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GIANT STEPS MELBOURNE

Annual Report 2025

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About our school

Giant Steps Melbourne (GSM), located in Kew, is a school for children with a diagnosis of Autism. It opened in February 2016, initially supporting 11 students. In 2025 the school had 50 students enrolled, aged between 4 and 18 years old. The school is registered as a Specialist Co-Educational School.

GSM's program is designed and delivered by teachers and therapists working collaboratively within a transdisciplinary model to develop the students' engagement and social connectivity, as well as skills and knowledge. GSM was established due to the overwhelming demand for the education and therapy program established in our sister school, Giant Steps Sydney (GSS).

The Sydney school, located in Gladesville and established in 1995, has grown and now offers a range of additional services to best support students, their families, and the wider community.

Further information regarding the history and context of both schools can be found at www.giantsteps.net.au

For further information visit the Autism Hub: https://giantsteps.net.au/the-autism-hub/

Our Mission

Giant Steps seeks to develop intensive therapeutic and educational programs to ensure that each child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Giant Steps aims to provide support to families, to improve understanding of autism in the wider community and to develop best practice among carers and professionals. Our vision is to continue to be recognised as a centre of excellence for the creation, implementation and dissemination of innovative and effective programs and services for children with autism and their families.

The core values of Giant Steps

- Maintain a culture of best practice service to individuals with autism.
- Remain open to the acceptance of innovative ideas and approaches, seeking continuous improvement in all that we do.
- Recognise the skills of our staff, encouraging commitment and dedication from a team of quality people.
- Strengthen professional relationships within and outside Giant Steps
- Adopt collaborative approaches to challenges.
- Promote constructive reciprocal involvement within the community.
- Pursue growth opportunities consistent with our core undertakings whilst maintaining prudent financial and risk management.
- Celebrate our achievements.
- Committed to the health, welfare, and safety of each student. Giant Steps has zero tolerance of child abuse.
- Together we can build brighter futures for children with autism and their families.

A Message from the School Principal

2025 was a year of growth, opportunity and achievement, marking a significant milestone in the history of Giant Steps Melbourne with the opening of our purpose-built, world-class secondary and senior secondary facilities.

This transformational development includes five new classrooms, a dedicated breakout space, library, hall, staff workroom and staff room, together with upgraded playground and car parking facilities. These thoughtfully designed learning environments have enabled us to expand enrolments and educational programs, providing contemporary spaces that support the diverse learning, sensory and wellbeing needs of our students.

The result is a school environment that is welcoming, calm, flexible and adaptable, reflecting our commitment to excellence in autism-specific education. The successful completion of this project was made possible through the collaboration and expertise of many contributors. The Giant Steps Melbourne Board of Directors provided the vision, governance and stewardship that underpinned this significant milestone and our ongoing growth as an organisation.

I also recognise our architectural partners, JCB Architects and McCorkell Construction, whose partnership enabled the project to be delivered ahead of schedule while ensuring minimal disruption to students, families and staff.

A further highlight in 2025 was the opportunity for Giant Steps Melbourne staff to contribute to the broader autism and education sectors through presentations at the Asia Pacific Autism Conference (APAC) in Perth. Staff shared innovative practice in areas including puberty education, student safety, sensory regulation and pathways to meaningful employment. Their contributions showcased the expertise, innovation and evidence-informed practice that underpin our programs and reflected the depth of knowledge within our organisation. It was a proud recognition of Giant Steps Melbourne's growing contribution to the national conversation surrounding autism-specific education and support, reinforcing our position as a leader in the field.

In 2025, Giant Steps Melbourne successfully completed its Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) School Review. This process provided an important opportunity to reflect on our practices, celebrate our strengths and identify opportunities for continued improvement.

With a particular focus on the Child Safe Standards and the care, safety and wellbeing of students, the review affirmed the strength of our policies, practices and culture. The successful outcome recognised our commitment to creating safe, inclusive and supportive learning environments in which student wellbeing is central to decision-making, leadership and educational practice. The review further highlighted the dedication of our staff, leadership team and Board in maintaining high standards of care, safeguarding and continuous improvement.

Underlying each of these achievements is the collective commitment of our school community. The Board of Directors continues to provide strong governance, strategic leadership and stewardship, guiding the growth and sustainability of the organisation.

The trust, partnership and advocacy of our families remain central to the success of our students and the strength of our community.

Our staff continue to demonstrate exceptional professionalism, expertise and dedication. Their

commitment creates opportunities for students to learn, grow, connect and thrive, while ensuring that every young person is supported to participate meaningfully in both school and community life.

Our work is strengthened by the extraordinary generosity of the Giant Steps Melbourne community. Corporate partners, philanthropic trusts and foundations, donors, volunteers and families continue to make our work possible through their commitment to our shared vision. I am particularly grateful for the dedication of our families, who consistently find creative and innovative ways to raise much-needed funds, ensuring that Giant Steps Melbourne can continue to deliver exceptional programs for current and future students. Together, their advocacy, partnership and financial support make a meaningful difference in the lives of students and families.

As we reflect on a year defined by growth, innovation and achievement, we celebrate how far we have come and look forward with confidence and optimism to the future. Together, we remain committed to creating a world where autistic individuals are supported to learn, participate, connect and reach their full potential.

Davina Bate
Principal

The Rob Llewellyn-Jones Clinical Centre

In 2025 the Rob Llewellyn-Jones Clinical Centre operated onsite at Giant Steps Melbourne. Across the year, 8 clinics were held (2 per term), with families also accessing phone consults during Sydney clinic days for a total of 80 appointments for 25 students, including 8 students for initial appointments. The clinic operates onsite at Giant Steps Melbourne, with our visiting psychiatrist and school staff working collaboratively to see students within the school environment which could be the classroom, playground, out on walks or wherever their timetable has taken them.

The clinic team includes:

- Dr Peter Wurth, Sydney consultant psychiatrist
- Dr Helen Appleton, National Director of Student and Psychological Services
- Davina Bate, school Principal
- Deli Winthrope, Engagement and Wellbeing Lead

Classroom teachers and/or therapists attend appointments with families. Clinic appointments can also include collaboration with wider medical supports and to date has included GPs, paediatricians, and neurologists as appropriate and available.

The key benefits to the onsite clinic are:

- Students not needing to leave school to access hospitals, doctor's surgeries, or clinics
- Shorter wait times for an initial appointment
- Longer appointment times available with regular follow ups available
- Collaborative care from a highly experienced psychiatric team
- Input from home and school with high levels of ongoing monitoring via data, observations and video to assist with decision making
- Decreased student and family stress around appointments and care plans
- Ability to access members of the care team between appointments to provide guidance and support

The presence of the clinic at Giant Steps continues to facilitate dialogue about mental health by both families and staff, and the need to consider it as an essential component to understand our students' behaviour and wellbeing. The clinic and how we support our students' complex needs continues to be a key discussion point with staff, families and external agencies who visit the site.

Transdisciplinary Approach

Our team of teachers and therapists (Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy and Music Therapy) draw on their expertise to provide an innovative and individualised education and therapy program for each student. These programs are based on the Victorian Curriculum and incorporate all the key learning areas.

Each member of our transdisciplinary team plays an integral part in the design, implementation, and assessment of the programs. This collaborative approach allows us to deliver rich learning programs within a supportive teaching environment. These programs aim to support student engagement and develop their skills. Our collaborative approach also allows us to differentiate the program to best support the individual social, physical, and emotional needs of each student.

Working closely with the families is also fundamental to the Giant Steps model. It ensures we tailor the individualised program to address the priorities of the family, work together as we support the students in their different contexts and respond to the changing needs of the students as they arise.

Primary Program

In 2025, the Primary Program at Giant Steps supported 23 students across three classes. Each class delivered a rich and engaging curriculum aligned with the Victorian Curriculum Learning Areas, tailored to meet the diverse needs and abilities of students.

The Literacy program focused on four key areas. Students developed phonemic awareness through targeted word work, building on the InitialLIT reading program. Self-selected reading encouraged students to explore texts aligned with their interests, fostering a love of reading. Shared reading sessions supported comprehension, drama, and functional commenting skills. Students delved into an enchanted world in the Julia Donaldson themed unit during Semester One and in Semester two explored Beary Tales. Writing was integrated throughout all units, supporting both functional and creative expression.

Mathematics and Geography units were integrated, and instruction was similarly structured to support practical and conceptual understanding. Students explored time, calendars, and daily routines during morning meetings, developed financial literacy through activities focused on money and its uses, and engaged in explicit teaching of curriculum-aligned mathematical and Geography concepts.

Core Giant Steps units such as Cooking (Design and Technologies), Becoming Me, Games and Sports, AllPlay Dance Program (Dance) and Activities of Daily Living (Health and Physical Education) remained central to the program. These units allowed students to consolidate prior learning while building new skills. Themed units throughout the year included Transport (History), Space (Digital Technologies and Science), R&B and Hip Hop and Meet the Orchestra (Music and Dance), and City Life (Media and Visual Arts). These engaging topics provided meaningful opportunities for students to generalise their learning in new and motivating contexts.

Cross-curricular capabilities including Critical and Creative Thinking and Personal and Social Capabilities were embedded across all learning areas, supporting holistic development.

The transdisciplinary model of therapy continued to be a cornerstone of the Primary Program, ensuring students received consistent and meaningful therapeutic support both within and beyond the classroom.

A highlight of the year was the AllPlay Dance Program's first professional performance. Family members and friends attended to celebrate and witness the students' dedication and hard work throughout their rehearsals. The stage and lighting were generously donated by Yourshow and the event was seamlessly organised by our very own Michelle Wheeler.

The Junior School Disco was another highlight held as an end-of-year celebration, inviting all students along with their parents and carers to enjoy an afternoon of fun on site. The event made excellent use of the stage and lighting setup from the school dance production. A special highlight was our very own superstar DJ Miranda Fitzgerald, who provided an energetic soundtrack for the event. A tuckshop was also available, coordinated and run by Joan from Friends of Giant Steps.

The Primary Program was also fortunate to participate in a Book Week incursion as part of the celebrations. The Flying Bookworm Theatre Company presented an engaging performance of three stories connected to the literacy unit. This experience formed part of a week-long Book Week program organised by Alisha Hopkins.

Secondary Program

In 2025, the Secondary Program at Giant Steps supported 12 students across three classes. Each class delivered a rich and engaging curriculum aligned with the Victorian Curriculum, with learning experiences carefully tailored to meet the diverse strengths, needs and abilities of every student.

Literacy remained a key focus throughout the year. Supported by the InitiaLit program, students explored a range of engaging texts through two units, *Blue Planet* in Semester One and *Marvel and DC Superheroes* in Semester Two. These texts provided meaningful opportunities for students to investigate settings, identify characters and their traits, and develop their comprehension skills. Reflection continued to be embedded in afternoon meetings, while the use of Colourful Semantics across programs supported students to strengthen their understanding of sentence structure and expressive language.

Numeracy and Geography were integrated through a cross-curricular approach, enabling students to explore mathematical and geographical concepts such as number, measurement, shape, place and space. Learning took place in both dedicated topic lessons and everyday classroom routines, including morning meetings where students developed their understanding of date, time and sequencing.

Core Giant Steps programs continued to provide meaningful opportunities for students to build independence. These included Cooking (Design and Technologies), French (Languages), Games and Sports, the AllPlay Dance Program (Dance), and Activities of Daily Living (Health and Physical Education). These ongoing programs allowed students to consolidate existing skills while extending their learning in authentic contexts.

Students also engaged in a range of themed inquiry units throughout the year. Topics included *Ancient Rome* (History), *Human Body* (Digital Technologies and Science), *R&B and Hip Hop* and *Meet the Orchestra* (Music and Dance), and *City Life* (Media Arts and Visual Arts).

Becoming Me remained an important component of the Secondary Program, supporting students to develop greater self-awareness, personal identity and social understanding. This program continued to provide valuable opportunities for students to explore their strengths, and preferences and continue to learn about and have a shared understanding of safe and not safe behaviours as they transition toward adulthood.

The Victorian Curriculum capabilities, including Critical and Creative Thinking and Personal and Social Capability, were embedded across all learning areas, supporting students' holistic development and fostering the skills needed for lifelong learning.

There were many highlights throughout the year. A standout achievement was our inaugural AllPlay Dance Concert. After weeks of dance sessions, students proudly performed for an audience of family and friends, showcasing not only their newly developed dance skills but also their confidence and enjoyment of performing.

Another significant highlight was the annual Secondary Camp. For many families, sending their child on a two-day camp represents a considerable step, requiring careful planning, trust and commitment. Each year, this collaborative effort proves worthwhile. Camp provides invaluable opportunities for students to develop independence, resilience and social connections in a supportive environment, while also strengthening relationships between students and staff. Although everyone returns tired, the sense of achievement, pride and excitement that follows camp is always evident and continues to be one of the most memorable experiences of the year.

Senior Secondary Pathway (VPC)

In 2025, the Foundation Secondary Pathway at Giant Steps supported eight students across two classes, aged between 16 and 18 years. These students engaged in the Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC), bringing with them a diverse range of skills and learning needs.

All students participated in a comprehensive curriculum encompassing Literacy, Numeracy, Work-Related Skills, and Personal Development Skills. These areas were explored through integrated and engaging units such as *Let's Party*, *Maths Matters*, *Teaching Texts, and Employ Me*. Students also collaborated with the Kew Neighbourhood Centre and Friends of Giant Steps, connecting to some of our community members.

Work experience and community participation remained key features of the program. Community access experiences included regular visits to Queen Victoria Market and participation in basketball sessions at Ford Park, strengthening students' social skills, community engagement, and physical wellbeing.

Students further developed their independence through hikes within the local community, practising navigation and following directions to reach destinations safely. Regular visits to Spare Chair Café and Woolworths provided authentic opportunities to purchase supplies and resources for their business activities, while building confidence in everyday community interactions.

Entrepreneurial learning continued to flourish with the launch of *Paws for Giant Steps*, the Foundation Secondary Pathway's social enterprise. Through this initiative, students developed skills in planning, production, customer service, and teamwork while gaining valuable experience in operating a purpose-driven business.

As part of their preparation for life beyond school, students participated in a Secondary Camp that promoted independence, teamwork, and problem-solving. In the lead-up to graduation, students worked diligently on developing and practising their speeches, building their communication skills and confidence in presenting to an audience. A significant milestone for the pathway was the graduation of three students, whose achievements reflected years of dedication, growth, and perseverance.

Occupational Therapy

In 2025, Occupational Therapy at Giant Steps has continued to evolve, reflecting the growing capability of our transdisciplinary model and the increasing confidence of staff in delivering therapeutic supports within everyday practice. Our focus has shifted from defining the OT role within the classroom to strengthening how therapy is embedded, responsive, and sustained across the school day.

A continued priority has been supporting students' emotional regulation as a foundation for engagement and learning. This focus is now more consistently integrated across all environments, with staff supported to recognise, respond to, and proactively plan for students' regulation needs as part of their daily practice.

Our work remains grounded in person-centred and strengths-based approaches. We have continued to collaborate closely with families to ensure goals are meaningful, functional, and reflective of each student's evolving needs. Goals are actively refined over time in response to student progress and changing priorities.

Over the past year, we have further strengthened the structures that support the implementation of therapy across the day. This has included redefining how therapeutic support is delivered when a therapist is not physically present, ensuring that strategies are embedded within classroom routines and consistently implemented by the broader team. As a result, therapy is no longer reliant on individual sessions but is sustained through shared ownership and team capability.

To support this shift, we have also refined our induction processes for therapists, ensuring clearer alignment with our transdisciplinary approach from the outset. This has contributed to greater consistency in practice, while also building staff confidence and capacity to implement and adapt strategies in real time.

Occupational Therapists have continued to work alongside class teams to create structured, predictable environments that promote independence and skill development. Students are supported to build independence in functional tasks such as meal preparation, dressing, managing personal belongings, and accessing the community. The classroom environment remains a key area of focus, with ongoing collaboration to ensure it is responsive to students' sensory, learning, and functional needs.

Speech Therapy

In 2025, the speech therapy team has continued to expand and refine speech therapy practice within the school and adult service settings. The opening of the new building and expansion of the school saw many opportunities to welcome in new students and their families, as well as many new staff faces to upskill and collaborate with. The team continued to consist of 4 speech therapists, and while one left

the school at the end of the year to move interstate, we recruited 2 new therapists to join the team in 2026.

The focus of therapy provision continued to be on providing individualised supports and strategies to support and extend individual's communication needs and skills. Additionally, the role encompasses assessing, supporting and monitoring mealtime needs to ensure safety while eating. Speech therapists continued to focus on this work within the transdisciplinary team, sharing goals, supports and knowledge with members of their teams to ensure that students and participants communication and safety is supported even while therapists are not present.

The speech therapy team refined the assessment and documentation process that captures the decision making and critical thinking that occurs when establishing strategies and AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) tools and systems for each student. Speech Therapists worked on creating a Communication Profile Summary for every student. This profile is based on the Participation Model- an AAC assessment tool and intervention framework that focuses on an ongoing evaluation of the tools, strategies and supports needed to manage the current and future communication needs of AAC users.

This process is completed through collaborative assessment involving the young persons school supports, family and external therapy providers and takes into consideration the individuals communication preferences and other areas that can impact their ability to communicate including sensory needs, visual literacy, interests/motivation, executive functioning skills, object permanence and theory of mind.

Speech therapists also continued to provide critical comprehension supports across the school and adult program. Therapists continued to assess individual comprehension needs, and in collaboration with the transdisciplinary team identified the adaptations required to individualise supports and ensure that all individuals could understand their routines and roles within the day, and better access the curriculum and key learning.

The speech therapy team also used their knowledge and collective expertise to deliver valuable professional learning sessions internally to the Giant Steps staff body, as well as presenting information through the Autism Hub. The Autism Hub provided full day courses for professionals focused on Autism in School Years, as well as tailoring content and providing individualized training for a specialist school setting, with a key focus on understanding the 'why' behind the use of autism friendly supports and strategies.

A highlight for the year was Jacinta Mulvaney attending and presenting at the Asia Pacific Autism Conference (APAC) in Perth with other members of the team, sharing the work she has been doing in collaboration with our Occupational Therapist and Teacher on supporting puberty changes and development within our school population. The team presented "Empowering Autistic students through puberty education: Reducing risks and promoting safe behaviours" which generated a high level of interest and was well attended.

Music Therapy

In 2025, the Music Therapy team continued to integrate music across programs, focusing on social engagement, learning, and well-being. We welcomed a new music therapist to our team and further developed the music program based on each semester's themes, strengthening connections between Sydney and Melbourne and deepening ties within the Melbourne community.

This year, the Music Therapy program centred around the themes of Hip Hop and R&B and Meet the Orchestra. In Semester 1, students explored some Hip Hop beats, learning Hip Hop dances and listening to some famous R&B songs. In Semester 2, the focus shifted to Meet the Orchestra, where students tried to play and explore different orchestra instruments such as the violin, trumpet and many more. As part of the program, we also had a String Quartet incursion who played some popular classical and contemporary music for our students.

Throughout the year, the Music Therapy team continued to build and maintain community connections, including partnerships with the Melbourne Recital Centre. Our students enjoyed inclusive performances performed by Antelodic. These enriching experiences were made possible through the collaboration and support of our community partners, giving students the opportunity to enjoy live music and theatre productions.

The Music Therapy team remained committed to professional development and collaboration. The Music Therapists also led a well-attended external professional course on creating autism-friendly music supports through the Autism Hub. Close connections between the Sydney and Melbourne Music Therapy teams were maintained through cross-campus meetings, fortnightly supervision sessions, and staff visits between sites. This ongoing collaboration-built innovation in our practice and led to new, creative ways to engage with students.

Workforce composition

Over the past year, Giant Steps employed 43 staff members across education, therapy and support services. During this period, 10 staff members resigned, reflecting workforce movement within our specialist setting.

Those who departed did so primarily to pursue career advancement opportunities, undertake further study or professional training, or relocate to roles outside Victoria. There was also some movement across the teaching and therapy teams to support individual career progression and wellbeing, while maintaining continuity of high-quality services for students and participants.

TOTAL STAFF NUMBERS		
	No. of Staff	FTE
Principal	1	1
Teachers	11	10.2
Therapists	13	9.9
Educators / Teachers' Aides	20	18
Administration	5	4.2
Total Staff	50	43.3

Staff Retention Rates

Teachers	75%
Therapists	75%
Educators	61%
Administration	80%

This accounts for an average staff retention rate of 71%.

Student Attendance & Management of Non-Attendance, Secondary Retention

Student Population	
Primary	23
Secondary	27

In 2025 the school enrolled 50 students aged 4-18 years of age. Retention of students in a special school is not an overarching goal.

Decisions to transition students into other educational settings are always made within the context of the individual planning process involving parents and caregivers, and key personnel.

Retention rates are not useful as a measure as they do not reflect the inclusive focus of the school program.

Due to the small numbers of students, the school does not report attendance rates against grades as there may only be one student per grade. The average attendance rate is very stable and high across the year with an average of 92%. Most students have 3 days or less absence in a year, usually due to illness, complex behaviour of challenges with transport to and from school.

The school implements policy and procedures for the management of student non-attendance with parents on an ongoing basis through daily communication. The school follows up where explanation of absence is not received from the parents or caregiver. Absences are monitored and parent meetings are held to resolve non-attendance. Mandatory reporting procedures apply where absences are extended, or a student may be at risk.

Senior Secondary Outcomes

There were three students in the senior secondary school studying the Victorian Pathways Certificate.

Enrolment policies and characteristics of the student body

The student population of 50 was from a wide and diverse background and includes students with a language background other than English. The school population is drawn from the greater Melbourne metropolitan area.

Demand for enrolment at Giant Steps continued to increase, with most applications coming from families seeking an educational service that includes autism specific teaching strategies combined with therapy services delivered within the curriculum framework.

The school population breakdown was as follows:

Student Population	
Primary	23
Secondary	27
Total Males	38
Total Females	12
Student Total	**50**

A ratio of 1 female to 4 males is the usual ratio for persons with autism spectrum disorder.

The were no students who identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Student performance in national and statewide tests and examinations

Victorian Certificate of Education

No students were eligible for the VCE.

Literacy & Numeracy Assessments

In 2025, students were exempt from NAPLAN, and all had Individual Plans focusing on key curriculum areas, communication, regulation, engagement, and participation. The school employed a range of assessment procedures, some administered directly by teaching staff and others by speech and occupational therapy staff, emphasising both assessment for learning and regular intervals of assessment of learning. Goals for the Individual Program were developed using a collaborative team approach, including teachers, therapists, and parents. These goals were aligned with outcomes in the Victorian curriculum and the communication support document. Specific indicators were created to match each child's skill level and were regularly reported against. This collaborative process was applied across all curriculum areas.

Summary Financial information

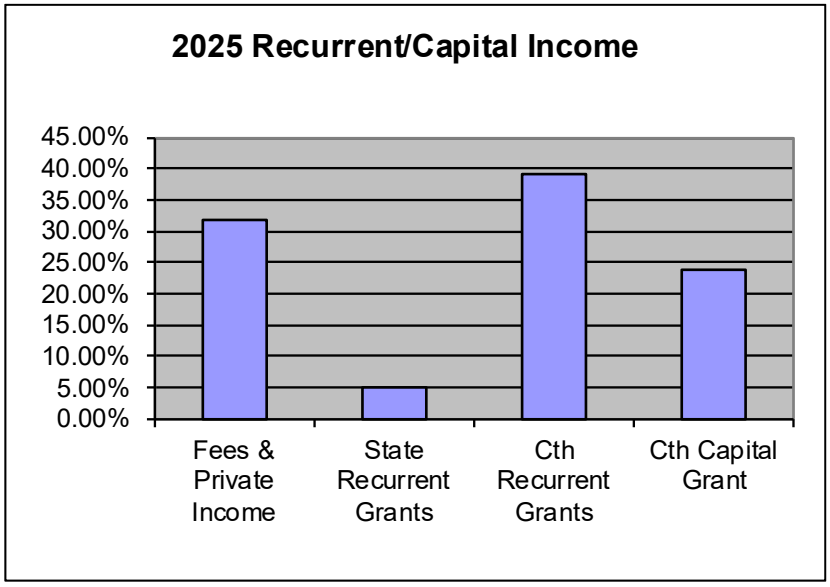
Giant Steps Melbourne is a registered Charity and a Public Benevolent Institution. Each year Giant Steps Melbourne has a full financial audit conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Giant Steps does not charge fees and in 2025 received 32% of revenue from donations, fundraising appeals and support from community organisations and companies

Summary financial information

(a) Graphic one: recurrent/capital income represented by column chart

Please note: Giant Steps does not charge School fees



(b) Graphic two: recurrent/capital expenditure represented by column chart

