

Australian Catholic Schools Why We Have Them? What They Aim To Achieve?

Preamble

Catholic schools have been a major component of Australian education for over 175 years. During that time they have adapted to changing circumstances and changing times. In recent decades, as both the Church and Australian society have changed, Catholic schools have continued to develop and to grow in quality and public esteem.

Compared to previous generations, today's Australian Catholic schools are relatively well equipped and staffed by well-qualified, committed teachers. Parents, students and staff of Catholic schools strive to be Christ-centred communities which witness to the Faith. Like all Australian schools, Catholic schools are accountable to governments and their local communities for meeting all the teaching and learning requirements of the state. They also have distinctive goals and features which derive from a core of philosophical and theological truths which are central to their character and mission. They are highly regarded by the Australian community.

Catholic schools will strive to continue to meet the needs of the Australian people as they begin to confront the major national challenges such as Reconciliation and the demand for greater social equity. It is therefore timely to take stock of Catholic schools in Australia and the ways in which they are still relevant to meeting the needs of students and parents, the Catholic community and Australian society. To do so is to take up such major challenges as that recently issued by the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education in its document *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997), namely to "devote careful attention to certain fundamental characteristics of the Catholic school, which are of great importance if its educational activity is to be effectual in the Church and in society" (#4).

Changing Context

Catholic schools in Australia operate in an ever-changing political and social context which shapes both the way they are organised and function, and their teaching and learning priorities. At present, Catholic schools are especially challenged by a range of issues emanating from Australia's changing place in the world and its struggle for self-identity, as well as the theological and ecclesial transformations of the post-Vatican II Church. In this rapidly developing environment the Catholic school provides a potential source of stability and vision.

Catholic schools seek to contribute to the creation of an Australian community that is highly educated, skilled and cultured with an ability to promote and embrace a critical analysis of social issues, the expansion of knowledge and the pursuit of truth. Such a community will be marked by a vigorous intellectual and cultural life, accessible to all. Education has individual and private benefits, but it is also very much a public good whose benefits enhance the whole community. Catholic schools emphasise the contribution of education to the common good of the Australian community.

It is therefore timely to stress some of the fundamentals of Catholic education: education is for the person and for society, for inviting students to find meaning in their lives through forming a mature relationship with their God, for developing communal obligations and aspirations. The challenges for Catholic schools will continue to change, but their overall goals and ethos will remain and be incorporated into a new vision which is more appropriate to the multicultural and pluralistic faith dimensions of modern Australian society.

Why do we have Catholic Schools?

Catholic schools:

- contribute to the Church's mission to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ;
- offer the Catholic community and the people of Australia an educational foundation for life to the full, meaning the full development of the person - intellectually, spiritually, physically, morally and emotionally;
- fulfil parents' rights in a democratic, free society to choose the schooling for their children which reflects their own values, beliefs and hopes as Australians; and
- have proven over successive generations that they contribute significantly to the development of the Australian community.

Who Catholic Schools are for?

- Catholic children who, through baptism, have a right to an education in the Catholic faith in a Catholic school.
- Parents and guardians who wish to entrust their children's future to Catholic schools because of their explicit goals and acknowledged educational quality.

What is distinctive about Catholic Schools?

- Promoting a particular view of the person, the community, the nation and the world, centred on the person and teachings of Jesus Christ.
- Challenging students to find, through God, meaning and value in their lives.
- Forming an integral part of a church community in which all generations live, worship and grow together.
- Critiquing our culture, and challenging community values, as an integral part of their Gospel mission.
- Aiming to be welcoming and reflective communities whose most distinctive sign is the discernment of God's presence and their spiritual life.
- Espousing values which unite Australia by promoting a citizenship infused by a commitment to social justice.
- Encouraging students to develop an international perspective on their own country and how their country can identify and respond justly to its international obligations.
- Developing a sense of historical perspective by reflecting on the development of societies and cultures over time, a story of human frailty but of continual efforts to live the Gospel message.
- Giving priority to educating the spiritually and financially poor and being their advocates.

What Catholic schools do?

Catholic schools:

- challenge students to discover God and to make value of their lives;
- encourage students to appreciate the intrinsic worth of who they are now and where they are now;
- utilise students' experience as the basis for developing a synthesis of faith and culture, and of faith and life;
- seek to provide a high-quality academic and vocational education for all their students, giving due emphasis to the fundamental literacy and numeracy skills required for both learning and life;
- actively and systematically promote the faith development of students in a conducive environment;
- provide religious education programs which make students knowledgeable about their faith;
- pray and celebrate the Eucharist in community;
- emphasise personal and social development as fundamental enduring values and requirements in an ever-changing world;
- take an international perspective on human development based on cooperation and collaboration, not competition;
- give priority to activities involving active community service and issues of social justice;
- strive to be a welcoming and effective community and provide a genuine experience of community for students, teachers, parents and priests;
- form part of an active ministry which reaches out to parents and responds to their expectations;
- view their teachers as being committed to and interested in the whole development of their students in a faith context;
- acknowledge, promote and celebrate the particular God-given gifts of each student; and
- encourage engagement and commitment by students, teachers, parents and priests.

What contribution do Catholic schools make?

Catholic schools:

- educate young Australians to be highly skilled, informed, tolerant, open and just;
- enhance, by emphasising the common good, the development of Australia and the building and improvement of a socially just Australian society that is multicultural and multi-faith;
- offer a voice which challenges current and future generations to reflect on their world in the light of Christ's message;
- provide a perspective which extends beyond national and temporal borders, encouraging students to have an open mind on contemporary issues as a foundation for becoming good Australian and world citizens;
- provide the potential to combine the spirituality of our Indigenous people and the different spiritual traditions of the various migrant communities since 1788, as a basis for valuing our diversity and promoting social justice; and

- encourage and provide a basis for students to seek to develop their relationship with their God and to continue their faith journey throughout their lives.

Conclusion

Catholic schools in Australia continue to respond to, and to serve, the needs of the parents who seek a Catholic education for their children. In the building up of Christ's Kingdom and Australian society, Catholic schools play a deliberate and vital role. As explicitly acknowledged in *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997), "... now, as in the past, the Catholic school must be able to speak for itself effectively and convincingly. It is not merely a question of adaptation, but of missionary thrust, the fundamental duty to evangelise, to go toward men and women wherever they are, so that they may receive the gift of salvation" (# 3). This document is designed to show how the Australian Catholic school is able to "speak for itself effectively and convincingly", and to highlight the fact that "the work of the school is irreplaceable and the investment of human and material resources in the school becomes a prophetic choice" (# 21).