

CELEBRATING TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

Although our world is challenged and troubled in these turbulent times, as Christians, we can afford to remain hopeful and hope filled.

EEA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE – MARCH 2021

Dear Colleagues,

This year we celebrate the bicentenary of Catholic education in Australia. We also celebrate the 150th anniversary of our oldest Edmund Rice school, Parade College. As people actively involved in, and passionate about, Catholic Schools in the Edmund Rice tradition we are invited to reflect on these remarkable two hundred years, our contribution to Catholic education in this country, and to consider our place as the current creators of the next phase of this extraordinary story.

From humble beginnings, the first Catholic school in the nation was opened in Parramatta with 31 students. Interestingly, the fledgling Catholic schools that gradually commenced in the colony were inclusive of Protestants as well as Catholic students, and the first teachers were lay.

Some two hundred years later, we see our schools now being almost exclusively led and taught again by lay teachers, and our student enrolment practices equally inclusive of all who wish to avail themselves of a Catholic education. I know that for many years especially in the late 20th century, we grappled with and debated whether our schools were Catholic schools, or schools only for Catholics. Pleasingly, and in concert with Blessed Edmund, we settled on welcoming all.

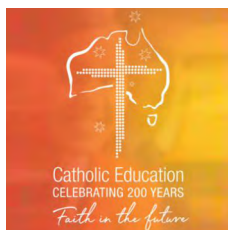
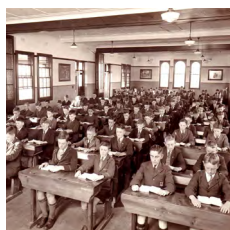
Today, approximately twenty percent of school-aged children in Australia are educated in a Catholic school. We are fortunate that every Catholic school receives some form of government funding. However, for a hundred or more years from the 1870s to the 1960s were it not for the dedication and labours of religious orders, many of whom came from Ireland, Catholic schooling in Australia would not have survived. With no government funding allocated to non-government schools, Catholic schools ran as extremely lean organisations.

Thanks to the contributions of parents and parishes, and the selfless vocations of Brothers, Sisters, and Priests from a variety of orders (although at times an enormous burden and struggle), Catholic schools not only continued to grow, but they also flourished.

There was a determination to see the graduates of Catholic schools enter the professions, and to perform well in final-year examinations for matriculation into university. One of the many great success stories of Catholic education in Australia is the movement of an almost universally working-class worshipping community base, into the middle classes. As well as boasting proud academic achievements, Catholic schooling also provided many vocations to religious life.



EDMUND RICE EDUCATION
AUSTRALIA



Today, as we lay teachers and leaders inherit the legacy of a lifetime dedication of those teaching orders of religious Brothers and Sisters, we continue to encourage and instil in our young people a love of God, a love of learning and a love for the “other”, particularly those who are on the margins of our world. We also offer a firm commitment to the overall wellbeing, care, and growth of our young people. We cherish our various school traditions and heritage, we rightfully acknowledge and apologise for our shortcomings and failings, and we seek ways of re-animating the Gospel story to make meaning in a contemporary context for our young people.

Catholic education is to be celebrated, yet we must not become boastful or proud, lest we lose sight of our mission and purpose. At a fundamental level, we invite children into the life and mission of Jesus, we nurture and nourish a relationship with God, and we provide high-quality learning and teaching experiences that expect that our young people will have life and indeed have it to the full (John 10:10). We humbly go about the business of continuing to educate our children in faith and in learning, so that they are equipped to live meaningful lives, and ones that benefit others, especially the poor, the silenced, and the forgotten.

The Christian Brothers and our Edmund Rice schools around this nation form an integral part of the story of Catholic schooling in Australia. Today we reaffirm our commitment to providing an education that liberates. This commitment resonates loudly with the initial intent of the first Brothers who arrived on these shores.

Many of our schools have been in existence for well over one hundred years, and yet many of our schools are still in their infancy. One thing of which we can be certain, is that our contribution to the fabric of Catholic education is significant, enduring, and meaningful.

As 2021 heralds this significant anniversary of Catholic education in Australia, let us remember two things. Firstly, that our schools are not the first schools in Australia. Indeed, for thousands of years before us, the original inhabitants of this land loved, lived, and learned. They were stewards of this earth and the preserved and protected all that we enjoy today. Secondly, we must remain ever vigilant as we exercise our privileged position as educators in a Catholic, Edmund Rice context. We reaffirm our commitment to keeping our young people safe, to offering them a voice in their learning, and to afford them their human right to dignity and respect. And of course, we offer them our best efforts to teach them well.

**Those original Christian Brothers
arrived on our shores and endured tremendous
struggle and hardship.**

They taught classes of up to 100 students in a single room, they had little training, and they often survived on the donations of food and other necessities from generous Catholics in their neighbourhood. After a long day of teaching, they then went about “the collections”, basically doorknocking for pennies to make the schools sustainable. There were precious few luxuries, and a strict religious observance was demanded, yet they did their work because they had committed their lives to service: of the Gospel and of young people, inspired by Jesus and a man named Edmund Rice.

Although our world is challenged and troubled in these turbulent times, as Christians, we can afford to remain hopeful and hope filled. I am often reminded of those simple words from Jeremiah: I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for (29:11).

Happy anniversary.

Dr Craig Wattam

Executive Director, Edmund Rice Education Australia

