

Consultation report

Murwillumbah Schools Consultation

October 2023

Foreword

From NSW Department of Education Secretary Murat Dizdar

I would like to thank the students, teachers, parents, and stakeholder groups, across all four public schools in Murwillumbah who provided frank and honest feedback during the consultation process.

As part of the consultation 265 students, parents and staff gave up their valuable time to contribute their perspectives in face-to-face meetings. We also received 482 responses via the online feedback forms as well as 14 written submissions.

This wealth of feedback demonstrates how much the people of Murwillumbah care about their public schools and want to see their students succeed.

The past few years have been particularly challenging for the Murwillumbah school communities, with bushfires, floods and the pandemic all adding to the challenges faced by students and staff as they negotiated the mergers.

As we move through the process of returning to four public schools in Murwillumbah, the department's priority will be supporting our staff and students.

While this report highlights the many and varied views across the communities, one thing is crystal clear: staff, students and families all want frequent, transparent, clear and detailed communication about the transition process.

We will be working hard to ensure the school communities, particularly those connected to the high schools, are kept informed along the way.

I want the community to know that we will be working closely with you at every step in this process. Your input matters and will shape the return to four public schools in Murwillumbah.

As a parent whose children attend public schools, I know how important our schools are to our communities. I want your local public schools to be your first choice. With the return to four public schools, we will continue to ensure ongoing, excellent public education provision.



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1 Executive summary

1.1 Overview of consultation

From July 2023 to August 2023, the NSW Department of Education conducted a consultation process in relation to implementing the NSW Government commitment to return to four public schools in Murwillumbah.

The consultation included the following.

- Direct engagement via phone and email with key stakeholders including the NSW Teachers' Federation, P&C Associations, school principals, Tweed/Wollumbin Aboriginal Education Committee, Mayor of Tweed Shire Council, and principals of partner primary schools in the Murwillumbah school network.
- In person engagement with approximately 265 students, staff, parents and carers, and community members across 9 separate face-to-face consultation sessions held at Murwillumbah Learning Community (MLC) High School, Murwillumbah East Public School (MEPS) and Murwillumbah Public School (MPS).
- Provision of 6 online feedback forms tailored to each stakeholder group, generating 482 responses from students, staff, parents and carers, and community members.
- Review of 14 written submissions provided at consultation sessions and 26 emails received at the murwillumbahschools@det.nsw.edu.au email address.
- Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Early Learning meeting with key stakeholders, including the Member for Lismore, staff and P&C Associations.

The open nature of the consultation generated a large volume of predominantly qualitative data reflecting a diverse range of thoughts, feelings, opinions and feedback. Feedback received has been analysed to extract findings in relation to the key stimulus questions posed during consultation.

1.2 Key findings

1.2.1 High school

Timing and approach for the return to two high school sites

There was no clear majority consensus among MLC High School staff and parents regarding the preferred timing for the return to the Murwillumbah High School (MHS) site:

- HS staff: 58% in favour of returning sooner with basic refurbishment; 33% in favour of returning later to new and improved facilities.
- HS parents: 44% in favour of returning sooner with basic refurbishment; 51% in favour of returning later with new and improved facilities.

The key priority for all school communities was a confirmed and clearly communicated date, timeline and milestones for the return to two high schools.

Given the relationship between the return to the MHS site and the condition of facilities, it was also a priority for school communities to have clarity around the infrastructure scope of works for the school/s.

Current MLC High School

Knowing a return to two separate sites isn't possible immediately due to the condition of MHS, school communities identified the need for additional focus on continuing to provide a safe, stable and effective environment at MLC High School now and through until the transition back to two separate schools.

Transition process

School community priorities for the transition back to two separate high schools included:

- A well-planned, well-executed, well-resourced and well-communicated transition process.
- Re-establishment of the two separate schools and staffing allocation prior to the physical separation to enable planning.
- Adequate support, resourcing and funding for the transition to relieve teacher and staff workload and ensure smooth transitions.
- Ability for students and staff to choose which school they go to, regardless of zoning.
- Supporting students through the transition, including seniors and students with additional learning and support needs.

High School future state

Looking to the future, school communities would like high school in Murwillumbah to be high quality and on par with metropolitan schools, with enough students and teachers to enable social, academic and extracurricular opportunities.

Challenges identified included potential competition between the two high schools for enrolments and resources, potential lack of resources, and reduced student numbers impacting on staffing and subject choice.

Strategies for success identified by school communities, included having a long-term vision for the high schools and public education in Murwillumbah more broadly, sufficient time and money allocated to each school, and investigation of alternative ways the two schools could work together to provide a full curriculum and equal opportunities to all students.

1.2.2 Primary school

Murwillumbah East Public School (MEPS) feedback

The MEPS community identified a range of success factors for the future of the school including, confirming school leadership, maintaining staffing levels, upgrading the school to provide new facilities, and a focus on student wellbeing.

Potential challenges for MEPS raised during consultation related to the lack of certainty around future plans, declining enrolments and quality of school facilities.

Murwillumbah Public School (MPS) feedback

The MPS community identified a range of success factors for the future of the school including maintaining staffing levels and unity in the school teams; a commitment to quality teaching and learning; focus on staff and student wellbeing; and promotion of the school to encourage enrolments.

Potential challenges for MPS raised during consultation related to uncertainty about the high schools and possible reduction in the high school offer impacting primary enrolments and fears the school may reduce in size to the point of becoming non-viable.

1.2.3 Infrastructure

School infrastructure and facilities was a commonly raised topic across the various consultation forums. Feedback received indicated that:

- School communities believe MHS requires investment to enable a complete rebuild and/or significant upgrading to ensure it is fit for purpose.
- Infrastructure is a key priority for the MEPS community, with staff and parents believing the school should receive new permanent facilities and flood proofing, in keeping with historical proposals.
- Staff at MPS believe investment in improving facilities at the school would have a positive impact on attracting new families and enrolments and ensure the school was not disadvantaged.
- While it was understood that WHS is in better condition than MHS, school communities felt investment in infrastructure and facilities was warranted at the school to ensure equity across the two high schools.

1.2.4 Communication and engagement

Across all consultation forums, school communities expressed a desire for more frequent, transparent, clear and detailed communication with staff, students and families about both the transition back to separate schools and the day-to-day operations of schools, to help alleviate uncertainty and anxiety and rebuild trust.

School communities also indicated they would like to see ongoing engagement with staff, students and families so they have a voice as plans for the return to four separate schools in Murwillumbah are developed and implemented.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background

Prior to the NSW Election in March 2023, NSW Labor provided a commitment that, if elected, it would stop the Murwillumbah Education Campus project and retain four public schools in Murwillumbah.

On 24 May 2023, the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Early Learning issued a media statement confirming the government's commitment to stopping the Murwillumbah Education Campus in consultation with the community and retaining the two high schools and two primary schools as separate schools.

The government also committed to a community consultation process, with a focus on minimising disruption to students and staff as the department implements the commitment to retain the four schools.

The consultation ran from July 2023 to August 2023.

2.2 About the consultation

The intention of the consultation process was to provide the most relevant stakeholders, i.e. staff, students and families, with forums to share their views, ask questions and provide feedback. The focus was on gathering insight that would help the department implement the return to four public schools in Murwillumbah in a way that minimises impact to school communities.

The consultation process was designed to:

- Demonstrate the department and government's commitment to listening to and supporting stakeholders through this change process.
- Provide stakeholders with forums where they could share their response to the current policy direction, ask questions and express any concerns in a safe and respectful way.
- Gather input from stakeholders about key areas the department needs to focus on during the return for four public schools to minimise disruption to school communities.

The consultation was built around 9 face-to-face, consultation sessions to suit the needs of specific stakeholder groups. Individual sessions were held for the following groups.

- Murwillumbah East Public School (MEPS) staff, student representatives and parents and carers.
- Murwillumbah Public School (MPS) staff, student representatives and parents and carers.
- Murwillumbah Learning Community (MLC) High School staff, student representatives and parents and carers.

Online feedback forms were also created to give session attendees the opportunity to provide written feedback privately and confidentially at the end of each session. A link to the same online form was emailed to those who couldn't attend sessions, so they were also able to contribute. The broader community was able to provide feedback to the murwillumbahschools@det.edu.au email address.

2.3 Reach

2.3.1 Stakeholder engagement

As part of the consultation process, the School Performance Rural North Directorate and school principals engaged directly with the following stakeholders:

- NSW Teachers’ Federation, Regional Organiser
- NSW Teachers’ Federation Representatives for each of the schools
- Principals of each of the schools
- Principals of partner primary schools in the network
- P&C Presidents
- Mayor of Tweed Shire Council

The Director, Schools Operational Readiness also engaged directly with the Tweed/Wollumbin Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). A tailored online feedback form was provided to the AECG to enable feedback from its members however no responses were received.

On 8 August 2023, the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Early Learning also met with key stakeholders, including the Member for Lismore, staff and P&C Associations (Note: matters discussed at this meeting have not been included in data analysis for this report).

2.3.2 School community consultation

School communities were invited to provide feedback in a number of different ways, including in person, in writing and online, to maximise reach and participation. An outline of all the engagement opportunities is provided below.

School	Consultation session attendees	Mentimeter participants	Online feedback form responses	Written submissions
Murwillumbah East Public School	Parents ~ 7 Staff ~30 Students ~ 20	Staff: 14	Parents: 26 Staff: 13 Students: 100	Nil
Murwillumbah Public School	Parents ~10 Staff ~21 Students ~ 11	Staff: 21	Parents: 7 Staff: 1 Students: 8	Parents: 1
Murwillumbah Learning Community High School	Parents ~ 60 Staff ~75 Students ~20	Staff: 57 Parents: 35	Parents: 111 Staff: 33 Students: 175	Parents: 7 Staff: 1 Students: 2
TOTALS	265 attendees		482 responses	

2.3.2.1 Consultation sessions

The 9 face-to-face consultation sessions were held on site at the schools and facilitated by the department to ensure all voices were able to be heard in a respectful and productive environment.

Discussions at the sessions were documented by a scribe and the notes are included in the raw data that was analysed for this report.

All staff sessions and the high school parent session included the use of Mentimeter, a live audience polling system, to give those who weren’t comfortable speaking to a group a way of also sharing

their views. Information added to Mentimeter is included in the raw data that was analysed for this report.

An agenda, including specific stimulus questions designed to gain input on practical aspects of the return to four separate schools, was developed for each session however it was found in practice that stakeholders preferred a more unstructured approach. The department responded to this need by working through agendas flexibly to allow participants to share thoughts, feelings and feedback on topics that were important to them.

2.3.2.2 Online feedback forms

Following the sessions, links to online feedback forms were emailed to all staff, high school students and parents and carers. Primary students were supported by their teachers to submit responses to the primary student feedback form.

The forms asked the specific questions that hadn't been covered in the consultation sessions and the feedback received provides valuable insight for decision-makers.

2.3.2.3 Correspondence

In April 2023, the Department established a dedicated email address – muwillumbahschools@det.nsw.edu.au – to provide a channel for the community to ask questions and provide feedback. During the consultation period 26 emails were received from 10 individuals. The sentiment expressed has been considered alongside the raw data from consultation.

2.4 Notes on the data

The intention of the consultation process was to offer stakeholders and the community an open and genuine opportunity to share their feedback, rather than limit feedback via closed questions and what the community views as 'tick a box' surveys. As a result, there were very few closed questions posed in the consultation sessions or online feedback forms and the consultation generated a large volume of predominantly qualitative data reflecting a diverse range of feelings and opinions.

To extract insight from the data, the analysis process involved looking for key themes and collating practical suggestions that could assist with planning.

Where appropriate or possible, responses to feedback forms were categorised according to sentiment or topic to enable some qualitative assessment. This has been used sparingly and only in instances where there was enough volume of strong sentiment expressed to indicate a statistically significant result.

It is also important to note that staff, students and parents and carers had the opportunity to attend multiple sessions (for example, one as a staff member, one as a parent) and provide feedback through multiple channels. As a result, opinions of individuals will have been reflected multiple times throughout the various data sources. This has been taken into consideration in the data analysis methodology and further supports the cautious and limited use of quantitative analysis.

3 Key findings – high school

3.1 Return to two separate high schools

A key focus of the consultation was to gain input from students, staff and families that could be used to inform planning of the return to two separate high schools in Murwillumbah.

3.1.1 Preference regarding return to the MHS site

High school staff and parents were asked via the online feedback forms to nominate their preferred option for the return to the Murwillumbah High School (MHS) site. Analysis of the data indicates there is no clear majority across the Murwillumbah community regarding the preferred option.

Option	Staff responses	Parent responses
MHS staff and students return to their site sooner, even if that means a more basic refurbishment.	58% (19) in favour MHS (8), WHS (11), Other (0)	44% (49) in favour MHS (22), WHS (27)
MHS staff and students return to their site later, with new and improved learning spaces and facilities	33% (11) in favour MHS (10), WHS (0), Other (1)	51% (56) in favour MHS (37), WHS (19)
No preference indicated	9% (3)	4% (5)

High school staff and parents were also asked via the online feedback form to indicate what’s most important to them when it comes to returning to two separate high school sites. Responses show:

- There is a sense of urgency around the return to two separate schools, with some mentioning a return for the 2024 school year. This was mainly driven by the desire to quickly end pain points in the current high school experience, including uncertainty, eroded community confidence in the school, and impacts of uncertainty on behaviour and learning.
- It was noted by many consultees that speed of return shouldn’t come at the cost of high-quality facilities, student and staff wellbeing, time to plan, and a well-executed transition that provides continuity of learning.

Stakeholders suggested several alternative options to enable both a fast return to the MHS site and delivery of high-quality facilities. There was no strong majority consensus on these options and if they were to be considered, further investigation would be required.

Alternative suggestions	Positive aspects mentioned	Negative aspects mentioned
Return MHS students and staff to temporary facilities on the MHS site while work is carried out.	Allows for a quick separation.	Not appropriate to put students anywhere on the site in its current condition. Unfair to ask one cohort of students to move twice.

Stage the upgrade works at MHS so they can be carried out while students are onsite.	Allows for a quick separation.	Not fair to ask students to return to a half built, old, problem-filled environment. Impacts of construction, site functionality and noise would need to be considered.
Run two separate high schools on the WHS site while the MHS site is being upgraded.	Allows schools to start rebuilding their own identity and culture sooner. Prepare the students for physical separation.	Presents operational and administrative challenges for schools. May strain relationships, communication and wellbeing.
Staged return of students to the MHS site while works take place (e.g. mainstream students move but support unit stays at WHS until work is complete; junior / senior student split)	Limited feedback in relation to this suggestion	Limited feedback in relation to this suggestion

3.1.2 Timeline a key priority

Regardless of other views, the number one priority expressed across all consultation forums was:

- A firm date for when the two high schools will resume operations so planning can start.
- A clearly defined and communicated roadmap, action plan and milestones for the return to two separate sites.

The driver of this priority is the need for certainty across all stakeholder groups, including:

- High school students and families who are considering the best option for their education.
- Staff who are making decisions about their future employment.
- Primary families who will consider moving students to private schools now to secure a position in high school for the future.
- Pre-school families who consider the high school pathway when choosing to enrol in local public primary schools.

3.2 High school current state

Knowing that a return to two separate high schools isn't possible immediately due to the condition of the Murwillumbah High School (MHS) site, school communities were asked what is needed to ensure the Murwillumbah Learning Community (MLC) High School continues providing a safe, stable and effective environment now and through until the transition back to two separate sites.

Staff themes

Certainty to enable planning

- A clear, consistent message about the path forward.

Leadership refresh

- New leadership to steer the school through the current phase.
- Representation of both future schools (Murwillumbah High School and Wollumbin High School) on the MLC High School executive.

Support the school, staff and students

- Funding and time to support the school.
- Certainty regarding job security.
- Restore staff leave and professional development credits.
- Foster unity, respect and professionalism.
- Special consideration applications for 2023 HSC students.
- Counselling and support services.

More support for behaviour management

- Review / reaffirm policies, procedures and protocols, ensure they are communicated to the student body, enforced by teaching staff and reinforced by the senior executive.
- Review and respond to truancy.
- Focus on student engagement.
- Activities to build culture.

A high-functioning school

- Maintain a strong focus on learning.
- Provide a strong routine for students.
- Review / reaffirm programs including Kin, Super Wednesday.

Parent / carer themes

Certainty regarding the way forward

- Confirm and communicate the roadmap for return to two separate schools.
- Regular updates on progress.

High quality teaching and learning

- Stability, routines, consistency and a well-run timetable.
- Review / reaffirm learning style.
- Review / reaffirm / communicate purpose of Super Wednesday.
- More permanent, qualified staff and fewer casuals.

Support for senior students

- Ensure HSC students are achieving minimum course hours.
- School-wide misadventure request for HSC students.

Student safety and wellbeing

- Mental health support and counsellors.
- More supervision.
- Safety in toilets.
- More discipline and consequences.
- Student wellbeing programs.

School culture

- Culture building and social activities.
- Continue planned excursions and camps.
- Peer support.

Student themes

Focus on behaviour

- More discipline and consequences.
- Support teachers to manage behaviour.
- A crack down on safety and vaping in the toilets.

- Reinforce phone policy.
- Zero tolerance of bullying and harassment.

Focus on learning

- More academic focus and support.
- Quality teaching.

Listen to students

- Listen to students – have open conversations about issues, agree a course of action, and follow through.
- Regular meetings between the executive and the student leadership.

Improve communication

- Transparency from government and the department.
- Communication from teachers to students and families.

3.2.1 Primary to high school transitions

It was clear from consultation with primary school communities that the current status of the high school/s is relevant to families with primary school students in Years 5 and 6 who will transition to high school in 2024 or 2025.

To gain insight, primary staff and parents were asked to identify ways the schools and department could better support Stage 3 students and their families navigate the transition to high school. Key themes from feedback are provided below.

- Confirm and communicate when the two separate high schools will resume operations.
- Confirm the current Year 7 intake and enrolment process.
- Consult with Stage 3 students and families to find out what they need in order to move forward to the public high school.
- Effective transition and orientation program, including:
 - Well-communicated transition plan
 - Transition days held at the WHS site
 - More communication and engagement with families during the transition process
 - Orientation days at the high school before other students return to establish relationships.
- Mentoring programs or peer support groups for incoming Year 7 students.
- Communication between the primary and high schools to facilitate a seamless transition.
- Student support services including confidential and accessible mental health support for students who may be anxious due to uncertainty.

3.3 Transition process

The high school feedback forms offered staff, parents and high school students the opportunity to provide suggestions around what an effective transition back to two separate high schools would look like. A representative selection of suggestions received is provided below.

Staff suggestions

Develop and clearly communicate timeline and action plan for transition

- Start time and deadlines.
- Fast but efficient process to minimise disruption to the learning of students.

Re-establish separate schools and school teams ahead of transition

- Re-establish the two school codes and staffing allocation prior to separation to enable planning.
- Appoint MHS and WHS principals to lead planning for return to two schools.
- Apply for 2 x establishment grants.
- Staff able to decide which school they are assigned to.

Collaboratively plan for the transition and develop policies, procedures etc.

- Set priorities and organise working teams, get the systems and structures in place and present these to students and community.
- Consult staff, students and community regarding organisation, policies and procedures, timetables, uniforms, canteen, for each school – all need to have ownership and a voice.

Resource the transition

- Adequate support and resourcing for staff to allow for the extra workload.
- Set time aside for planning that doesn't impact student teaching and learning opportunities, including time off class to plan, timetable, move and set up new schools and establish processes.
- Coordinator/ project manager on site at both high schools while the administrative tasks required are identified, completed, synchronised, addressed and corrected as needed.
- Actual support on the ground for packing and moving.

Provide continuity of learning and education service delivery

- Students able to choose which high school they enrol in to maintain friendships/ social connections.
- Evaluate and continue the programs that are beneficial (Big Picture, Learning Support/Wellbeing hub, Kin groups, the Support unit, the Tut program and Distance Ed).

Support students through the transition

- Consider students with disabilities, mental health conditions, autism and intellectual disabilities, students with a background of trauma.

Support reestablishment of separate school cultures

- Provide a grant to the P&C of each school so they can rebuild.
- Undertake community ownership activities – working bees, beautification, mural painting etc.

Parent suggestions

Well planned and executed transition

- A planned and organised transition with little disruption.
- Consult staff and students, make them integral to the planning process.
- Needs to happen as soon as possible to provide stability.
- Do at the beginning of a new school year.
- Classes and timetables correct prior to demerging.
- Year 10, 11 and 12 should not be disrupted again.
- Each school has a strong leadership team to bring this all together.
- Establish P&C for the two schools ahead of the transition.

Allow choice and provide continuity of learning and friendships

- Confirm which teachers will be at which school.
- Allow students to choose which school they go to regardless of zoning.
- Enable continuity of friendship groups, teacher relationships and subject choices.
- Transition is organised so friendship groups remain the same.

Support students through the transition

- Support students who are anxious about the change.
- Focus on the learning and support unit – students have difficulties adjusting to change.

Better communication

- Keep families informed every step of the way.
- Communicate honestly with students and parents about any problems that may occur.

Focus on uniforms.

- Ensuring uniforms are prioritised and readily available to ease transition for students.
- Complimentary uniform at the commencement of re-enrolment.

Student suggestions

- Good communication about the plan to demerge.
- Ensuring teachers won't leave and staff retention remains the same.
- Understanding which teachers will be allocated to which school.
- Ensuring no big interruptions to senior students, and HSC students.
- Keeping senior students together. Students don't want disruption for 11 and 12 students.
- The freedom to choose which school you want to go to.
- Still having access to all the subject and sporting choices currently available.
- Continue programs like Super Wednesday
- Make it happen quickly as possible.

3.4 High school future state

Although much of the consultation focused on gaining insight the department could use to develop the plan for the return to four separate schools, consultees also had the opportunity to provide feedback on their hopes for the longer-term future of high school in Murwillumbah. A selection of feedback is provided below.

What does a great high school experience look like?

- Quality of education that is on par with metropolitan schools.
- Well-funded schools.
- Adequate numbers of students at each high school for friendships, academic offerings and social/extracurricular opportunities.
- A wide range of subject choices, particularly for senior students, and access to expert teachers in all subjects.
- Strong, visible and effective senior leadership
- An appropriate number of happy, permanent, qualified teachers to ensure quality teaching.
- Strong focus on learning and evidence-based programs and practices.
- A wide range of education pathways including high academic achievement and vocational education.
- Quality opportunities in the performing arts.
- Access to agricultural education and farm.
- A safe environment and effective behaviour management policy with high expectations, and consistent rewards and consequences.
- Wellbeing support for staff and students.
- State of the art environment with quality learning spaces and great facilities.
- Good communication.

- Focus on relationships, respect, trust, genuine listening to all voices and working well with the community.

What challenges do you think the two separate schools might face?

- Loss of more students to other schools due to uncertainty and disruption.
- Continued declining enrolments meaning we won't have enough students or staff to support two functional, viable high schools.
- Staff shortages leading to not enough staff to support curriculum delivery.
- Lower student numbers leading to a reduced ability to provide courses and reduced positions for teachers.
- The separate schools won't be able to provide a full curriculum so certain subjects will no longer be offered to students.
- Not enough students for a full sport program.
- The two high schools will go back to being rivals.
- The two schools won't be supported or renovated equally and fairly to give all students the same opportunities.
- Loss of connections and friendships between students and staff.
- Increase in behaviour management and bullying issues.
- Money may be limited leading to two poorly resourced schools.
- Resources lost in the merge will need to be duplicated again at high cost.

What could be done to address those challenges?

- Develop and implement a long-term vision and strategy for making both schools thrive.
- The 'Murwillumbah Learning Community' works across the two high schools and all feeder primary schools. Not as a college but as a 'community' of public schools that share resources etc. with the collective focus on improving public education in Murwillumbah.
- Time and money allocated to rebuild the schools culturally, operationally and physically.
- Explore alternative education service delivery options to provide a full curriculum to students of both schools:
 - Students able to study different subjects across both sites.
 - Online learning across the two sites.
 - A common or flexible timetable for senior students.
 - Combined senior class.
 - Enabling students to travel between campuses.
 - Two campuses one staff pool one student body.
 - Continue merged classes in some instances, e.g. on super Wednesday's students to attend specialist programs on either site.
 - A cross-school committee to handle programs that branch across two campuses.
- Possible differentiation of the two schools:
 - Each high schools has a different education focus (e.g. science/ maths vs humanities subjects) may allow for wider subject choice in senior years and promote excellence at both schools.
 - Have a junior and senior campus, each location could be purpose built/modified for the needs of its student cohort.
- Continue programs that have demonstrated positive outcomes (Big Picture, KIN program, LCW)
- Continued communication, collaboration and sharing of expertise across the two high schools.

- Sharing staff and resources across the schools to enable specialised subjects to run, especially CAPA.
- Shared disability and learning support.
- Regular and purposeful joint activities and shared goals:
- Joint performances or projects.
- Larger cross-school groups for sport and camps.
- Joint wellbeing days.
- Ability to access special events at the other school.
- Celebrations of learning

4 Key findings – primary school

4.1 Murwillumbah East Public School

This section provides an overview of feedback received in relation to Murwillumbah East Public School (MEPS).

4.1.1 Challenges

Staff and parents identified a range of challenges facing the school now and which may impact the school’s ability to rebuild and continue to thrive into the future.

Lack of certainty

- A long time in limbo.
- No permanent principal.
- General uncertainty about public education in Murwillumbah.

Uninspiring school facilities

- Staff and the community expect upgrades promised in the past to be delivered.
- Additional funding may be required to provide first-class learning environments and facilities.
- The school is vulnerable to flood damage.

Declining enrolments

- Loss of students to private schools over a long period.
- Reputation of public education has been damaged.
- Support is needed to attract enrolments.

Inadequate communication and engagement

- Need collaborative forums for listening to and addressing staff and community concerns, suggestions, and feedback.
- School community needs regular updates.
- Need transparent communication regarding the ‘new build’.

4.1.2 School success factors

The online feedback form provided an opportunity for staff and parents to indicate what factors need to be in place to support MEPS to succeed now and into the future.

Staff priorities	What’s important to parents
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Deliver promised school upgrade <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New classrooms • New library • Rebuild support unit • Flood mitigation • Furniture and resources 2. Confirm leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint permanent principal 3. Maintain staffing levels 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Great staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective, caring, committed teachers • Strong leadership 2. High-quality education provision <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent learning and opportunities • High expectations • Personalised attention • Extracurricular activities 3. Student safety and wellbeing

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honour staffing agreement and freeze 4. Improve communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular updates for MEPS community • Open and transparent re. new build 5. More resourcing of wellbeing and support services for students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for WHIN, school counsellor and other services 6. More professional development for staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Physical environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World-class school • Modern learning environments • Deliver promised upgrades • Flood-proof facilities • Maintain green space 5. Stability and certainty
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4.1.3 Suggestions

School operations

- Strong leadership. Appoint permanent principal to move us forward in a positive and inspiring direction.
- Maintain staffing agreement and freeze. Teachers will perform at their best if they feel secure in their position. Temporary staff need to feel secure about their job security.
- A curriculum focused on the basics - reading, mathematics and writing.
- Continue the Aboriginal education work that has been really positive.
- Review school zoning to enable more enrolments. Allow school to take out of area enrolments.
- Provide professional development to make up for the time lost preparing for the merger.

Vision for the school

- Support the school to rebuild student numbers.
- Introduce a transition to Kindy program (e.g. Future Fives Program).
- Consider positioning the school as a special needs centre of excellence. More support student enrolments could be a point of difference for the school.
- Budget and resourcing support for marketing and promotion of the school to attract enrolments.
- Better promote the fact that nuanced learning needs can be better served at a public school.
- Money allocated to primary schools.

4.1.4 Collaboration with other schools

Staff, parents and students were asked whether there were aspects of the collaboration with the other primary school and/or the high school that they would like to see continue.

Staff perspective	Parent perspective	Student perspective
Staff felt some collaboration between the two primary schools could still be beneficial: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study tours • Sporting days with the other primary 	Parents were supportive of some shared activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint excursions • Combined sports teams • Professional learning • Using technology to support collaboration • Retain the connection to the high school/s 	There were mixed views among students as some were more comfortable doing things in smaller groups with their own school. Little support for continuing joint carnivals, but some support for other activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint learning activities

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stage 3 joint programming for the new curriculum • Shared drive for resources • Leadership collaboration • Common language, including around restorative practice • Collaborative dance programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting easier transitions to high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competing against each other in sport • Sport day at MEPS • Joint camps and excursions • Singing at Coffs Harbour • Do elective sport together
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4.2 Murwillumbah Public School

This section provides an overview of feedback received in relation to Murwillumbah East Public School (MEPS).

4.2.1 Challenges

Staff and parents identified a range of challenges facing the Murwillumbah Public School (MPS) now and which may impact the school's ability to rebuild and continue to thrive into the future.

Uncertainty about the high school

- Families are not enrolling their students in Kindy because of uncertainty at the high school.
- The broader community is not aware that the return to two high schools is proceeding.
- There is no clear plan for the return to two schools.

Loss of reputation

- Our school has been tainted through this process.
- The community doesn't trust public education anymore.
- It's hard to attract new families who are choosing private schools.
- The community is disengaged.

Shrinking of the school

- Fears that student numbers won't recover.
- Fears jobs will be lost after the staffing freeze ends.
- Need numbers for programs.
- Questions as to whether the school will still be viable.

Reduced resilience

- Staff wellbeing has been impacted.
- Fears of disharmony due to different views and not working as a team.
- Fears staff and students won't be given the support they need.

4.2.2 School success factors

Across the different consultation forums, staff and parents were asked what factors need to be in place to support MPS to succeed now and into the future.

Staff priorities	What's important to parents
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maintain staffing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep current staff numbers for at least 10 years 2. A united school team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff to work together • Enable staff to have a voice 3. Staff and student wellbeing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support staff with counselling • More counselling and support for students beyond what the school can provide • Personal compensation 4. Promotion and community engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time to engage with community • Public awareness of our achievements • Mass advertising • Positive media about the school • Promote small school learning, small classes, extra teachers, top performers. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Commitment to learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad range of educational opportunities in science and arts as well as literacy and numeracy. • Offering all children the best available education. • Up to date learning across all subjects 2. Quality teaching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring, passionate teachers • Quality educators 3. Opportunities for students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport • Music program • Access to technology • Opportunities for outdoor activities 4. Student wellbeing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strong wellbeing strategy for students • Small class sizes • Nurturing, supportive environment

4.2.3 Suggestions

An overview of suggestions received from the MPS school community are outlined below. It should be noted that there was a low response rate to the online feedback forms for MPS and this is reflected in the volume of suggestions reported here.

Vision for the school

- Quality education.
- Funding to boost current offering and establish a unique selling point for the school.
- Something amazing to attract people to the public system.
- Great K-12 education journey.
- Long term rebuilding of public education in Murwillumbah.
- Increased parent and community confidence and support.
- Increased enrolments.
- Targeting pre-school families to enter public education system.
 - Pre-school programs in the kinder rooms (new entry from Condong Street, ramp for prams etc.)
 - Playgroup.
 - Pre-school outreach and enrichment.

4.2.4 Collaboration with other schools

Staff, parents and students were asked whether there were aspects of the collaboration with the other primary school and/or the high school that they would like to see continue.

Staff perspective	Parent perspective	Student perspective
<p>Opinion was divided on this question. Some answered with just 'no', others said no to collaborative school planning and programming, while some said aligned curriculum and programming was beneficial and identified the need for a K-12 perspective. There was some support for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combined sport carnivals and sports days • Continuing the Aboriginal education approach • Relationship building • Sharing • Joint visits to other schools • Combined student events and occasions 	<p>There was more support for continued collaboration among parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I liked that the schools did things together. It was nice. • The combined excursions have been great. • More collegiality • Fill gap of out-of-school sport with gala days • Better to join than have tiny numbers from each school competing in sport. • Buddy program between schools • Combined activities for year 6 students who will be likely attending high school together. • Opportunities for the children to continue to interact and form friendships. <p>Parents also identified the opportunity to continue collaborating with the high schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MPS always had strong relationships with MHS and WHS. • Repurpose the middle school idea. 	<p>There were mixed views among students with some enjoying the social and competitive sporting opportunities of doing things together. Others felt it was too crowded with the other school and weren't as comfortable with different people as they were with their own cohort.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoyed doing things with them. • Prefer it just our own school. • Doing sport over at MEPS was fun. • I prefer just going to camp with our own school, might be too busy together. • Competing would be good, e.g. touch football, gala days are fun against the other school. • Can prepare to go to high school together.

5 Additional themes

This section includes additional themes arising from the consultation which weren't related to the specific questions posed but were observed consistently across the different consultation forums and data sources.

5.1 Impact of historical events

School communities would like the impact of the events of recent years to be acknowledged and the transition approach to be considerate of this.

Across all stakeholder groups, people indicated they have been through a lot over the past 5 years with floods, COVID, the proposed school mergers and the more recent change in policy. This has impacted school community harmony, resilience, morale and energy levels.

Staff across all schools reported the additional workload that was involved with preparing for the proposed mergers, including high school staff who talked about the work involved with the relocation of MHS to WHS at the beginning of the 2023 school year.

It was noted the decision to retain four schools in Murwillumbah, while welcomed by many, has not alleviated short to medium-term uncertainty which is having an ongoing impact on staff, students and families.

While it was communicated and understood that the election commitment to retain four public schools in Murwillumbah was based on community feedback, a small proportion of consultees remained concerned that the decision reflected sentiments and values arising from the electoral process as distinct from educational ones. Related to this, some attendees at each of the consultation sessions expressed the view that the consultation should have provided school communities with the opportunity to have input into the decision whether to stop or continue with the high school merger.

5.2 Diversity of opinions and perspectives

There are a variety of views among school communities but a common recognition that students should be at the heart of decision-making.

It was evident from feedback received that there are a variety of opinions on many key issues, including the preferred high school model.

The consultation did not seek views on whether people supported or opposed the return to two high schools. Despite this, many people took the opportunity to provide their views on this matter in feedback forms submitted through the consultation.

The most prevalent topic of feedback was from high school parents and related to their views on the return to two separate schools vs the merger of the high school.

Views were also expressed on alternative high school models such as using the two sites to provide separate junior and senior campuses or offering different specialisations at each school. The consultation did not demonstrate widespread support for any of these alternate models and further consultation would be required if they were to be considered.

Regardless of other views, there was common recognition that students should not be disrupted and disadvantaged when there is instability and uncertainty.

5.3 Public education in Murwillumbah

Stakeholders believe the schools will need support to rebuild enrolments and continue attracting families to public education in Murwillumbah.

There was feedback from school communities that the events of recent years have damaged the reputation of public education in Murwillumbah, contributed to declining enrolments, and that rebuilding will take time, resourcing and investment.

5.3.1 Student numbers

One of the concerns among communities, is declining student numbers and the impact this may have on staffing, resource allocation, the viability of the schools and their ability to offer a full education program.

It was reported that student numbers at the schools have been declining for some time due to the proliferation of private and independent schools in the area. Stakeholders observed this trend accelerated after the announcement of the proposed school mergers in 2020 and has continued since the announcement there would be a return to two separate high schools.

There are reports of senior students moving from MLC High School to other private and public high schools and impacts on Kindergarten enrolments at the primary schools.

Stage 3 (Year 5 and 6) students consulted during the primary student sessions were asked to indicate whether they thought they would be enrolling in the MLC high school, the outcomes were as follows.

- Murwillumbah East Public School: 20 students in the session, 13 likely to go to MLC High School, 5 undecided and 2 going to a different school.
- Murwillumbah Public School: 11 students in the session, 8 with siblings at MLC and of those 5 won't be going to MLC High School.

5.3.2 Vision for the future

A common view was that rebuilding reputation and enrolments will take time. It was suggested that there needs to be a long-term vision for public education in Murwillumbah as well as funding to rebuild the schools culturally, educationally and physically.

Key themes from suggestions included:

- A holistic approach which thinks for the four schools as part of one public education system in Murwillumbah to support collaboration instead of competition between the schools.
- Differentiating the schools so they each have their own unique culture, specialisation and/or programs to give families choice and ensure that each school can build its reputation and enrolments.
- A commitment to funding and staffing the schools for 5-10 years, regardless of student numbers.
- Large, highly resourced, shared facilities (e.g. a shared performing arts centre) that can be used by the four schools individually or collectively.

- Budget and resourcing to promote the schools and public education in Murwillumbah more broadly to demonstrate the advantages of the public system and attract enrolments.

6 School infrastructure

School infrastructure and facilities was a topic commonly raised across the various consultation forums. School communities expressed their expectations for work to be carried out at some or all of the four schools in Murwillumbah to provide new, modern, high-quality classrooms and facilities which will attract and retain students and families in public education.

School communities were conscious of the history of school infrastructure planning in Murwillumbah, including past commitments and budget allocations. There was an expectation that funding previously allocated to the campus project would be retained for investment in Murwillumbah's schools.

There were also calls for a prompt confirmation and communication of the infrastructure scope of works proposed and delivery timeline for each of the four schools.

Feedback across the four schools is summarised below.

6.1 Murwillumbah High School

A key theme across consultation was that MHS requires investment for a complete rebuild and/or significant upgrading to ensure it is fit for purpose and provide modern facilities for students and staff. Specific issues raised by the school community included:

- Poor standard of existing infrastructure at the school due to ageing facilities and the site being vacant for an extended period of time. Including reports from staff of asbestos, leaking buildings, mould, concrete cancer and plumbing, drainage and wastewater issues.
- Challenges that may arise from attempting to refurbish, or partially rebuild existing buildings and facilities.
- Need for improved accessibility for students, teachers and visitors with a disability or mobility issues.
- Desire for a support unit built to the highest standard for students with additional learning or support needs.
- Desire for air-conditioning in all classrooms.

6.2 Murwillumbah East Public School

Investment in school infrastructure, including provision of new permanent facilities and flood proofing, was one of the matters most raised by MEPS consultees. This was driven by past proposals to upgrade the school following the 2017 flooding event and belief that new facilities would help rebuild enrolments. Priorities expressed by the school community included:

- New, flood proof classrooms and library fitted out with modern furniture to facilitate high quality teaching and learning and attract new families to public education.
- Reconstruction of the school support unit, which is currently housed in demountables, to provide better, flood-proof facilities.
- Making the school flood proof by either raising demountable classrooms or build new ones and building a levee bank.
- A general school upgrade including canteen, air conditioning, new verandas, refurbishment of old buildings and maintenance.

- Provision of a performance space, including a possible shared performing arts centre for use by all the schools.
 - Maintaining the extensive green space that MEPS is known for.
-

6.3 Murwillumbah Public School

Staff in particular felt improved facilities at MPS would have a positive impact on attracting new families and enrolments and ensure the school was not disadvantaged. Specific issues raised during consultation included:

- Desire for a significant upgrade of facilities rather than just a refurbishment to 'reimagine' the school, provide spaces on par with what the campus project would have delivered, and attract families to the school.
 - Possible purchase of additional, adjoining land to allow for future growth and expansion of outdoor and green space.
 - Need for general maintenance, including replacement of leaking roof.
 - Desire for improved toilets.
 - Desire for shade shelters for the school.
-

6.4 Wollumbin High School

While it was understood by school communities that WHS is in better condition than MHS, consultees felt investment in infrastructure and facilities was warranted at the site to ensure equity across the two high schools. Specific issues raised during consultation included:

- Desire for a refit/refurbish/partial rebuild of infrastructure, including learning spaces.
- Need for upgrades to equipment including the school alarm system, air-conditioning and technology equipment.
- Repair and upgrading of student toilets.

7 Communication and engagement

One of the matters consistently raised across consultation forums, was the desire for more consistent and improved communication about the transition back to four separate schools and the day-to-day operations of the schools, to help alleviate uncertainty and anxiety and rebuild trust.

Feedback indicated that stakeholders would like communication to be:

- Regular: A good, regular program of weekly, monthly or quarterly updates from the department.
- Transparent: Honest and transparent communication, even when there is bad news or if the answers to questions aren't certain.
- Clear: Clear and open communication in plain English.
- Detailed: Detailed information and facts about timelines, progress and developments as they come to hand.

School communities also indicated they would like to see ongoing engagement between the department and staff, students and parents to enable them to have a voice as plans for the return to four separate schools in Murwillumbah are developed and implemented.

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