

OEIC World Congress 2022
The Hon Jacinta Collins, Executive Director
National Catholic Education Commission, Australia
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Acknowledgment of Country

I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I live and work, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. I extend that respect to all Indigenous peoples.

A brief history of Australian education

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By way of introduction, I would like to provide a very brief history of Catholic education in Australia, which is only 200 years young, and is unique in its provision and scope of Catholic education in the world.

The first 'official' Catholic school was founded in 1820 by Irish priest Fr John Therry, and run by former convict George Marley in Parramatta, near Sydney. The school taught 31 students – seven of whom were Protestants.

In 1885, the Australian Catholic Bishops named their intention for a Catholic school to be provided in every parish to educate children in the faith and contribute to the common good. Catholic schools grew alongside public schools, and established a parallel school system in Australia, without any government funding or support for over a century.

Government funding was re-established in 1962, in recognition of the moral responsibility of governments to fund, at least in part, education for all Australian children. It also acknowledged the significant contribution of Catholic schools to the public good.

Today, Catholic education has grown to become the largest provider of schooling outside of government, educating one in five, or over 785,000 students, in 1,755 schools, with more than 102,000 staff. Catholic schooling is a \$16 billion annual enterprise with Australian governments contributing around 80% of all recurrent funding.

Education for the Common Good

In their 2021 pastoral letter to mark the Bicentenary of Catholic education in Australia, our bishops noted the contribution of Catholic schools to the common good. They wrote:

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“Catholic schools... stand as a beacon in our society, for their contribution to the common good and to the nation’s social capital. They have helped nurture a more just, tolerant and cohesive society. Catholic education is determined in its commitment to excellence and equity.” ([200 Years Young](#), p2).

This vision is echoed in the recent [Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration](#) for all Australian schools. It reads:

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“... our education system... must also prepare young people to thrive in a time of rapid social and technological change, and complex

environmental, social and economic challenges. Education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians...” (2019, p2)

This commitment to the common good through the ‘human flourishing’ of young people is the hallmark of **hope** that I would like to focus on today, as it is woven through the invitation of Pope Francis in *the Global Compact on Education, Fratelli Tutti* and *Laudato Si’*.

Improving Access

The Global Compact on Education calls us **To Welcome** - to educate and be educated on the need for acceptance and in particular, openness to the most vulnerable and marginalised.

Since our earliest days, Catholic education has mobilised future generations, to lift them out of poverty and disadvantage, and foster the human flourishing of young people. We describe this in the words of Jesus, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”. (John 10:10)

Through our early Catholic educators such as Australia’s first Saint, Mary MacKillop, Catholic schools were established to educate the poor and most vulnerable in society. While the ‘preferential option for the poor’ is still a valued aspiration for Catholic schools, we increasingly have found ourselves a ‘victim’ of our own success, and are now more available to families from middle class backgrounds.

Today, we know that students from lower income backgrounds, students with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are under-represented in our schools compared to the public sector.

We are identifying how we can reduce or remove barriers to enrolment so we are more welcoming and inclusive, and better serve the needs of students and their families from all backgrounds, particularly those from regional, rural and remote areas, First Nations' families, students with disability, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and migrant and refugee families.

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Nearly 40% of our Catholic schools are located outside metropolitan areas, in some of the remotest parts of Australia. By comparison one of our largest dioceses is nearly two and a half times the land size of France. Despite its vast size, the Diocese of Darwin in the Northern Territory, has only 18 Catholic schools and 4,850 students from 80 cultural backgrounds. Over a quarter are from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

As one of our national strategic priorities, improving access to Catholic schools has involved researching the needs of families; advocating for a fairer government funding model to ensure greater affordability; presenting the case for government investment into school capital projects; and assisting Catholic school systems to deliver increased early childhood education services.

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Through our national focus, and local state, territory and diocesan initiatives such as financial hardship programs and scholarships, Catholic education is seeing increasing enrolments of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since 2000, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Catholic schools has increased by 180%; 41% of Catholic school students are funded for socio-educational disadvantage, and students with disability make up 20% of the students in our schools.

We are determined to learn the lessons of the past and improve access to Catholic schools. This requires us to be alert to signs of complacency in our mission and reduce or remove barriers to enrolment.

Excellence in education

Providing access is only the first step. To support our students to thrive, we must deliver on our promise of excellence in education.

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A pressing concern for all Australian schools, not just Catholic schools, is how we will reverse a 20-year decline in student performance as measured by the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and local measures such as NAPLAN, which show an absolute and relative decline in performance.

At our national conference in September, Director for Education and Skills at the OECD, Andreas Schleicher, said the global findings from PISA demonstrate that education can moderate social disadvantage,

however he acknowledges there is some performance variability *between* schools.

Of Australia's performance, he says performance variability *between* schools is less of a concern, however, there is huge variability in student performance *within* schools and it's not just disadvantaged students. There are many young people "falling through the cracks" even in high performing and wealthy schools.

As part of our strategic focus we are working, through greater collaboration, to understand the national picture and share expertise across the country to better serve the needs of our students. Our 'systemness' is our greatest asset to share best practice and learn from each other in order to lift educational outcomes for all students in all schools.

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At our national conference, in an entertaining cooking segment with a hospitality student and teacher, Archbishop of Sydney Anthony Fisher OP said the recipe for success for Catholic education, and one could say, education generally, can be equated to a well-baked souffle. The ingredients need to be right and all parts of the souffle need to rise – the bottom, the middle and the top, otherwise the whole souffle will flop.

It's not enough to lift those from educational disadvantage or to extend high performing students – we must respond to the learning needs of each and every young person so that they all succeed and flourish.

Enriching faith formation

In Australian Catholic schools, there is a tension that exists between faith formation and contributing to the common good that is reflected in the diversity of those we enrol, and their connection to faith, parish life and active worship.

Sixty-two per cent of our students are from Catholic backgrounds, while 38% are from other Christian, other faith, or are from no faith background.

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How we measure the impact of Catholic schools in faith formation is a complex one. In the 2020 Cardus report, 40 per cent of graduates from Christian schools attended a religious service at least monthly in the last 12 months, whereas only 16 per cent of Catholic school graduates did so.

For Catholic schools, our partnership with parishes in 1885 is as important today, and our schools are one of our strongest opportunities to evangelise and continue to be fertile ground to enrich faith formation and religious education.

We are looking to further develop national approaches through a shared understanding of missionary purpose, the nature of Catholic school leadership and the most effective formation to support teachers and leaders. We are challenged to find meaningful ways to look at school improvement in light of the distinctive nature of Catholic schools and how we honor and support the role of parents as the first educators of their children.

The Global Compact on Education calls for us **to empower the family** and **to listen to the voices of children and young people**.

Through our national priorities, we are deepening engagement with families and students through a range of activities including researching attitudes about the importance of faith in the lives of students; entering into a dialogue with school communities; and exploring a national approach for faith formation and religious education.

We are engaging with students and parents through forums, as well as through consultation with Catholic School Parents Australia who are also represented on our national commission and First Nations communities. This has resulted in the development of a number of key resources to support faith formation and build greater engagement with families as the primary educators of their children.

Conclusion

At its heart, *Fratelli Tutti* asks us to love and learn from everyone. It seeks to bring together the best from everyone through dialogue, diversity, understanding and cooperation.

As those involved in Catholic education across the world, we have a responsibility, as part of our shared mission, to place the human dignity and flourishing of each individual, as well as the interests of the common good, at the heart of our work. It creates a tension which is not always easy to balance.

As Pope Francis says, the “development of a global community of fraternity based on the practice of social friendship on the part of peoples and nations calls for a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good”. Whether this be at the level of government or at the level of our school communities and families, we are challenged to promote a “culture of encounter” that places “at the centre of all political, social and economic activity the human person, who enjoys the highest dignity, and respect for the common good”.

The great hallmark of hope in Australian Catholic education is the young people that attend our schools and the teachers and leaders who educate them. In conclusion, I return to the words of the Australian bishops:

“We also have great confidence in our young people: that inspired by their encounter with Jesus Christ and nurtured by a Catholic education, they will be young women and men of character and ideals, and will contribute as leaders and disciples in our world. And we have great confidence in our education leaders and staff: that in charting the course for Catholic education in Australia in its third century, you will help us imagine how our educational institutions can be schools in a deeper faith and humanity, and ensure that this dream is realised.”

(200 Years Young, p.6)

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