.



# SECTION 5: FINANCIAL INFORMATION

