

Parents & Friends in Catholic Schools

On behalf of all present this evening, I acknowledge the traditional carers and Elders, past and present, from across our Diocese with particular acknowledgement of the traditional custodians of lands where Catholic schools are located. As we journey together I pay respect to the spirituality, knowledge and traditions embedded forever within the Aboriginal Custodianship of Country.

Thanks for contribution to the school over many years. Welcome to any who are attending their first meeting or have just joined the St Mary's community. Who I am and why I am here this evening.

School Parent Bodies, and this can embrace SACs, P&Fs and any other advisory commissions, are an important expression of the educational partnership that exists between families, schools, parishes and the wider community to support the faith development, learning and well being of all students. They provide a structure and a process for collaboration and the sharing of wisdom.

This Shared Wisdom recognises the worth of every individual's contribution and the unique knowledge, experience and wisdom that each person brings to the process.

It means listening to the wisdom of your community. It

- Recognises, values and considers the contribution of all
- Is complementary, not competitive
- Draws on an understanding of facts
- Invites God into the process

The Catholic Principles of the Primacy of God, the Sanctity of Life, Fidelity on Relationships, and the Common Good support the mission statement of the Diocese of Armidale CSO "To Proclaim, Witness and Serve". These principles provide the basis for articulating how Catholic schools are different, provide an understanding of what it is to be Catholic, what principles we live by and the contributions we can make as Catholics to the world.

Just as our schools are more than a building with a cross, our Parents & Friends are more than a P&C Federation.

Governance

For some time now there have been authorities who play an oversight role in Catholic schools, but since 2008 there has been a marked increase in corporate governance and regulatory demands across the board.

Catholic schools in our diocese belong to a system of schools with CatholicSchools NSW (CSNSW) recognised as the “approved authority” a requirement of Section 40 of the NSW Education Act.

There are 24 schools in our diocese with 6075 students, 595 schools in NSW with 257.000 students and 2000 schools in Australia with 750.000 students. Catholic schools educate one in five or 20% of all students in Australia.

There is a complex mix of governance, both civil and Canon Law, that makes our Catholic schools different to State schools and legislative acts and laws have been written to address the special needs of Catholic schools.

There are 45 NSW Acts of Parliament and 23 Commonwealth pieces of legislation that impact our schools.

Because of the increased regulatory requirements and oversight by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA), Bishop Kennedy has undertaken a review of the governance structures which support the schools across the diocese. As a result of that review, the need for a cohesive and standardised approach to the operation and governance of the School Advisory Council and the Parents & Friends was required to satisfy the Diocese’s obligations to the NESA requirements. Part of this process necessarily involves a new standard of governance in support of our schools and this includes implementing new Constitutions which respond to the modern expectations of governance and the needs of our schools.

A new constitution and name for what had been the School Boards was introduced first, and this was followed by a new constitution for the P&F in our schools which has been approved by Bishop Kennedy and endorsed by the BCCS. This constitution was issued in December 2018 for use in all of our schools in the diocese and has been adopted by all of those schools.

The P&F

Every parent/carer of a child who attends the Catholic school is automatically a member of the P&F.

Principals have appreciated the support and financial assistance of the school P&F and many parents have found value in contributing to and being part of the school community through their active involvement.

Some P&Fs are finding it increasingly difficult to attract parents to meetings or to take on executive positions, but they can still thrive where parents feel the association is valued by the Principal and school community. It is important that all parents feel that they are a part of the P&F even if they don’t or can’t attend meetings.

Times have changed, education has changed and parents/carers have changed. However, the current model of the P&F has changed little since the 1960s. Then the main role of the P&F was fundraising. Catholic schools were poorly resourced and underfunded. The resourcing and funding landscape, through the efforts of many in Catholic education, including parents, has changed. But parents still value the opportunity to be a part of a community and become better informed about educational issues, in particular in relation to the teaching and learning happening at their school. Clause 4 of the constitution defines the aims of the P&F and it should be noted that while fundraising is included, it is Clause 4.10 for a reason.

Catholic Systemic or Diocesan schools, including this school, receive nearly 90% of their recurrent funding from governments, largely the Commonwealth but some State funding. This comes through the CSO, and in addition funds are provided from the CSO as an operating allowance and support for school maintenance and insurance costs.

Your school P&F, along with all of the school P&Fs in the Armidale Diocese, has a long history of financial support which has been and is appreciated.

With the level of funding our schools now receive P&Fs are able to move from this model to one that can focus on building their school communities, supporting each other in challenging times, and becoming an agent for parent engagement in their children's learning,

The P&F Constitution

- Ensures the rights and responsibilities of principals, teachers and parents are understood and valued
- Reduces the stresses and misunderstanding by clarifying the aims and specifying the limitations of the Association in **Clauses 4 and 5**

The P&F input into our schools is still highly valued for the social and community building provided to school communities, as well as the financial contributions that provide resources and opportunities for enriching the learning and well being of all students. In addition, while they are purely advisory in nature, the support through conversation and consultation given to the Principal and the Parish Priest gives a genuine parent perspective to the school. In this respect, there is no change to the role of the association, and the P&F will continue to engage closely with the Principal.

Clause 9.4 Staff members, who are also parents in the school, while they are P&F members, cannot hold an executive position. This is also consistent with good governance practice because of the possibility of a real, potential or perceived conflict of interest between a staff member's parental and staff role.

Clause 12 General Meetings are at least once per term. Meetings are held in the precinct of the school.

Clause 16 With regard to banking, it is a Diocesan policy that all Diocesan agencies, which includes schools, CSO, P&Fs are required to utilize the banking facilities of the Armidale Diocesan Investment Group (ADIG).

I have had questions about fundraising for and donating to charities. There have also been queries from the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission (ACNC) about Catholic schools and this activity. The ACNC is very clear that this does not fit within the objectives of the P&F which are set out in the constitution and therefore shouldn't be occurring, ie. a Charity/ Not for Profit should not be fundraising for another Charity/Not for Profit. The P&F's role is to support the school and any fundraising should contribute only to this. This includes donations or financial support for the Parish.

Clause 17 Authorised signatories or co-operators of P&F accounts. 17.1 provides the security of having both a parent Executive Committee member and the School principal as co-operators of all banking accounts. It provides protection from possible financial malfeasance, is collaborative in nature and answers the regulatory demands that as a system we must respond to.

In October 2014 Amendments to the NSW Education Act (Section 47) came into effect for the registration of non-government schools. Among other requirements it identified the "responsible person" both at Diocesan level and in each Catholic school in the diocese. This accreditation requires mandatory training for the identified "responsible persons". These persons are the Bishop of Armidale and each Catholic School Principal.

The Parish Priest and Principal are ex-officio members of the P&F Executive. Ex-officio means that these individuals are members by right of the position they hold. They have the same rights as ordinary members, including voting, however they do not always choose to exercise these rights. Although the PP's responsibilities often preclude active involvement in P&F meetings, an invitation should be extended once dates for the year have been finalised.

A Catholic school P&F must ensure that all parents/carers know they have the right to nominate and to be nominated to a P&F leadership position. The P&F must ensure that all parents understand what it means to be a committee/executive member.

P&F Success

- Choosing times for meetings that will suit the majority of parents
- Specifically reaching out to underrepresented parents
- P&F meetings are not appropriate places for parents to discuss personal issues or air grievances that they have with school administration and/or personnel. P&F meetings should not be used or seen as the parent complaint unit or replace the School Complaints and Grievance Resolution Policy.
- Meetings are not the only avenue for parents to participate. And attendance at meetings should not be the main success criteria for the P&F. Success is found in the number of parents who engage with their children in their education and who participate in school and P&F activities.

As integral members of a Catholic school community all parents including P&F leaders:

- Value and respect the Catholic identity of the school, its relationship to the parish community and the expression of the Catholic ethos through rituals, tradition, symbols and the teaching of Catholic beliefs
- Act as role models within their school community by reflecting the values and ethos of the school
- Work collaboratively with the Parish Priest, the Principal and the wider school community
- Recognise that coherence and team membership bring some loss of autonomy
- Be informed and supportive of the work of others
- Build and nurture a sense of community

Note Ethical Standards for Executive Officers

St Paul in (1Cor 12) exhorts the Christian communities to recognise their own gifts, to utilise them for the good of the community, for the spreading of the Gospel message and for the affirmation of these gifts in one another

*All these gifts are the work of the same Spirit and
He distributes them to each one, just as He determines*

Those that take on leadership positions in the P&F are called to a particular service in Catholic education which is both a privilege and an opportunity to serve the children, the young people and their families who seek a Catholic education.

