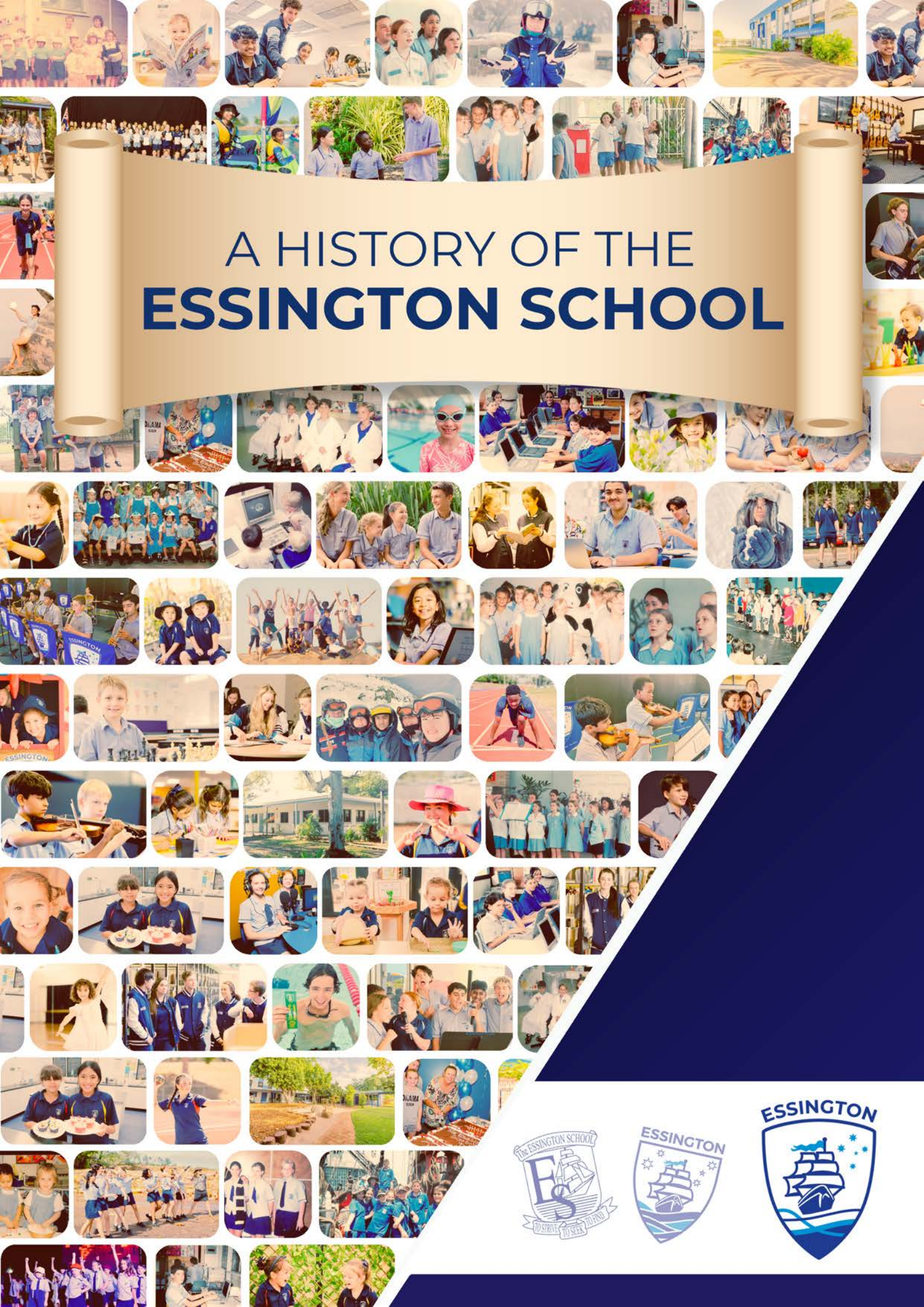

A HISTORY OF THE ESSINGTON SCHOOL

THE EARLY YEARS
A QUEST FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT

For over forty years, The Essington School has been a significant part of the educational landscape in the Northern Territory. As the school continues to evolve, it is timely to reflect on its origins and acknowledge the contributions of individuals who helped shape this important part of the Territory's educational history.

In Darwin during the early 1980s, there were few options for schooling — and even fewer for preschool-aged children. Most preschool settings began at age four and offered minimal structured teaching and learning. Many parents, however, were seeking something more: an educational environment that provided their young children with meaningful learning experiences, rather than traditional childcare. Despite this growing demand, suitable alternatives were scarce — highlighting a clear gap in early childhood education at the time.

In response, a small group of parents came together in 1983 to establish a playgroup based on the philosophy of educationalist Dr Maria Montessori. This approach encouraged a nurturing environment where children could explore the world around them, develop at their own pace, and become active learners.

Operating under the name of the Darwin Montessori Society, the group opened a combined playgroup and preschool on Nemarluk Drive, Ludmilla. The setting was intimate, with around 20 3yr old children, a caring teacher, and a small team of support staff. With no government funding, the preschool relied heavily on the commitment and voluntary efforts of the parent body, under the Society leadership of Marion Ah Toy, to support and sustain its operations. As demand grew, the centre expanded to offer both morning and afternoon sessions, effectively doubling its size.

DEVELOPING THE **MONTESSORI MODEL**

By 1985, the group had formally established the Darwin Montessori Kindergarten and Preschool, offering both a playgroup and a preschool program for children aged 3 to 6 years. Professor Grahame Webb served as the first President (Chair), and Margaret Oliver was the Head of the Preschool during this time.

The Montessori approach—particularly its emphasis on small class sizes and individualised learning—was highly valued by families and supported strong student outcomes. However, as children approached primary school age, many parents became concerned about the lack of suitable pathways to maintain their children's approach to learning and their progress. Reports from families indicated that once students transitioned into other primary schools, their overall development was impacted.

This concern became the key impetus for expanding into primary education. Enrolments were increasing rapidly, and students were notably advanced for their age. As Chair, Professor Webb responded to the growing demand with a practical mindset: "Well, let's build one. There are hundreds of thousands of primary schools around the world — it's not as though we're the first to walk this road." And so, the path toward a primary school began.

While there was continued confidence in the core principles of Montessori education, the Board recognised that a secular Montessori primary school in Darwin was unlikely to be viable due to its limited scale. Although Montessori methods were effective, they were not viewed as a singular solution. The Board prioritised educational outcomes above all else and agreed that while the early years would remain grounded in Montessori principles, the school would also draw upon other teaching approaches wherever they offered superior results and evidence based.

A core group of committed parents began exploring how a primary school could be established despite the limited financial and physical resources. They were confident that Montessori's foundations would continue to benefit students transitioning into primary years by fostering a respectful, individualised learning environment. At the same time, the school would embrace broader pedagogical strategies to ensure students received the best possible education. The emerging model retained key Montessori values while adopting a more flexible, future-focused educational philosophy.

In 1990, the transition to a full primary school was formalised, with Gail Barker appointed as Head Teacher, succeeding Margaret Oliver. The foundation families and educators recognised the importance of a clear moral, ethical, and philosophical foundation to guide future decisions. From this, the Essington model was developed—an approach grounded in personalised learning, strong values, and a deep sense of community.

NOTE: A formal, legislated school registration framework was introduced in 2015. Prior to this, schools operated under a different set of administrative and regulatory requirements.

THE FOUNDING OF THE **ESSINGTON SCHOOL**

In 1989, the Darwin Montessori Preschool formally became an association and was incorporated as The Essington School Inc., marking the beginning of a new chapter in its development. This incorporation required the adoption of a constitution and the establishment of a more structured leadership model. As part of this structure, the community agreed to form a parent-led School Board. A Parents and Friends Association (P&F) was established later, with the specific purpose of supporting fundraising initiatives and enhancing community engagement.

In the earliest years, prior to the formation of the P&F, all parents were required to participate in regular working bees or pay a $100 contribution. The entire school community, including parents and teachers, contributed directly to the school's physical development and day-to-day operations. As the school expanded and enrolments increased, the obligation for parents to attend working bees gradually diminished, and the P&F emerged to take on a more defined role in supporting the school through organised fundraising and community activities.

The early working bees focused on essential construction and maintenance tasks — establishing grounds, undertaking repairs, and improving facilities. With very limited financial resources, many parent families contributed significantly, often working every weekend. Board member Keith Kroger played a key role in coordinating and guiding these vital efforts.

Among the founding Board members were Professor Grahame Webb, Graham Lewis, and Patricia Hancock—each playing a pivotal role in guiding the school through its formative years with vision, commitment, and a strong belief in the value of community-driven education.

As Darwin's first parent-owned, private, non-sectarian primary school, The Essington School was a unique and progressive initiative. Initially operating from facilities at the Pan Hellenic Cultural Centre (Nightcliff Greek Community School), the school began with 88 preschoolers and just two primary students. Despite its modest size, the school represented a bold vision for an alternative, values-based education in the Territory.

At that time, the Northern Territory Government had announced plans to close several schools, including Rapid Creek Primary School—located directly across from the preschool and the newly developing primary program. Recognising a significant opportunity, the School Committee approached Chief Minister Marshall Perron to express interest in acquiring the site for the expanding school.

Although initially opposed to the proposal, then Minister for Education Shane Stone ultimately played a pivotal role in advancing the acquisition within government. His leadership was instrumental in facilitating the transfer of the Rapid Creek site to the school. While Chief Minister Perron may have provided the strategic direction, it was Shane Stone who worked to deliver a solution—securing a permanent home for the school and enabling its long-term growth.

SECURING A **PERMANENT HOME**

Essington was never intended to be an elitist private school or a domain of the wealthy. It was founded on the belief that education should be inclusive, aspirational, community-driven and of the highest possible standard.

At the time, there were limited independent schooling options in Darwin, and many parents were seeking an alternative to what was available, and specifically a school with small class sizes that would tailor education to the unique needs of their children. The Montessori approached suited these requirements. Some students welcomed to the school had additional needs, including Down Syndrome, Autism, and Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), their parents attracted by the building public perception that Essington offered an alternative approach to education, grounded in inclusion and flexibility. In 1997, there was no legislated school registration process, requiring the school to apply for access to government education funding through the Federal Government, which supported non-government schools.

In late 1991, recognising the commitment and shared vision of The Essington School community, the Northern Territory Government formally allocated the site of the former Rapid Creek Primary School to The Essington School. The campus, however, was in a serious state of disrepair - riddled with white ants and requiring substantial work. It was through the tireless efforts of parents, who volunteered their time, skills, and labour, that the site was transformed. Their goal was simple yet powerful: to create a school where children could access a high-quality education, regardless of background or needs

In 1993, Anne Mauger was appointed Principal, bringing strong leadership at a pivotal time. In 1994, Patricia Hancock became the second Chair of the School Board, and by 1995, the P&F had become the school's main fundraising body. The P&F did more than raise money—they also ran key services such as the Uniform Shop and Canteen, embedding themselves deeply in the daily life of the school. During this period, Vanessa Thomas served as P&F President and acted as the Community Representative on the Board, ensuring parent voices continued to be part of the school's philosophy and governance.

Throughout the mid-1990s, Essington remained committed to educational innovation, actively exploring progressive models in line with international trends. This forward-thinking approach culminated in 1997 with the introduction of a Middle School, marking the beginning of the school's expansion into secondary education and reaffirmed Essington's focus on future-focused learning.

In the same year, Gail Barker returned as Principal to lead this next phase of growth, and Deb Halliwell became President of the P&F. The group successfully raised significant funds, which were matched dollar-for-dollar by the NT Government - an outstanding achievement that supported further development and expansion.

As the academic offering expanded, so too did the school's sense of identity. Its distinctive uniforms became a familiar sight across Darwin, symbolising the aspirational and united spirit of the school community.

Through strong leadership, the commitment of dedicated families, bold educational choices, and a growing sense of identity, The Essington School established itself as a leading educational force in the Northern Territory. Its success not only benefited its own students but also helped to raise expectations and standards across the broader education sector.

INCORPORATION AND **INFRASTRUCTURE**

Between 1997 and 2001, The Essington School underwent a period of profound change and development, marked by expansion in infrastructure, leadership, and its educational networks.

In 1998, a purpose-built middle school facility for Years 6–9 was officially opened by former Chief Minister Shane Stone. The new building was named the Webb Site in honour of Professor Grahame Webb.

The following year, in 1999, the school was formally incorporated as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. With this change, its official name became The Essington School Darwin, reflecting its broader aspirations and growing presence in the Territory's education landscape.

This era also saw key leadership changes. Peter Boyce became the third Chair of the School Board in 1998, and in 1999, David Cannon was appointed Principal/CEO. Although the school enjoyed strong and ongoing parental support, it remained relatively small and faced financial constraints. In 2000, Denise Paech succeeded Peter Boyce as the fourth Chair and led the Board into a new phase focused on innovation and program development.

Essington's global connections deepened in 1997 when the school became an Associate Member of Round Square, a worldwide network of schools that share a commitment to character education, leadership, and global citizenship. Although Essington had not yet established a full secondary program at the time, its associate membership was a significant milestone in aligning with international best practice and connecting students with broader opportunities beyond the classroom. That same year, Essington had the honour of hosting King Constantine of Greece, patron of Round Square—an unforgettable moment in the school's history.

Essington also participated in the Pan Pacific Conference through the Pan Asia Pacific Education (PAPE) network, with the Northern Territory proudly hosting the event.

Strategic partnerships were also forged to support teaching and learning. In 2001, Essington signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University), enabling access to academic resources and expertise. That same year, the school became a member of the European Council of International Schools (later the Council of International Schools), again reinforcing its commitment to international education standards.

Facility upgrades continued throughout this time. Major refurbishments of the former Rapid Creek Primary School began in 1990, with additional improvements into the early 2000s. These included addressing safety concerns such as termite damage and asbestos removal. Thanks to the efforts of Anne Mauger, a grant from the NT Government had funded the safe removal of asbestos from the school's undercover area.

GROWTH, INNOVATION AND **DEVELOPMENT**

In 2002, John McLaren became the fifth Chair of the School Board, overseeing a period of substantial growth in enrolments, facilities, and community partnerships. This period marked Essington's transition from a small, independent school into a dynamic and expanding educational institution.

The P&F remained active in the early 2000s, with Kathy Ryan serving as President in 2003, followed by Megan Brown in 2004 and Jenny Scullion in 2007–08. During this period, the group underwent gradual restructuring, with many of its fundraising and operational roles being integrated into the school's broader governance framework—eventually leading to its formal conclusion.

In 2004, the school acquired the Rapid Creek Child Care Centre from Somerville Community Services, expanding its reach into early childhood education. In partnership with the Charlton Brown Institute, Essington began delivering accredited childcare training to staff and the wider Darwin community. Two decades later, this same preschool would undergo a multi-million-dollar transformation into a state-of-the-art preschool and early childhood centre.

The school also embraced innovation in media and technology. A partnership with Darwin FM (later Radio Larrakia) and TV Larrakia led to the launch of student-led multimedia and radio programs, providing students with opportunities to develop communication and production skills.

At the same time, Darwin's growing international profile -driven in part by the Timor Sea LNG developments, including the INPEX-led Ichthys Project -created new opportunities for global engagement. Essington established a sister school relationship with Tamagawa University School in Tokyo, which facilitated regular student exchanges and cultural experiences. The school also hosted the Tamagawa Solar Car Challenge Team, further strengthening its ties to innovation and international collaboration.

THE EXPANSION TO **YEAR 10**

By 2005, The Essington School was experiencing significant enrolment growth, prompting the upgrade of existing classrooms and the acquisition of transportable classrooms to meet demand as the school expanded to Year 10. John McLaren recalls stepping out classroom space with Principal David Cannon by torchlight—an example of the hands-on leadership style of both the Chair and Principal, who often met after 8pm to tackle the many challenges of a rapidly growing school.

Around 2006, the school introduced innovative programs to the Northern Territory, including the "Learn to Fly" aviation course and rural extension training through Charles Darwin University at the Katherine Rural College, where students gained industry-recognised certificates.

To accommodate further enrolment growth - exceeding 25% per annum - a new Middle School building was constructed at the edge of the school's oval in 2006.

THE SENIOR COLLEGE AND **INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION**

To address the ongoing need for classrooms and specialist facilities, The Essington School entered into a formal agreement with Charles Darwin University in 2010. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Chairman John McLaren and CDU Vice-Chancellor Professor Barney Glover, leading to the establishment of the Essington Senior College campus on the CDU grounds. This expansion enabled the school to extend its offerings through to Years 11 and 12.

By this time, The Essington School Darwin had evolved from its humble beginnings into a diverse and vibrant learning community, with students spanning Preschool to Year 12. The school's strong foundation in parent involvement remained a defining characteristic, reinforcing its deep connection to the Darwin community.

In 2010, Peter Rogers was appointed as the sixth Chair of the School. Following his relocation to Perth, Vicki O'Halloran assumed the role in 2012, continuing the governance leadership during this period of transformation.

INTERNATIONAL ACCREDICATION AND **PROGRAM EXPANSION**

By 2013, The Essington School Darwin achieved accreditation as a Cambridge International School—becoming only the sixth school in Australia to receive this recognition. This milestone enabled the school to deliver the globally respected International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) curriculum.

In 2014, after five years of sustained lobbying, the school gained access to the adjacent NT Open Education Centre. The site was repurposed to accommodate Year 8 and 9 classrooms and became the home of the school's administration.

During this period, Darwin's economy experienced a downturn following the completion of major Natural Gas Liquefaction projects. This economic shift led to a decline in local population growth and a reduction in student enrolments. The school experienced several changes in Board leadership. Vicki O'Halloran stepped down in 2015, followed by the appointments of Steve Margetic and then Peter Plumber in 2017.

Amid ongoing developments, The Essington School continued to enrich its student offerings. The Creative and Performing Arts program, particularly Music, expanded to include musicianship, theory, and performance across strings, wind, keyboard, brass, and vocal. Physical Education also grew, supporting student development through sports such as netball, basketball, volleyball, soccer, and hockey—encouraging participation, inclusiveness, respect, and kindness.

REASSESS AND **REFRESH**

By 2018, it became clear that the school needed to consolidate and realign its operations. A new Board was formed under the Chairmanship of Nathan Reichstein, supported by Michael Hannon, with John McLaren rejoining the Board. Financial pressures and declining enrolments called for a strategic reassessment of the school's direction.

Following the resignation of long-serving Principal/CEO, David Cannon in 2019, who had overseen a remarkable and visionary growth and development phase in the school, recently retired educator Brian Kennelly was appointed as Interim Principal/CEO. His immediate focus was stabilising the school's finances and improving internal systems and procedures.

CONSOLIDATION AND **STRATEGIC RENEWAL**

Brian Kennelly's tenure concluded with the appointment of Karen Rohrs as Principal/CEO in 2022. During this period, one of the Board's key strategic decisions was to consolidate the entire school onto the main Rapid Creek campus. Karen's primary focus became the planning and execution of the Senior School's relocation from the CDU Campus – a significant project that involved major upgrades to existing facilities and a comprehensive staffing restructure.

Concurrently, the Board initiated the development of a School Masterplan and embarked on a multi-million-dollar redevelopment of the Preschool/Long Day Care Centre at Cummins Street. These transformative projects marked a pivotal phase in the school's growth and highlighted the importance of a long-term Strategic Plan to shape future direction.

A VISION FOR A **WORLD-CLASS SCHOOL**

A new chapter began in 2024 with the appointment of Paul Nyhuis as Principal/CEO. With the successful consolidation of Transition to Year 12 on a single campus, the opening of a revitalised Early Childhood Centre, and a renewed strategic direction. Paul brings clarity of purpose, and support for the original bold vision of positioning Essington as a world-class school.

In partnership with the Board, Paul led a comprehensive review and refinement of the school's Vision, Mission, and Values - ensuring the original foundation ideas remained relevant, purposeful, and reflective of the Essington community. The updated Values: Responsibility, Respect, Kindness, Inclusiveness and Excellence - now underpin all aspects of school life and guide decision-making at every level.

This work laid the foundation for a forward-focused Strategic Plan, built around four key strategic drivers:

- **Educational Excellence**
- **People, Performance, and Culture**
- **Community and Partnerships**
- **Governance, Operations, and Innovation.**

These drivers are supported by a measurable Annual Improvement Plan, with a strong focus on professional development and data-informed strategies to enhance outcomes for students at every stage of their educational journey.

Principals of The Essington School

Paul Nyhuis	2024 - present
Karen Rohrs	2022 - 2023
Brian Kennelly	2019 - 2022
David Cannon	1999 - 2019
Cheryl Salter	1998 - 1998
Gail Barker	1995 - 1998
Anne Mauger	1993 - 1995

Chairs of the Board of The Essington School

Vicki Bridge	2025 - present
Nathan Reichstein	2018 - 2025
Peter Plummer	2017 - 2018
Steve Margetic	2015 - 2017
Vicki O'Halloran	2012 - 2014
Peter Rogers	2010 - 2012
John McLaren	2002 - 2010
Denise Paech	2000 - 2002
Peter Boyce	1999 - 2000
Patricia Hancock	1994 - 1999
Grahame Webb	1989 - 1994

ESSINGTON SCHOOL
BOARD MEMBERS

NAME	APPOINTED	END DATE
Jocelyn Cull	11-Oct-23	
Minh Tran	31-May-23	
Fredrick Law	14-Dec-22	
Carol Cain	14-Dec-22	
Leo Athanasiou	14-Dec-22	28-Mar-23
Maria Teo	05-May-22	
Peter Kennon	25-May-21	30-Nov-22
Vicki Bridge	27-Apr-21	
Ashely Perez	25-Jun-20	
Michele Oliphant	25-Jun-20	30-Aug-22
George Alexopoulos	20-Jan-20	25-Sep-23
Matthew Kelly	22-Dec-18	01-Feb-22
John McLaren	29-Oct-18	
Tracey Hayes	29-Oct-18	27-Nov-18
Tatiane Kelly	29-Oct-18	02-Dec-18
Manuel Liveris	05-Jul-18	24-Jan-20
Nathan Reichstein	30-May-18	29-Apr-25
Kym Cairns	30-May-18	02-Dec-20
Ruth O'Brien	28-Apr-17	31-May-18
Michael Solomon	28-Apr-17	29-May-18
Mick Hannon	28-Apr-16	24-May-22
Hendri Mentz	15-May-15	23-Jun-17
Megan Lawton	06-May-15	29-May-18
Chris O'Brien	30-Apr-14	31-Oct-18
Martin Kendall	30-Apr-14	28-Feb-17
Danni Mears	30-Apr-14	28-Apr-16
Chris McCabe	15-Jul-13	02-Dec-18
Peter Plummer	15-Jul-13	22-Aug-18
Steve Margetic	29-Apr-13	07-Oct-17
Pompea Sweet	29-Apr-13	25-Jun-20
Marc Johnston	09-May-11	22-Oct-14
Dean Osborne	11-Jan-10	28-Apr-16
Vicki O'Halloran	29-Apr-04	03-Apr-17

NAME	APPOINTED
Sean Kildare	2013
Janet Russell	2013
Richard Harding	2013
Marc Johnston	2010
Tanya Gamble	2010
Ross Coburn	2010
Peter Gordon	2007
Jenny Scullion	2006
Don Hill	2005
Chris Young	2002
John Carroll	2002
Phil Donohoe	2002
Wendy Darwin	2002
John McLaren	2000 -2010
John Gersekowski	2000
Brian Chilcott	1999
Peter Boyce	1999
Karen Chilcott	1999
Nigel Scullion	1999
Wendy Scullion	1999
Jenny Scullion	1999
Carrie Altamura	1999
Rosemary Blackford	1998
David Lloyd	1997
Josie Parry	1997
Inta Tumuls	1997
Denise Paech	1997
Grahame Webb	1997
Graeme Lewis	1997
Leslie Joiner	1996
Paul Ewens	1995
Cheryl Salter Staff Rep	1995
Keith Kroger	1990
John Tobin First Treasurer	1989 -1993

NAME
Vanessa Thomas
Bruce Harvey
Jeanette Harvey
Mary Hamilton
Nanette Holiday
Peter Forrest

STAFF REPRESENATIVES
Natalie Hyde
Jaya Srinivas
Renee Schultz
Mandy Boots
Siobhan Sheikh
Megan Brown

LIFE MEMBERS OF THE **ESSINGTON SCHOOL DARWIN**

Professor Grahame Webb

Widely recognised as one of the world's leading authorities on crocodilian research and sustainable wildlife management, Professor Grahame Webb played a foundational role in the establishment of The Essington School. As the School's founding Chairman, Grahame brought visionary leadership and progressive thinking that helped shape the school's philosophy and direction. During his tenure, he was instrumental in securing the old Rapid Creek Primary School site as the permanent home for The Essington School.

Patrica Hancock

As the second Chair of the School Board, Patrica Hancock championed the development of the Primary School, drawing on progressive educational models that mirrored international trends. Her forward-thinking approach drove initiatives that were considered groundbreaking in the Northern Territory at the time. Patrica also led the challenging task of restoring the deteriorated facilities that had been inherited with the school's site.

Margaret Muirhead (deceased 2025)

The late Margaret Muirhead arrived in the Northern Territory in 1974 when her husband was appointed a judge of the NT Supreme Court. She was actively involved in community life, including helping to establish a women's refuge in Darwin. During her husband's term as NT Administrator (1989–1993), Margaret served as the Patron of The Essington School, providing strong support and advocacy over many years.

John McLaren

A respected accountant and Fellow of CPA Australia, brought a wealth of expertise in finance, governance, and public administration to the Board. A long-standing company director and community leader, including as Past District Governor of Rotary International, John provided steady leadership during a period of significant growth and development. He served on the Board for 10 years, including 8 years as its fifth Chairman, and returned as a Board member again in 2018.

Josephine (Josie) Parry

A dedicated and meticulous contributor to the Board and its Property Committee during a time of rapid expansion. Her eye for detail and calm, consistent presence was of immense value to the school, and her contribution supported sound decision-making during pivotal times.

Deborah (Deb) Halliwell

Has been a long-time supporter of The Essington School and remains employed within the administration team. During her time as President of the Parents & Friends Association, she played a key role in fundraising for essential school resources through events such as fetes, movie nights, and other community activities. Her ongoing involvement with the school continues to reflect her commitment to supporting students.

Megan (Meg) Brown

Megan Brown built meaningful connections with students, staff, and families through her warm and approachable nature. Her involvement extended across many aspects of school life —from her daily presence in the canteen, to her enthusiastic support of events and community initiatives. Megan served as President of the P&F, was a member of the School Board, and took on the role of Facilities Manager for a time. Her positive energy, hands-on approach, and genuine care for others helped shape a welcoming, inclusive school culture.

Graeme Lewis (deceased 2018)

The late Graeme Lewis, an experienced accountant and partner at KPMG, was part of the steering committee that helped establish The Essington School. As Treasurer during a financially challenging time, his expertise was vital in guiding the school forward. A proud Territorian, he believed in the Territory's future and played a key role in strengthening the school's foundations.

Michael (Mick) Hannon

A third-generation Territorian and Director of the Hannon Group, brought extensive business and industry experience to the School Board. He served during a critical time of governance renewal and operational restructuring. Mick's leadership, tenacity, and dedication were invaluable in helping the school refocus its direction and strengthen its foundations.

The
ESSINGTON
School
DELIVERING A
WORLD CLASS
EDUCATION