



Diocese of Broken Bay

Catholic Communications

Press Release

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Bishops Say Catholic Schools at a Crossroads

The Bishops of NSW and the ACT have released a pastoral letter inviting Catholic educational leaders, staff, parents and the broader Catholic community to reflect on the nature and role of Catholic schools and where they are headed.

Speaking at the public launch of the document at the Mary MacKillop Memorial Chapel at North Sydney on 7 August, the Bishop of Broken Bay, David Walker, said the world of the 21st Century is very different from that of the past and that the time had come to reassess the future of Catholic schools.

“Our Catholic school system is one of the ‘jewels in the crown’ of the Catholic community in our region and has few parallels overseas,” Bishop Walker said.

“It has provided high-quality education to generations of young Australians and has been the major arm of the Church’s engagement with youth.

“I wish to publicly acknowledge the achievements of the Religious and lay staff who have built and served in our system, along with parents and parish communities. The Church is very grateful for their efforts.”

“The crossroads we have reached today has been brought about by cultural and demographic changes,” said Bishop Walker.

He pointed out that most schools were established in the 19th and 20th Centuries to assist poor Catholic families to educate their children and to pass on the Catholic faith and practices in a sometimes hostile social context.

“However, today we find that the poor are no longer over-represented in our schools. Financial stress and other factors press many Catholic families to look elsewhere.

Other changes are that many young people now have little or no connection with the Church outside their school and the number of other-than-Catholic students enrolling is increasing.

“Then, there are the society-wide trends such as secularisation, consumerism, family dysfunction and values disorientation that also impact on young people. Schools often have to pick up the pieces,” Bishop Walker continued.

The dilemma outlined in the Bishops’ letter is whether to resist the high demand for Catholic schooling and downsize to accommodate only those who are committed to the faith; or

embrace the changing enrolment patterns as 'signs of the times' and a new mission for Catholic schools.

All agree that the second option is the better way forward.

The Bishops challenge everyone involved with Catholic schools to dedicate themselves to ensuring that schools are truly Catholic in their identity and life; are centres of new evangelization; enable students to achieve high levels of 'Catholic religious literacy and practice; and are led and staffed by people who will contribute to these goals.

The document goes on to list a number of critical indicators of progress by which changes can be measured in future, such as progress towards an increase in the proportion of students in schools who are Catholic, a higher proportion of enrolments from poorer families and greater Mass attendance.

Quoting from the letter, Bishop Walker said that great things have already been achieved in our Catholic schools and are being achieved daily; greater things are still possible and indeed required, as together we forge the way ahead.

With many thousand copies being distributed throughout the Catholic community in NSW and the ACT, people are invited to reflect and discuss the issues raised and to provide feedback to the Bishops by joining them in recommitting to Catholic schools in the 21st Century.

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