FOR CONSIDERATION by the MPCS School Council

Moonee Ponds Central School (MPCS)

Report of an investigation into
A Viable School Structure

David McRae
May 2011
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Summary

Over the past decade primary enrolments at MPCS have considerably exceeded Departmental projections. However, enrolments in the secondary years are currently at a very low ebb, too low to sustain for both financial and educational reasons.

Enrolment does not drop off at Year 7 because parents are dissatisfied with the school per se. There is a strong level of parent satisfaction with the school as a whole. Its caring and affective aspects are what is most appreciated.

There is a group of parents which actively seeks qualities that can only exist in small schools for their children and they are happy with the way that MPCS provides them. Small schools do have important virtues. But it should also be noted that they can have drawbacks. They are subject to comparatively greater levels of impact from external shocks, and there is a risk of small and sheltered school environments attracting a disproportionate number of struggling or troubled students. Additional opportunities for leadership, may be somewhat illusory.

It was proposed that perceived shortcomings in MPCS’s program might be one factor significantly influencing parent enrolment choice in the secondary years. The absence of Design and Technology studies is cited. However only nine of the 87 responses to the survey conducted for this investigation felt this to be a matter of high concern, with several of the nine planning to keep their children at MPCS in Year 7 regardless. Discontent with the nature of the program is not the fundamental problem.

It was also proposed that the issue generating the decline in enrolment was the unavailability of a designated place in another secondary school at Year 9. No child can be excluded from school in general because they are seeking entry at Year 9. ‘The right of each child to a place in his or her designated neighbourhood school’ is a government guarantee. But seeking out-of-zone enrolment in the geographical area in which MPCS is located can be difficult. There is no foreseeable prospect of a special enrolment deal for Year 8 MPCS students at another secondary school being formalised.

There was also a suggestion that MPCS’s almost unique structure be preserved because it was in keeping with a new emphasis on the middle years of schooling. The vogue for structural adjustment related to that topic has passed and the focus for educational improvements associated with early adolescence has shifted to pedagogical practice. MPCS’s own experience of a middle schooling project was not sufficiently positive for the project to be sustained.

Transition to secondary school is a major marking point in a young person’s life. As a summary of middle years research puts it: ‘For most students it is a thoroughly welcome and highly anticipated rite of passage, the achievement of a benchmark of maturity.’ Students want to adopt the signs of growing up. The most obvious of these can be where you go to school. Pursuing this course of action, ie acting conventionally, is almost certainly the dominant influence on the decline in secondary enrolment. The biggest issue related to that transition is the establishment of friendship groups and fitting in socially. A number of parents were highly alert to this issue. They described the importance of being in at the beginning of establishing friendship groups which might last through the secondary years as a decisive factor in their decision to enrol their child elsewhere.
The target nominated by the MPCS School Council for sustainability of Years 7 & 8 is ‘two (ongoing) classes at each year level’, a minimum of approximately 80 enrolments. On the basis of the information to hand, the probability of this occurring in the short term is very low. The absolute best case scenario suggests an enrolment of 36 for Year 7 next year, but low to mid 20s seems more likely. Parents who have other children at the school in the lower grades were not among those who were definitely planning to keep their children at MPCS in Years 7 & 8.

There are two small groups of parents who have strong but opposed views about the future of the school. But, while interested in the school and generally believing that it should continue to offer Years 7 & 8, the majority of parents are focused firmly on what they believe to be the best interests of their child and, for most, that does not include secondary schooling at MPCS. There is nothing that the school could, or should, do to change this situation.

**It is on that basis I recommend the closure of Years 7 & 8 at MPCS.**

The future health and viability of the rest of the school should be the dominant consideration in steps taken to effect that decision.
THE TASK

As set out in the project brief, the task is as follows.

*To provide the School Council with a formal recommendation as to the most viable structure for the school.*

The recommendation should include, as a minimum:

- Outline of recommended structure
  - Includes capturing enhancements to curriculum where applicable
- Rationale for recommendation
- Evidence supporting recommendation as the most viable & sustainable option
- Identified risks (and potential mitigation strategies) associated with the recommendation
- Identified risks if the recommendation and its components are not accepted
- Other potential options with associated information around rationale, evidence and risks
- Ensure recommendation is supported by Western Metropolitan Region

Note: A recommendation that supports maintaining the existing P-8 structure must outline a clear strategy to support growth in the Year 7 & 8 space that will result in two (ongoing) classes at each year level.

The particular areas of contemporary concern were identified as:

- One Year 7 and one Year 8 class (Year 7 enrolments for the last 4 years are: 2010 – 15; 2009 – 24; 2008 – 39; 2007 - 42
- Curriculum — breadth (or perceived lack of breadth)
- Resources — (ICT environment)
- Workforce — retention; engagement & satisfaction

A number of specific topics/questions were suggested for investigation.

- Attitudes to the Year 7 & 8 program
- Attitudes to the school overall
- What does MPCS stand for?
- What does it offer our students?
- What is MPCS’s value proposition?
- What does MPCS do that other schools don’t?
- What does MPCS do that is ahead of other schools?
- What do other schools offer that MPCS doesn’t (can’t)?
THE APPROACH

The brief also provided guidance about the conduct of the investigation. ‘A transparent process’ was specified, ‘that assesses & reviews the school current environment, identifies strengths and weaknesses and explores opportunities and challenges through a consultation process that will engage with ... key groups.’ A series of internal and external stakeholders were nominated as being key groups.¹

While the investigation has proceeded in close accord with the specifications of the brief, there has been some variation. Staff from the Northern Metropolitan Region were interested in the issue but saw themselves as having no jurisdiction related to the issue or responsibility for direct input. Neighbouring kindergartens were not approached because entry into the primary years at MPCS is in a healthy state and doesn’t impinge on the central issue of structure in the upper years.

In the first discussion with the steering group and several times subsequently, I have suggested that while it is useful and interesting to look at a wide range of issues associated with retention to Years 7 & 8 and transition to secondary school in general — and I have tried to do that — the fundamental issue is whether students and parents will choose to stay or newly enrol at the school at Years 7 & 8.

Regardless of the quality of the school’s intentions, what has happened in the past or what it might offer in the future, the School Council’s stipulation of ‘two (ongoing) classes at each year level [7 & 8]’ requires enrolment from 80+ students. That is the unavoidable bottom line.

But if this was a simple decision it would have been made some time ago and there would have been no call for this investigation. It is not a simple decision. Good reasons have been advanced by some of the most immediate ‘stakeholders’ — students and their parents — for keeping alive even the very small operation that the secondary section of MPCS is at present. In fact it is the size that provides many of the perceived benefits.

Some of the teachers were attached to the status quo as well for what might be called organic reasons: often considerable experience of watching and having confidence in the interaction between the various elements of the school, by no means excluding its history as an unusual and perhaps special place.

In writing this report I have been conscious of these matters.

So how can the question, 'Why can’t you just leave things like they are?', be answered?

The issue has been deemed important enough for the School Council to take action and that is significant in itself. I have not been privy to the Council’s discussions and its specific reasons for mounting this investigation, but they are likely to include these.

• **Given the way government schools are funded**, maintaining Years 7 & 8 groups of this size has a negative impact on the rest of the school. There is a disproportionate cost which must

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¹ A list of those consulted and the media for consultation can be found at Attachment 1 (p. 32).
² Basically per capita with adjustments for special needs from within the student community. Students used to attract a greater level of funding than primary students. This is no longer the case.
be borne by the school as a whole in maintaining staffing (in particular) and operational infrastructure for year levels of a single group especially of less than 20 students and when an effort is being made to offer a program based on separate subjects broadly conforming with a conventional secondary curriculum. The 10% of the school’s students who are in the secondary sector are consuming about 20% of the school’s resources. If there were no other options the good sense and fairness of that situation might still be in question. But ...

- There are many alternative options for access to secondary education for MPCS students. There are around 2,200 small schools in Australia, including several hundred secondary schools, with enrolments of less than 100. But few if any of these are located in a major metropolitan area, five kilometres from the CBD, with access to a range of alternatives in terms of both institution and style of education. Educational agencies prefer to avoid maintaining very small schools if and where they can because ...

- The range of activities and options which a school can offer is proportionate to its size. In some ways this is at the heart of the investigation. Some families are quite happy to sacrifice whatever incremental benefit there might be in enhanced curricular offerings and school facilities for the value placed on the close personal interaction and individual interest and attention of a small institution. But there can be no question that it is easier to offer a wider curricular range and to equip the school with a wider range of facilities with a larger student base. The obvious case to hand is the capacity of MPCS to offer its secondary students studies in the Design and Technology area. That might not matter; but the inescapable fact is that, despite considerable effort, it can’t. There is an observable effect of a downward spiral. As one of the teachers said: 'The smaller [the secondary unit] gets, the less it is of anything.'

I believe these are sound reasons for the School Council’s investigation. I also believe, with the School Council, that the current numbers are not sufficient to maintain the secondary element of the school.

The questions then become: What might happen in the future? How many students can be anticipated? Do families with students in the primary years expect to maintain their enrolment at MPCS at Years 7 & 8? On what basis are the enrolment decisions being made? Could the school do anything to improve its market position?

These are the questions I have tried to answer.

I have received every assistance from the school community during this task and would like to place on record my gratitude for this to all concerned and especially to MPCS’s principal Mary Bluer. My thanks.

— David McRae
May, 2011

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3 Fourteen students take up one teacher in one room, just as 26 do. The EBA governing the conditions of secondary teachers, while thoughtfully modified at MPCS, still means they teach less time than their primary counterparts (Agreement: 22.5 hrs for primary vs. 20.0 hrs for secondary. At MPCS 21 hrs and 20 hrs.) The recent MPCS diagnostic review states: 'The reduction in numbers in Years 7 and 8 is having resource implications for the school and the fewer numbers has resulted in more part-time staff on smaller time fractions. As a result staff who teach in the Year 7 and 8 area reported in discussions with the reviewer that they are feeling less connected to the school and are worried about resource implications and the effect this may have on student learning.' (p. 3, emphasis added)
BACKGROUND

History

As the school’s website says: ‘The original school was established in 1919 and an extension was built in 1976. With Malvern Central School, we are one of two remaining Central Schools in Victoria’.4

‘The Central School provided a means through which students could access the first two years of secondary education in the era before mass provision. It also provided a pathway for entry to selective state high schools — Melbourne Boys High School, MacRobertson Girls High School and the University High School.’

MPCS’s primary connection was with University High School which was dissolved in 1971 when UHS moved to local rather than selective or ‘designated’ status as a basis for enrolment, at the same time extending its year level offerings to include Years 7 and 8. The enrolment connection with UHS was not severed completely at that point. It has continued with various degrees of strength so that up to six years ago, on an informal basis, MPCS graduates were given some modest priority for inclusion in the Year 9 class which was added at that level each year. This practice no longer occurs. UHS now has around 700 applications for the 200 places available at Year 7, 140 of which go to in-zone students and siblings of current students. The other places are filled through selective entry.

That connection no longer exists;5 nor does its function. For the vast majority of the population 100 years ago a primary education was a ‘complete’ education which would enable young people to enter the expanding market at the time for clerical jobs and non-manual labour. Victoria had only six government secondary schools which all began at what is now called Year 9. The model chosen for the expansion of secondary education in Victoria in the early 20th century was modelled on the English private system, whereby students (in the main, boys) would attend a ‘preparatory’ school before going to a ‘finishing’ school. The precise origins of this idea are lost, but it seems obvious that as the period devoted to formal education was extended, institutional layers were added to the process just as a matter of course rather than as a considered idea.

Something of the same sort happened with points of school entry and transition. Judgments which were justified as ‘common sense’ or ‘in accord with convention’ established points at which the care and nurture of a child could be shared between family and school6. Until very recently there was no uniform agreement between Australian jurisdictions about what that point was. Nor has there been agreement about the point at which students should transfer from the primary to the secondary years (in themselves arbitrary constructs): Year 7 (mostly) in SA, Qld and WA; Year 6 (mostly) in the rest of the country with, in recent times, some comparatively isolated local variations in transition points (P-4, 5-9, 10-12 for example; this is discussed further below, p. 20ff).

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4 The other two were at Elwood and Gardenvale, also feeder schools for Melbourne Boys and MacRobertson Girls High Schools.
5 It may be of interest to know that Malvern Central is in exactly the same situation. The vast majority, around 70%, of its students leave at the end of Year 6 for private schools. In the last few years more of its students (3) have enrolled at University HS than at Melbourne or MacRob HSs (0).
6 The rising incidence of long term day care complicated this picture a good while ago.
At its inception MPCS was a preparatory school for one of six government secondary schools. It is no longer a preparatory school in the formal sense; and there are 360 government secondary schools in Victoria, 29 alone in Western Metropolitan Region.

For various reasons it has been the policy of governments of all complexions to encourage, or at least not hinder, choice as a factor in school enrolment. Like most other schools and all other schools in the metropolitan area where choice is a reality, MPCS is now, and has been for some time, situated in a competitive marketplace for enrolments.

**Enrolment**

In April 2011 there are 347 students enrolled at MPCS in the following year level and gender configuration. A projection done by Western Metropolitan Region in 2006 suggested that numbers would today be in the region of 260. It is notable that this figure has been considerably exceeded.

**Table 1.**
**MPCS current enrolment (2011) by year level and gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>347</strong></td>
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</table>

The following table describes enrolment in terms of recent history. It also contains Years 7 & 8 enrolment as a percentage of the total enrolment.

**Table 2.**
**MPCS enrolments, 1998-2011 at Feb census: by primary, Year 7, Year 8 and 7&8 combined**

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<td>P-6</td>
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<td>183</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 7</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7&amp;8</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>289</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>347</td>
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<tr>
<td>7&amp;8 as % total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The broad trend in total numbers over the last decade has been growth. This is not true of enrolment in Years 7 & 8. In chart form, these trends are more visible.

**Chart 1: MPCS enrolments, 1998-2011 at Feb census: by primary, Years 7&8 combined**

The numbers bounce about, but in eight of these 14 years enrolment in Years 7 & 8 was more than the mean average of a little over 60. For the last two years they have been under 40, just over 10% of the total student population.

**It should be pointed out here** that, considering the target included in the brief of two (ongoing) classes at each year level — in essence, 80+ students enrolled — there have only been three years in the last 14 when that has occurred at MPCS and, despite the rude good health of the current primary numbers, 40 or more students are enrolled in only four of the seven primary year levels.

Another piece of data worth including here and helpful especially in thinking about prospective enrolments in the future is the pattern of continuing and new enrolments at Year 7 (which on the numerical evidence at least tend to be sustained in Year 8). The numbers for the past decade are as follows.

**Table 3: MPCS Year 7 continuing and new enrolments 2001-2011**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuing</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>enrolments</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enrolments (% of total)</td>
<td>12 (47)</td>
<td>11 (37)</td>
<td>8 (24)</td>
<td>5 (22)</td>
<td>9 (43)</td>
<td>15 (38)</td>
<td>14 (33)</td>
<td>15 (38)</td>
<td>13 (54)</td>
<td>5 (36)</td>
<td>9 (41)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average about four of every ten students in Years 7 & 8 at MPCS arrive from elsewhere. Surprisingly that was true when the total number of students was both 40 (2006) and 14.
(2010). 2009 was the only year during this period when there was a majority of new students.

Where do MPCS students come from? About three-quarters of the primary students do not come from the MPCS zone (see Attachment 3, pp. 35-36). While the proportion of secondary students living in and out of the different MPCS secondary zone has varied a good deal over the last six years the same figure is currently true of them, that is about three-quarters live out-of-zone.
SATISFACTION WITH MPCS

One reason why parents and students choose to leave MPCS at Year 7 could be because they are dissatisfied or only partially satisfied with the school.

The short answer is that that is not true, but there is a more complete and useful answer.

The Years 5 & 6 students I spoke with almost all described how much they liked school. They liked the facilities, many referred to the playing area, they thought their teachers were friendly and that you could make friends easily with other kids. They liked the sport, but they liked their subjects as well.\(^7\)

The survey of parents\(^8\) conducted for this investigation enquired about parent satisfaction with the school. A five-point Likert scale was used to help signify ‘How satisfied are you now with the education your child is receiving at MPCS?’ The following table and chart show the results.

Table 4: Overall levels of parent satisfaction with education at MPCS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all satisfied</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Extremely satisfied</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 6 families</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=37)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5 families</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=31)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4 families</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=19)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total as %</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^7\) These comments contrast with data from 2008 and 2009 contained in the school’s 2010 Annual Report and commented on as a special issue in the recent school review. The circumstances which gave rise to these data may now be out of date and less relevant, however there is an interesting *prima facie* logic about them. MPCS students are very good at coming to school perhaps reflecting the social composition and interests of the parent group, but Years 5 & 6 students’ attitudes to and engagement with school were substantially lower than the norm for these year levels at the time these data were collected. The trend was also downward. Years 7 & 8 students’ attitudes were considerably more positive. This may say that those particular students are happy to have stayed and, like their parents (see p. 26), are pleased with the school and what it offers them. This information may also indicate that many Years 5 & 6 students were getting ready to leave.

\(^8\) This survey drew a very high response rate, especially of Year 6 parents. See p. 33
Chart 2: Overall levels of parent satisfaction with education at MPCS

The data in this chart are well skewed positively, revealing a group which is generally quite satisfied, with a few outliers. (Three of the ‘don’t knows’ came from parents new to the school.)

The survey didn’t enquire about matters respondents didn’t like. The purpose of this item was to try to establish whether the reason for low enrolment into Years 7 & 8 was dissatisfaction with the school among senior primary parents. It may be, but only in a small number of isolated cases. The trend is otherwise. The verbal comments made at the forum didn’t provide many clues either about the nature of the outlying views apart from conventional complaints about minor aspects of the program or particular teachers.

A second item enquired about what they liked more specifically to get an idea about what might receive additional emphasis in the senior unit or what might help drive a marketing campaign. The sub-items offered were standard matters for parent judgment about a school. These are the results, again by the Year level of the respondents’ children. They have been ordered by incidence.

Table 5: What parents like best about the school (multiple answers possible)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Year 6 (n)</th>
<th>Year 5 (n)</th>
<th>Year 4 (n)</th>
<th>Total (n) (% of total mentions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring staff</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td><strong>61</strong> (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nice feel</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td><strong>50</strong> (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close to home</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td><strong>43</strong> (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good program</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td><strong>32</strong> (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good discipline</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td><strong>32</strong> (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good buildings and facilities</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>24</strong> (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High academic standards</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>20</strong> (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data may tell us two things.
They definitely tell us that the affective (and geographical) aspects of the school are well appreciated. Nearly 60% of all respondents were happy to tick ‘caring staff’ and almost 50% think that the school has a ‘nice feel’ — two good reasons for feeling satisfied with the nature of the school. That is obviously a strong perception. The placement of ‘high academic standards’ tells another story which other school data does not quite support.

The second thing might help to explain this placement. A substantial group of parents, mostly from out of the school’s zone, might have chosen MPCS precisely for its affective qualities. They choose it deliberately for its family atmosphere and the warmth and the caring quality of its teachers. High academic standards are a considerably less important consideration perhaps, at least until Year 7 ... and then, for a substantial proportion, it’s time for a change. And they make that change. A parent comment illustrates this perspective.

_The mentality of the school is that of a primary school. MPCS should focus on its strengths — up to Year 6._

But enrolment does not drop off at Year 7 because parents don’t like the school _per se_. The evidence suggests otherwise.
SCHOOL SIZE

I have suggested above that one of the main reasons why parents might choose to send their children to MPCS is because of the quality of its caring environment. This quality would be high on any parent’s list of concerns about schooling their child. I am not sure that MPCS does this exceptionally well, simply because I believe that most Australian primary schools do outstanding jobs in this regard. But in terms of its secondary area, this is partly, even mostly, a function of size. The very thing that makes the school unique and sought after by some parents is the source of the problem.

Putting some more flesh on the idea of the desirable attributes of a small school, it was suggested that at MPCS parents get attention immediately and personally, very good practice if that is the case; that every child is well known to several adults, and that for this reason and others problem situations are readily and quickly diffused; that there are no ‘gangs’ and no difficult groups, just a tight knit community.

These are the virtues of the small school, the ‘family’ school, where young people are given time to come to terms with the vagaries of the wider world with a very stable and secure home base. There is a school of educational thought that suggests all schooling should be like this or at least more so. Students in such situations get more attention, they get ‘more of a go’ at things and more responsibility, they are figures in their immediate community.

These are virtues and important ones. They obviously appeal greatly to a number of MPCS parents and their children. But, without wanting to undermine the general significance of the values that might stem from smallness, I want to provide three qualifications.

The example of the impact of size and structure which features prominently in the school’s marketing literature and also in the thinking and talk of some members of the school community is MPCS’s capacity to offer leadership opportunities. This is worth a brief discussion because I think it is not quite as it appears. Unusually MPCS offers school-wide leadership opportunities to students at Year 8. That is the function of the unconventional placement of Year 8 as the top of the school and not much else. As one teacher pointed out, it also means that Year 6 students don’t have access to school-wide leadership opportunities. There aren’t an unusually large number of leadership positions at MPCS and they aren’t rotated, so it’s a simple case of the smaller the group from which to choose the better the odds of being chosen.

The second matter is that small schools get large impacts from small incursions. Almost every teacher I spoke to told me about the ‘two students’ who were enrolled at MPCS a short time ago. From the descriptions they sounded extremely difficult cases and the school seems to have had less help than it should to manage them. It also sounds as though they would have been problems anywhere, but I suggest that in a larger school with a more diverse group of students, these students would not have had nearly the level of impact they had on MPCS. This is important: small schools are far more vulnerable to change and to impact from the outside world. A centimetre of cordial in a glass will provide a much stronger drink than a centimetre of cordial in a bottle. Except in extraordinarily sheltered environments which bring their own deep problems, shocks of this nature are inevitable. In the end you do have to live in the world.

The third issue is another form of risk which is clearly at hand. Small schools are great for everyone concerned when there is a mix of kids in terms of ability, social confidence, sense
of adventure and so on, and especially when the school can describe itself as having a strong top end of seniors who are smart and capable, and who can provide models of behaviour and demeanour for younger students.

Despite the fact that more than 70% of students leave at Year 6 and a good proportion beforehand, Malvern Central has no apparent problem with enrolment in Years 7 & 8 with a large influx of new entrants. But those new entrants tend to be students who are academically less capable and, for all sorts of reasons, behaviourally vulnerable seeking a sheltered environment. This is discussed below in the sub-section on readiness for transition (p.22) as something which can be a valuable function of a small school with stronger immediate connections to the primary rather than the secondary years. But what is a fair share? What impact does the increasing presence of students with modest learning and behavioural disabilities have on the rest of the (small) school?

The last thing I want to do is to foment concern about the senior unit of MPCS becoming a de facto special school. But I do want to point out that a healthy school has a mix of kids rather like the mix in the rest of society, not skewed in any particular direction and, for the sake of the other students and the buoyancy and reputation of the school, especially not in the direction of those who are struggling and require special help. Those students need to be shared around. That is one major reason why the integration of students with more serious disabilities in mainstream schools is so important. This is an issue which demands consideration.

What’s a good size for a school?

These can only be rules of thumb but they are advanced on the basis of a good deal of experience and observation just to think about. A school is too big when:

- teachers don’t know all or most of the students by sight
- students don’t know most of the teachers by sight
- students don’t mix with students from other year levels, and
- students are confused by or find difficulty with the systems (eg timetable, planned movements, arrangements for events and recreation) and/or geography of the school.

A class is too small when the group dynamic is always the same, when the views and behaviour of individuals are almost completely predictable, when the group never develops its own momentum and where there is no room for individuals to sometimes ‘hide’ or sink into the background.

Turning those notions into sizes, I suggest 13 or 14 is too small for a class, and 650 might be an upper limit for a school. The implication is that the senior section of MPCS could get a good deal bigger before it lost the desirable attributes generated by smallness, and should get considerably bigger to overcome its disadvantages.
THE PROGRAM

It was proposed a number of times that perceived shortcomings in MPCS’s program is one factor significantly influencing parent enrolment choice in the secondary years.

The minutes of the early meetings of the steering group supervising this investigation contain records of a discussion prompted by a comment that all Victorian government schools work to provide a guaranteed and viable curriculum. What, the group asked, was a ‘guaranteed and viable curriculum’? Is MPCS in a position to deliver this? What are the gaps at present? And the opportunities?

What is a guaranteed and viable curriculum? The most authoritative formal source for the nature of the program an Australian school should offer is the combined statement by all Ministers of Education, the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008)*. It specifies that young Australians should have a curriculum which includes:

- English
- Mathematics
- Sciences (including physics, chemistry and biology)
- Humanities and Social Sciences (including history, geography, economics, business, civics and citizenship)
- The Arts (performing and visual)
- Languages (especially Asian languages)
- Health and Physical Education
- Information and Communication Technology, and
- Design and Technology. (p. 14)

MPCS offers all these areas* except Design and Technology. This has been commented on a number of times, usually in terms of ‘no woodwork, no cooking’.

That noted, the school runs the ‘Compass’, ‘Advance’ and ‘Junior Duke of Edinburgh Award’ programs which are reportedly well enjoyed by students. It offers training in First Aid for its students. The ‘City School’ program provides a range of urban out-of-school experiences for Year 8 students. There is an extensive camping and excursion program for all students. A wide range of sports opportunities are on offer.

In fact when comparison is made with the programs offered by the new, and massive* P-9 schools in Western Region (see also p. 21), with the exception of Wood and Food Technology, MPCS has *exactly* the same offerings.

But, still, MPCS does not offer Wood or Food Technology. It does not have the facilities to do so. Various schemes have been tried in the past to include these studies or versions of them. Arrangements have been tried with Brunswick SC, Debney Park SC and Footscray City College, but each has been defeated by cost and highly problematic logistics (a minimum of 40 minute travel time one way to the other site for example). It is clear that it is not for want of trying on behalf of the school that the issue has not been resolved.

*Albeit with Italian rather than an Asian language. It is strong in both versions of the Arts.
*Both with more than 1000 students.
Does the absence of Wood and Food Technology matter?

In terms of the despoliation of a child’s educational experience, the answer is no. You can catch up; you can do it at home; you can do it elsewhere out of school. Other activities are almost certainly more important. At this time of your life, in absolute terms, social relationships are far more significant than curricular choice.

But how much does it matter to MPCS parents? How high do they rate the nature of the program, and in particular the absence of Design and Technology studies, in their reasons for choice of secondary school? (The students had no obvious interest in this question except that they wanted better computers.)

The survey enquired about this issue. Respondents were asked to ‘pick the ONE THING that would influence [them] to keep [their] child at MPCS for Years 7 & 8’ from a list derived from ideas and hypotheses proposed in discussions. Two items on this list were:

- Inclusion in the program of additional Technology Studies (eg cooking, woodwork, other (please write in)), and
- Innovative programs that include, for example, interdisciplinary teaching and a substantial number of excursions.

Neither item generated much response. Of the Year 6 parents, three said additional studies (citing media, Science, choir, orchestra, and ‘other interesting elective options’), but in two cases were going to maintain their child’s enrolment at Year 7 anyway. Three said ‘innovative programs’ which, as described, could be assumed to describe the program at MPCS but they were sending their children elsewhere anyway. In Year Five one said more electives (art and multimedia) and one said ‘innovative programs’, both ‘probably’ keeping their child at MPCS. With Year Four, one said ‘an elective program’, and there was one additional written comment:

_I would like to see 5-8 integration also Science and Wood to be part of the curriculum._

That is nine responses out of 87 with several of these respondents still planning to keep their children at MPCS in Year 7. Discontent with the nature of the program is not the deal breaker.

I think it is likely that these occasional or more frequent complaints about this issue may be convenient shorthand for a cluster of minor aggravations. There is no elective program in Years 7 or 8. In some other schools there might be. Or if not full-blown elective programs, some taster programs of curricular activities that might evolve further in the future. There is no laptop program. The computers in the classrooms are not crash hot and too often not working. Having computers in a lab is a bit 20th century. The school is not on Twitter; it doesn’t blog. It hasn’t got an enterprise program, or some other program for the Year 8s which will ‘take them into the 21st century’. Etc. Etc. Much of this may be window dressing, but it is how you dress windows today. It is a sign of alertness to the times which is not obviously present in the school.

But, I repeat, discontent with the nature of the MPCS secondary program is not the deal breaker with continued enrolment.
TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

The Mechanics and the Policy

Transition to another school for continued secondary education is something that every MPCS student faces. I was assured with considerable vigour by several people with long association with the school that the issue generating the decline in enrolment was the unavailability of a designated place in another secondary school at Year 9.

In the section on ‘Background’ in this report it is noted that the original function of the school was as a preparatory school for University HS and also that this function ceased on a formal basis 40 years ago. Since that time, however, there have been a number of informal arrangements in place which have provided some MPCS students at least with access to their preferred schools at Year 9 regardless of zoning. In the 1990s an arrangement of this sort existed for some years with Strathmore SC. University HS provided a ‘slight priority’ for MPCS students’ entry to an additional Year 9 class established each year up until six years ago. More recently Buckley Park College has taken to setting up an additional class at Year 9 into which MPCS students have been welcomed. The impact of this last can be seen in a list of destinations of Year 8 students in two recent years when there were rather more students in Year 8 (42 and 39) than at present.

Table 6: Destination of MPCS Year 8 students 2008, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buckley Pk SC</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princes Hill SC</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunswick SC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maribyrnong SC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footscray City College</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debney Pk SC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne Boys HS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacRobertson Girls HS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pascoe Vale Girls HS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ess Keilor SC</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzroy HS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic schools</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private schools</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Till now this arrangement has worked well for both schools. The principal of Buckley Park is pleased to receive the ‘well prepared, beaut kids’ from MPCS who in turn are provided with placements in an increasingly high demand secondary school. Nonetheless it is still a grace and favour arrangement. Buckley Park has had its enrolment capped; at Year 7 it receives twice as many applications as places available; the principal may change; and, even more likely, MPCS will not be able to provide sufficient numbers for the basis of the class added at Year 9. If this happens it will make this arrangement unviable for the secondary school.

No child can be excluded from school, of course, simply because they are seeking entry at Year 9. ‘The right of each child to a place in the designated neighbourhood school’ [emphasis added] is a government guarantee. But if you are seeking out-of-zone enrolment in this geographical area it will be difficult. Brunswick SC, Buckley Park College, Maribyrnong SC,
Princes Hill SC, Strathmore SC and University HS all currently have capped enrolment ceilings. Representatives of Princes Hill SC indicated that the school had been interested in the past in giving special consideration to a small number of out-of-zone MPCS students wanting to enter at Year 9. But this is obviously contingent on those places being available. To place that into context, the total number of places available for entry at PHSC at Year 9 in the last four years was three, seven, two and three.

The relevant government policy appears at Attachment 4. Its contents are likely to be familiar to parents of students around the age of primary-secondary transition: the ‘designated neighbourhood school’ must accept students who live in their zoned area; the presence of siblings will be a consideration. Many of the government schools MPCS students might be interested in also have a ‘curriculum’ provision whereby the students can indicate that they have educational background or skills suitable for a particular program or specialisation which runs at their preferred school.

But in one salient regard the policy is crystal clear. ‘Attendance at a particular primary school does not automatically guarantee enrolment at a particular secondary school.’ There is no foreseeable prospect of a special enrolment deal for Year 8 MPCS students being formalised.

Stages of schooling

Doesn’t the P-8 structure of MPCS fit with the new emphasis on the middle years of schooling? Isn’t there some value in that?

The most recent cycle of interest in the middle years began in the early 1990s, perhaps most obviously in 1992 with the publication of the Report of the Junior Secondary Review: The Education of Young Adolescents in South Australian Government Schools, which includes a comprehensive account of concerns related to early adolescence and the contributions schooling might make to their exacerbation. This Report argued that issues like truancy, inappropriate behaviour, alienation, non-compliance and other types of fairly low key but problematic adolescent rebellion were enhanced by the shock entailed by moving between two radically different cultures of schooling.

According to this description, primary school was focused on the nurture and support of individual students in a consistent ‘home’ group. The seams between subjects could be stitched together more effectively by the continuity of the teacher and learning group. Not only do you have a ‘home’ group but you have a ‘home’ room which provides additional stability. But then, at the most sensitive school/life point (ie early adolescence), the new arrangements for secondary school produce experiences of fragmentation and isolation.

The solution proposed was to modify the arrangements in the early secondary years by reducing the number of teachers students had contact with, reducing student movements, integrating subjects and paying more attention to the pastoral requirements and group cohesion aspects of the secondary entrants. The senior years of primary school might also be modified to make aspects of that experience more like secondary school. This discussion

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12 Vivian Eyers, with Phil Cormack and Robyn Barratt, published by the Education Department of SA. The call for change was more emphatic in SA because of a comparatively late school starting age (6+) and transition at the end of Year 7, leading to students as old as 14 still enrolled in primary school.
13 Along with ample other research evidence on which the report drew. I am using the Report here as a useful summative example.
14 Statistically these issues peaked then and still do at the ages represented by Years 7-9.
advanced the notion of changing the stages of schooling to (something like, ideas varied) P-4, 5-9, 10-12.

The middle schooling movement had a substantial vogue. The Commonwealth Government published an influential paper\(^{15}\) which was the precursor to a major national program designed to investigate practical ways of implementing these ideas. South Australia began developing its new schools with these suggestions in mind and new practical examples of the ideas (themselves hardly new) cropped up elsewhere. Victoria, for example, instituted its comparatively large-scale\(^{16}\) MYRAD (Middle Years Research and Development) program; and if one downloads the DEECD’s advice on transition it is still headed ‘Middle Years 5-9’.

The Commonwealth’s middle years contribution was configured as part of the ‘School Innovation: Pathway to the Knowledge Society’ program. The report of four years of work\(^{17}\) suggests that what was learnt is that schooling (secondary in particular) needs to be more learner-centred, an enduring theme in school improvement literature. Little evidence of the value of structural or ‘stage’ change was found. In its detailed search of student attitudes, MYRAD discovered that in fact only a very small minority of junior secondary students were disaffected. Most liked their teachers, enjoyed school and felt comfortable there. As with the Commonwealth program, MYRAD’s focus shifted to general issues of reform of school practice\(^{18}\). While there are more structural variations in schooling than there were 40 years ago, the focus has very obviously shifted from changing structures to changing pedagogical and other internal school practices as a solution to the educational problems of young adolescents.

In this context it was pointed out several times that the Western Region had supported the recent development of two P-9 schools. Can I suggest that these developments reflect enthusiasms that were current 10-15 years ago, roughly the time taken to move a school from being an idea to a going concern. It is also important to understand that both these schools have characteristics which make them very much unlike MPCS. They are both in corridors of remarkable population growth. Baden Powell College consists of two campuses (a P-6 at Hopper’s Crossing and a P-9 at Tarneit). It has more than 1500 students and 120+ teachers. Point Cook P-9 (planned for an enrolment of more than 1000 students) should be considered as a subset of new education provision in Point Cook with a developing senior 10-12 College adjacent.

MPCS has had its own experience of the influence of the middle years movement. In 2003 it was part of a Western Region network program which involved Years 5-8 students and teachers from North Melbourne PS, Carlton Gardens PS, University HS (Yr 9 students) and Ascot Vale Special School as well as MPCS. The program ran for one day a fortnight over a year with the students working together on topic-based units (gene technology is one which is remembered) and activities like cross-age tutoring. It was supported by additional funding and the work of a dedicated project officer. When the funding ceased there was little call for it to continue. One issue which emerged was the very large developmental difference between Year 5 and Year 8/9 students. The students themselves didn’t want it. This experience has been widely replicated.

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\(^{15}\) National Board of Employment, Education and Training (1994) *The Middle Years of Schooling* Canberra: AGPS

\(^{16}\) Sixty-one clusters of schools across the state made up of 61 secondary colleges and 195 primary schools were involved.

\(^{17}\) www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/school_innovation chapter_5.htm

\(^{18}\) See Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) Project: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (2002) downloaded from the DEECD’s ‘edulibrary’
In terms of transition, my understanding of the history of the secondary unit at MPCS is that for most of its life, and to varying degrees, it has run as its own small school and hence the school has had its own transition program with the added convenience of it taking place on site. As I understand it, there were long periods when the secondary school not only had its own building, staff (with their own staff room, and conditions), timetable and program (which go a long way towards the definition of a separate school), but also its own bell times. The differences in uniforms, access to positions of responsibility, eating and play spaces remain.

Running two ‘schools’ on the same site is a bad situation. The school as a whole would be considerably more difficult to run, less coherent as an entity and, because this is just how things go, a disproportionate level of power and influence would be accorded to the secondary staff who nonetheless would not be taking responsibility for what was happening in the primary years.

This is not how things are at present. One of the deficiencies of this investigation is that it coincides with significant efforts to better integrate the two parts of the school. These are only a few months old and there is no way of determining their impact.

But, in summing up this section, MPCS is not an outpost of the middle years schooling movement and it would not be to anyone’s advantage if it was.

**Readiness**

Whenever and however it occurs, the transition to secondary school is a major marking point in a young person’s life.

As I spoke to the groups of Years 5/6 students about their futures, there was a sense of suppressed excitement (which became progressively less suppressed) about going to secondary school despite the point of transition being either 9 months or, for the Year 5s, nearly two years away. As a summary of middle years research puts it: ‘For most students it is a thoroughly welcome and highly anticipated rite of passage, the achievement of a benchmark of maturity.’\(^{19}\) They don’t mind the challenges of changing schools and sectors. The bother they encounter will be well matched by the pay off — growing up.

There is no real need to cite research to evidence the idea that it is a highly approved social convention to change schools at the end of primary schooling.\(^{20}\) It is plainly obvious, and this is unquestionably one of the major reasons why students leave MPCS at the end of Year 6. It’s time; as inevitable as birds hatching in spring, and should be respected as such.

What’s the biggest issue about transition for students themselves? The program? Excursions and camps? Sport? A great uniform?

None of those. It’s ‘having friends’, and its close relation, ‘fitting in socially’.\(^{21}\)


\(^{20}\) No doubt this is one of the reasons why MPCS maintains primary/secondary distinctions visible to students. The demand is coming from the clients.

\(^{21}\) ibid. p.3
This cuts a number of ways. Peer influence will be a major determinant of the choices students and their parents make. One parent wrote on the survey:

_The main reason we would leave at Grade 6 is so our child can start at secondary level with everyone else. I have a concern about my child, particularly being a girl, entering a school after friendship groups have formed. If I knew her and all her friends staying at MPCS would all go to the same school in Year 9, I’d be happy for her to stay till Year 8._

This parent also said his/her child would probably be enrolling in Year 7 at MPCS in 2012. If the decisive condition is as described, it would appear unlikely that this will occur.

Friendship groups. They recur consistently as a consideration by parents at the forum and in the comments they wrote in their surveys.

_Friendships. My daughter doesn’t want to stay at MPCS because she thinks all her friends are leaving at the end of Grade 6._

_I would not be able to pick just one [of the reasons] as it would have to be more than one to influence me. For my child I think it would be difficult socially to start with a group that has been together two years._

_Moving schools in Year 9 is potentially difficult socially and I would never choose this as an option for my child._

But if friendship groups are so important wouldn’t you stay with the ones which are established?

That question has lost sight of the combination of two telling factors: we’re moving into a new situation at some time anyway AND we want the best possible opportunities to deal with that new situation. As one teacher noted: ‘Staying on at MPCS [to Year 7 & 8] doesn’t suit everyone. Some kids obviously grow out of this school. They need a bigger and more diverse social group.’ Similar views were offered almost unanimously by the teaching group.

But there are also some fledglings for whom survival is especially difficult and who might benefit from some extra time in the nest. The same teacher reminded us: ‘The range of ability and maturity levels at Year 7 is huge.’ Several teachers spoke very thoughtfully of the value of delaying the full-blown transition to another institution for a year or two for some students. ‘It really suits some kids’, one said. ‘It gives them a chance to pace the development of new friendship groups and gives them a structure that they can rely on.’ Another offered: ‘I have watched enormous shifts in kids from being vulnerable and a bit fragile in their learning to becoming responsible, confident, established learners with those extra two years here.’

I have no doubt this is true.
THE BOTTOM LINE

The Numbers

The target nominated by the MPCS School Council for sustainability of Years 7 & 8 is ‘two (ongoing) classes at each year level’, a minimum of approximately 80 enrolments. The probability of this at least in short term is the focus of what follows.

It begins with a caveat. No one can say with any precision what the Year 7 enrolment at MPCS in 2012 will be until February next year. 2012 enrolment applications close on May 20 next. On August 12 primary schools will advise parents on secondary placements, but this will not be the end of the story. People make up their minds at the last minute — the proportion of parents indicating their uncertainty is well evidenced below — other enrolment options are realised or fall through, families shift in or out of the area unexpectedly. MPCS can expect about 40% of its enrolment at Year 7 to be new entrants but only with a fair level of confidence. It might be 30%, or it might be 55%. The following figures should be approached with these facts in mind.

First the students. I spoke with each of the four classes of Years 5/6 students and listened to them talk about MPCS and their future plans. Pace what is said above, students in three of the four classes seemed remarkably certain about where they were headed in Year 7, if less so in the fourth class. It seemed to me that the views of most of these children will be very influential in whatever decision is made about their destination.

What mattered for them, or at least what were the considerations in their minds? Four things stood out. These are in order of incidence.

The first was the importance of friendship groups in the two variants referred to above: wanting to ‘go with your friends’; and wanting to form friendship groups at the beginning of a new experience, the same time as ‘everybody else’.

The second was location of siblings. ‘I’m going to Strathmore with my sister’, ‘... Buckley Park with my brothers’, ‘my family is at Maribyrnong’, etc.

The third was geographical location. The decision had been made to shift, but where to go was the school close at hand.

Lastly, Year 7 is clearly being used as the point at which to change sectors\textsuperscript{22}. In the first two classes, destinations students nominated included MLC, Penleigh (2), Westbourne Grammar, Assumption Kilmore, St Columba’s (2) and St Bernard’s (2) — about 20% of this group. About eight of the 25 in another class said they were going to private schools. This also appears, if a little obliquely, in one parental comment:

\textit{Access to private schools: The confidence and certainty that the academic standards and rigour of other alternatives, like private schools, would definitely be on offer.}

Destination figures from previous years (p.19) suggest this might be an accelerating phenomenon.

\textsuperscript{22}This happened at Malvern Central many years ago. More than 80% of students exiting at Year 6 go to non government schools.
These figures MUST be treated as indicative only, but ‘hands up for staying on at MPCS in Year 7’ suggested that of the 99 Years 5/6 students in the four classes present on the contact days, 24 thought they definitely would be doing so. That is not 24 Year 6 students, but 24 Years 5 & 6 students combined.

The Parents. The survey asked directly: ‘Where will your child be for their Years 7 & 8 education?’ Five options for response were proffered: ‘Definitely at MPCS’, ‘Definitely not at MPCS’, ‘Probably at MPCS’, ‘Probably not at MPCS’, ‘Not sure’. These are the results.

Table 7: ‘Where will your child be for their Years 7 & 8 education?’ Parent response by child’s Year level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Definitely at MPCS</th>
<th>Probably at MPCS</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Probably not at MPCS</th>
<th>Definitely not at MPCS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=37</td>
<td>(75% of total)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=31</td>
<td>(60% of total)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=19</td>
<td>(50% of total)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assuming that all the ‘definites’, ‘probables’ and ‘not sures’ continue enrolment at MPCS and that the pattern of choice of non respondents is directly aligned with that of the respondents, there will be 26 continuing students in Year 7 next year. Add 10 students as the 40% complement of new enrolments and the result is 36. That would be pleasing to the school. But this is the absolute best case scenario and unlikely. A more realistic prediction would be low-mid 20s, or one class, considerably short of the Council’s target of around 40.

To provide another dimension to these data, the survey enquired if respondents had other children at the school, ie in lower year levels. This provides an indication of what might happen in the future. If, for example, enthusiasts for enrolment at MPCS had other children in junior grades this might augur well for future enrolment.

Cross referencing these responses the results were as follows.

Table 8: ‘Where will your child be for their Years 7 & 8 education?’ Parent response by having other children at the school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other children at MPCS</th>
<th>Definitely at MPCS</th>
<th>Probably at MPCS</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Probably not at MPCS</th>
<th>Definitely not at MPCS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n=41 (almost 40% of respondents)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When combined with the trend in the responses of the Year 6, 5 and 4 parents in Table 7 little comfort can be drawn from these responses.

There is one other matter of interest about these results. Two groups emerge from the survey results (taken as a whole) with emphatic but opposed views about the future of the school.
There are five ‘sets’ of results which indicate that these particular respondents were mostly extremely satisfied with the school, that it was of the highest importance that the early secondary years are kept on offer at MPCS, and that their child will definitely be enrolling. As an important addendum, the comments that came from this group suggested that it might have been the idea or the potential of the school that they relished rather than the current standard of execution. This is what would be decisive in school choice for two members of this group:

A small group of dedicated teachers with support from the principal who engage with the children to excite them to excel.

Committed teachers and total commitment from the school to a viable, vibrant Year 7 & 8 program.

This comment may also belong here. I’m not sure. It came from a member of this ‘set’.

I want a Year 7 and 8 program superior to anything offered in other secondary schools that clearly links to the senior school levels and VCE.

On the other hand there are seven ‘sets’ of results which are less pleased with the school, with respondents who say keeping Years 7 & 8 at MPCS has no importance, and suggest sentiments of which the following comment is the strongest expression.

There is nothing that would convince me to stay with MPCS. Years 7 & 8 have not been developed to be of any benefit to the school.

The comment recorded on p.14 above is also from this ‘set’.

There is some indication that both groups want improvement, but one wants to fight on while the other is prepared to seek their solution elsewhere.

This is not how most respondents feel. The considerable majority have an interest in and concern for the school, but these are vastly outweighed by their concern about the interests and wishes of their child.

Varies depending on the child. Each of our kids will have a different need or want.

Overall, the right school for this particular child.

Being convinced my child wouldn’t be disadvantaged by missing Years 7 & 8 at the secondary school where they will end up.

I am worried that there is something my child will miss out on if they stay [at MPCS].

These parents just want to do the best they can. They’re thinking about it, not sure about some things, plenty of things. But one thing they do know is — kids come first.
What are the clinching factors in this decision?

Another item on the survey, referred to already in this report, asked respondents to ‘Pick the ONE THING that would influence you to keep your child at MPCS for Years 7 & 8.’ The options were drawn from other discussions and hypotheses that had been advanced. Some answers to this question have already been discussed and conclusions proffered.

One of the reasons for including this item was because of the very strong view tendered by some people with well-established connection with the school that there was one specific reason for the decline in enrolment — no guaranteed place at a secondary school in Year 9 for MPCS students. It has been noted that there is a guaranteed Year 9 place for all MPCS students — at the student’s neighbourhood school. I think that what was really meant was that there is no secondary school which has a direct and formal feeder relationship with MPCS, something which dissolved 40 years ago and to which there is no obvious prospect of returning. But I was assured that this was what concerned parents, and I could imagine the debilitating sense of dangling uncertainty that might linger during Year 8 for some people, students and their parents alike. I had difficulty nonetheless including the right wording for it as a sub item.

Trying to force this choice might not have been a helpful exercise because, as a good number of respondents replied or implied, a whole series of issues are included in the decision-making process. The number of respondents who ticked many of the boxes simply underlined that point. Apart from noting the good sense of their action, I have left them out of the following discussion.

The results do have a number of interesting aspects.

From the available options, Year 6 parents responded as follows.

• 9 respondents ticked: High level opportunities for individual support and tuition, one adding ‘adaptation to a child’s learning needs’
• 5: Guaranteed place at a particular secondary school
• 3: Innovative programs that include, for example, interdisciplinary teaching and a substantial number of excursions
• 3: Inclusion in the program of additional Technology Studies (‘media’, ‘Science’, ‘choir, orchestra’, ‘other interesting elective options’)  
• 2: High level opportunities for positions of responsibility
• 1: Presence of a sibling in the lower grades  
• 1: More inter-school sport

Year 5 parents responded as follows.

• 18 respondents: High level opportunities for individual support and tuition, one mentioning provision for special educational needs
• 4: Guaranteed place at a particular secondary school
• 2: More inter-school sport
• 1: Inclusion in the program of additional Technology Studies (‘art and multimedia’)  
• 1: Innovative programs that include, for example, interdisciplinary teaching and a substantial number of excursions

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23 See a copy of the survey on p. 35s
Year 4 parents responded as follows.

- 4 respondents: Guaranteed place at a particular secondary school
- 3: High level opportunities for individual support and tuition
- 2: Close and lasting pastoral relationships with teachers
- 1: High level opportunities for positions of responsibility
- 1: The opportunity to extend the period before being exposed to the turbulence of other adolescents.
- 1: Presence of a sibling in the lower grades
- 1: Inclusion in the program of additional Technology Studies (‘elective program’)

The most prominent issue is ‘High level opportunities for individual support and tuition’. (Note the striking incidence of views from the Year 5 parents.) This was supported or perhaps qualified by two comments related to teaching.

*Stability of qualified teachers.*

If I can be sure that the (new) teaching team is enthusiastic and competent.

The ‘guaranteed place’ matters to some, but these data do not suggest that it is a dominant concern. Program issues have been discussed elsewhere (p.18).

The meaning of these results taken as a whole is uncertain: the ‘decisive reasons’ do not align with the proposed choices for enrolment. The same ‘decisive reason’ can be and is related to each of the five enrolment options.

One might imagine that the corollary of the strong support for ‘high level opportunities for individual support and tuition’ would be enrolment in MPCS at 7 & 8, a small school where they might be considered more likely to occur. But the evidence is not there for that. A more appropriate reading could be that whatever school we choose it will have this quality. It may also say something about the past, the reasons why parents chose to enrol their children in MPCS originally, rather than the future. What is true is that no marketing campaign (based, of course, on the reality of practice) should fail to focus on this point.

**What would change this situation?**

*A ‘champion’ to drive excellence at Years 7 & 8, not complacency.*

A thoughtful comment along these lines was also made at the forum, the implication being that the school was not trying hard enough to maintain the quality of and public interest in its senior section. It might be true that if a capable, energetic and determined ‘champion’ of this idea emerged, new enrolment could be captured for Years 7 & 8. But, for a number of reasons, that ‘champion’ would have to be a member of staff.

The report of the 2010 school review states: ‘The majority of staff also support the central school structure and report that the opportunities for students in Year 7 and 8 related to building learning confidence and resilience is great.’ (p.3) That comment only partially represents the views of the staff members to whom I spoke.
Members of staff can’t adopt the position that remaining at the school for Years 7 & 8 is the right choice for all or even most students. They are keenly aware that this is not the case. Their responsibility is to do the right thing for the students and their parents, not to be marketing managers for a section of the school. In general terms, a substantial number of the primary group thought the extended years had virtues which might be important for some students, but weren’t prepared to go to the wall to maintain them. A smaller number didn’t care one way or the other but wanted the issue resolved so it didn’t intrude so much into school life. One made a special effort to tell me, ‘We’ve got to go one way or the other and have a definite direction.’ The specialists didn’t feel that their work was much impacted by the school structure. The new Years 7 & 8 staff were determined to make a go of things, were well organised and had good ideas. But there was only one member of staff who was insistent that the secondary section should be maintained.

Something of the same sort was evident in parent responses to the survey question: ‘How important is it to you that Moonee Ponds CS maintains Years 7 & 8 provision?’ These were the results.

**Table 9: How important is it to you that Moonee Ponds CS maintains Years 7 & 8 provision? Parent responses, number and proportion (n=87)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 (14%)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23 (26%)</td>
<td>13 (15%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On a chart, ignoring the ‘not sure’ group, that distribution looks like this, strongly positive.

**Chart 3: How important is it to you that Moonee Ponds CS maintains Years 7 & 8 provision? Parent responses, number, deleting ‘not sure’ responses**

Aspects of the ‘not at all’ response have been commented on above, but it is small compared with the numbers in the fourth and fifth columns. Parents believe that it is important for MPCS to maintain Years 7 & 8 provision — but they won’t necessarily enrol their children there. They want the option, they like the idea, but when it comes down to it other issues will prevail. To change that mindset a champion would have to locate strategies which are not immediately obvious.
CONCLUSION

On the basis of the information collected via this investigation it is unlikely that MPCS will achieve an enrolment of two classes at each of Years 7 & 8 in the foreseeable future.

The summary at the beginning of this report tells the story.

There are some wonderful and widely appreciated things about MPCS. But when it is all boiled down, providing Years 7 & 8 is not at or near the top of that list. People appreciate the school’s history, its uniqueness, the ideals of its structure and in particular, the support it can provide for kids who need something extra or delayed entry into the wider world — and its existence as an enrolment option. All of these matters are forthrightly acknowledged by the investigator as well as the informants.

But larger forces are at work.

Whether it is a change in public mood (and the shift to private schools at Year 6 may presage that), the shocks received from the two problem boys that put parents off, or many other possibilities, the natural desire to shift to ‘big school’ has become more urgent and emphatic. The numbers are not there, and it is very hard to see where they might come from in the future. I have explained elsewhere in the report why I, along with the Council, believe this situation cannot be sustained.

I therefore recommend that procedures be instituted immediately to begin the closure of Years 7 & 8 at MPCS. This procedure should be marked by full consideration of the needs and interests of students and their parents, but it is likely that it will be better if this process is decisive and effected as speedily as possible.

There are other matters which require sustained attention at MPCS. This major change should provide an opportunity to re-examine the practices of the school and to increase the level of crisp professionalism that should characterise its operations. The 2010 review has provided a list of key issues which at that time required attention. The brief for this investigation was not to look at these, but I suggest that they are not fully resolved and still require sustained attention.

There is no reason to think the school will not thrive in the future, but it should be without Years 7 & 8.
Attachment 1.

Methodology

The brief provided defined the process to include the following.

The scope will ensure a transparent process that assesses & reviews the school current environment, identifies strengths and weaknesses and explore opportunities and challenges through a consultation process that will engage with the following key groups:

Internal stakeholders:
• Teaching staff
• Non-teaching staff
• Parents & Guardians
• Students (P-8)
• Past students years 6, 7 & 8

External stakeholders:
• YMCA
• Surrounding secondary schools
• Neighbouring primary schools
• Kindergartens
• Northern Metropolitan Region
• Western Metropolitan Region
• Malvern Central School

Project Process:

Data will be gathered from the above groups through a range of activities (as relevant to each group), for example surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, targeted interviews etc.

Questions to be explored / teased out include:
• Attitudes of the Year 7 & 8 program
• Attitudes to the school overall
• What does MPCS stand for?
• What does it offer our students?
• What is MPCS’ value proposition?
• What does MPCS do that other schools don’t?
• What does MPCS do that is ahead of other schools?
• What do other schools offer that MPCS doesn’t (can’t)?

I have discussed the choice of focus and reasons for doing so above in the body of the report. This has resulted in some reduction in the number of groups contacted, but no group who could shed light on the question: ‘What will happen to Years 7 & 8 in the near future?’ was missed. This report also does not answer except obliquely the questions — ‘What does MPCS stand for?’ and ‘What is MPCS’ value proposition?’ They are testing questions to answer with any authenticity of an institution in any case, but they seemed to fall outside the range of the most immediate concerns of the investigation.

Work began in late February, 2011 with a discussion with John Dainutis (representing Western Metropolitan Region) which focused on several matters: the position taken by the Region about the current school structure, the administrative process, the role to be played by the School Council, general enrolment policy and any enrolment policy which applied particularly to MPCS. I have spoken to him several times subsequently to keep him in touch with the progress of the investigation.

Contact was made with a spokesperson for the Northern Metropolitan Region who indicated that he felt this was an issue which rightly belonged to the Western Region.
At this time I also had, separately, several long conversations with Mary Bluer for essential background and helpful observations about the nature of the situation. Those conversations have continued over the period of the work.

On 25 February I visited Malvern Central School and had a lengthy conversation with Kerry Clayton, its principal, who also provided some useful documentation and data about student movement. We discussed the issues that school faced which were similar to and different from the experience at MPCS, and the nature of the challenges confronting Malvern for the future.

Early in March I had phone conversations with principals (mostly) and/or other relevant representatives of Brunswick SC, University HS, Princes Hill SC, Buckley Park SC and (in early April) Strathmore SC. The topics of these conversations were: current enrolment policy, nature of enrolment processes at present, enrolment at Year 7 and at Year 9 — places available, what happens, and views on how different students’ adaptation is, experience of enrolment arrangements with MPCS (where relevant), and experience with MPCS students.

On 9 March a meeting was convened of parents of Years 4-6 students; 39 attended and lively discussion ensued which revealed fairly precisely the parameters of the issues displayed in the survey responses from a larger group of parents. Those present filled in a survey form which inquired about their attitudes to the school, intentions for their children’s Years 7 and 8 schooling and the major factors in the choice they had made. This same survey (see Attachment 2) was sent home with all Grades 4-6 students for completion. The surveys were returned to school at a very high rate from Year 6 families (37 of 49, or 75%), a good rate from Year 5 families (31 of 51, or just over 60%) and rather less from Year 4 families but still 19 of 38, or 50%. The return rate is in fact better than these figures indicate as several families, who will have responded only once, have children in more than one of these years.

In the week of 14 March several days were spent in the school talking to most of the teachers (all of the classroom teachers and a number of the specialists). The topics discussed were general issues about the functioning of the school, especially its good points, if and how other units interacted with the secondary unit, the social relationships and interaction of the students, the importance of Years 7 & 8 to the school and the reasons for the views expressed. I had a follow-up meeting with the student coordinator and the curriculum coordinator as senior members of staff with specific briefs. I also spoke at some length with the deputy principal.

In the subsequent week I spent about half an hour talking with each of the four Grade 5/6 classes. The topics were: what they liked about MPCS currently, what they thought about when they thought about making choices of secondary school, whether or not they knew where they were going to be in Year 7, if they did where that was. This is an incidental observation but I would like to note the quality and thoughtfulness of the students’ contributions, the confidence with which they were delivered and the skills at turn-taking and sharing which enabled everyone to have a go — a tribute to them certainly but to their teachers as well.

Documentation: Relevant documents about: enrolments; previous discussions of this issue; school prospectuses, brochures and parent notices; contemporary student performance data; and the report of the recent school review have been received, read and, where relevant, incorporated into this report.

I have also reviewed a collection of research focused on transition and the middle years of schooling, some of which is referred to in the report.

A written progress report was provided to the steering committee on 23 March, and this document was delivered on 4 May.
THE FUTURE OF YEARS 7 AND 8 AT MOONEE PONDS CENTRAL SCHOOL

1. What year level is your child in?
   Year ______

2. Do you have other children at the school? YES/NO

3. How satisfied are you now with the education your child is receiving at MPCS? (Circle one.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. What do you like best about the school at present? Tick each item you like.
   - Caring staff
   - Close to home
   - High academic standards
   - Good discipline
   - Good buildings and facilities
   - Good program
   - Nice feel

5. How important is it to you that Moonee Ponds CS maintains Years 7 & 8 provision? (Circle one.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Where will your child be for their Years 7 & 8 education?
   - Definitely at Moonee Ponds CS
   - Definitely not at Moonee Ponds CS
   - Probably at Moonee Ponds CS
   - Probably not at Moonee Ponds CS
   - Not sure

7. Pick the ONE THING that would influence you to keep your child at MPCS for Years 7 & 8.
   - High level opportunities for individual support and tuition.
   - Presence of a sibling in the lower grades.
   - Inclusion in the program of additional Technology Studies (eg cooking, woodwork, (other, Please write in)).
   - Guaranteed place at a particular secondary school.
   - More inter-school sport.
   - High level opportunities for positions of responsibility.
   - Close and lasting pastoral relationships with teachers.
   - The opportunity to extend the period before being exposed to the turbulence of other adolescents.
   - Innovative programs that included, for example, interdisciplinary teaching and a substantial number of excursions.
   - Something else or some of the above expressed differently (Please write in.)
Attachment 3.
MPCS’s Enrolment Zones
Relevant extracts from the notice:

1. **NEIGHBOURHOOD SCHOOLS POLICY**

The principles of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development neighbourhood school policy are:

- To guarantee the right of each child to a place in the designated neighbourhood school.
- Wherever practical, to provide parents/guardians with the opportunity to enrol their child at the same school as that being concurrently attended by an older brother or sister who resides permanently at the same address.
- To allow parents not wishing to send their child to the neighbourhood school to select any other school in which **space is available**.
- To contain enrolments in each school within the limits of available resources as determined by the Regional Director.
- Attendance at a particular primary school does not automatically guarantee enrolment at a particular secondary school.

**These principles guide the process of Year 7 enrolment.**

If you apply to a secondary school that is outside your neighbourhood area, you may be requested to provide additional information to support your application. This may occur where the nominated school has to limit enrolments because of accommodation constraints. If you select a school other than the neighbourhood school as first preference, you should provide at least four (4) school preferences in Section 2 of the **Application for Enrolment, Year 7, 2012** form. If a student is not successful in gaining his/her preferences, he/she will be placed in their designated neighbourhood school.

All requests for enrolments in secondary schools from students living outside the neighbourhood area will be carefully considered by a Placement Committee at each secondary school. It must be noted however that all placements are subject to the availability of accommodation at the particular secondary school. Where there are insufficient places at a school for all students who seek entry, that is, schools with enrolment ceilings, students should be enrolled in the following priority order unless determined otherwise by the Regional Director.

- Students for whom the school is the designated neighbourhood school (determined by a straight line from the student’s home to the front gate of the school).
- In those instances where the Regional Director has restricted the enrolment of a school, students for whom the school is the nearest one to their permanent residential address.
- Students with a brother or sister who will be concurrently attending the school and who resides permanently at the same address.
- Students seeking enrolment on specific curriculum grounds.
- Students in order of closeness of their home to the school.