



**Diocese of Toowoomba  
Catholic Schools**

# **St Patrick's School, St George**

**Collaborative school review  
October 2017**



**Executive Summary Report October 2017**



## **Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office: School Evaluation and Renewal Process (SERP)**

### **Key beliefs and values**

Real school improvement and the capacity to improve come from within rather than from anywhere external to the school. We view improvement more as a bottom-up than a top-down approach to change, thus putting students, teachers, parents and school leadership at the core of improvement efforts.

Essentially, teachers and the school leaders are the key agents of change. Therefore, we school self-review, as a significant driver for school improvement.

Toowoomba Catholic Schools commit to the following key beliefs and values:

1. Catholic schools exist to support high quality academic achievement and to help children come to know Jesus better.
2. Every school can improve.
3. Collective teacher efficacy and the manner by which this is nurtured by leadership, is the most effective school improvement strategy.
  - Every individual in the school has a contribution to make to improvement
  - Everyone in the school should be learning from others and the school should be learning from other successful schools.

*“Although much has been written about school reform in past decades – national reports, studies, descriptions of findings – insufficient attention has been given to the important relationships among the adults within the school, and to a consideration of how the abundant untapped energy, inventiveness and idealism within the school might be encouraged”.*

(Roland Barth, Harvard Graduate School of Education) 1990

# Methodology

The review was conducted from Tuesday 10 October to Thursday 12 October 2017.

## Reviewers

Norm Hunter, Review Chair

Suzanne Cavanagh, Senior Education Leader

John Coman, Senior Education Leader

Gerard Hore, Director: Mission & Identity, Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office

Jim Midgley, Director: Teaching and Learning, Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office

Paul Murphy, Senior Education Leader

Brett Pollard, Principal, St Mary's School, Goondiwindi

The review consisted of structured interviews of the following school personnel:

- the Principal and three Assistant Principals
- 100% of teacher staff
- eight school officers, including office staff and teacher aides
- sixteen students years 5 & 6 of enrolment 186
- the Parish Priest
- twelve parents (including the Chair of the School Board and the President of the Parents & Friends Association)

The reference document for the review was the October 10, 2017 draft of the *Excellence in Catholic Education Domains and Components*. The supporting background framework was the seven principles of the Diocese of Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office *Excellence in Catholic Education*.

# Excellence in Catholic Education: Domains and Components

## DOMAIN 1: CATHOLIC IDENTITY

- 1.1 Religion Curriculum
- 1.2 Religious Life of the School

## DOMAIN 2: TEACHING and LEARNING

- 2.1 Students and their Learning
- 2.2 Curriculum Structure and Provision
- 2.3 Pastoral Care and Student Wellbeing

## DOMAIN 3: LEADERSHIP for SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

- 3.1 School Improvement Culture
- 3.2 Strategic Leadership
- 3.3 Community Partnerships

## DOMAIN 4: STRATEGIC RESOURCING

- 4.1 Staff Well-Being
- 4.2 Use of Resources, Facilities and the Learning Environment

## Domain 1 Catholic life and religious identity

*Religious education is conceptualised as a combining of teaching people religion (the classroom teaching and learning of religion) and teaching people to be religious in a particular way (the religious life of the school community and its Catholic Christian ethos). In the schools and colleges of the Diocese, teaching people religion and teaching people to be religious draw upon the Catholic Christian tradition in ways that are mindful of local contexts and the ... realities of contemporary culture.*

(adopted by Diocese of Toowoomba 2013)

### 1.1 Religion curriculum

#### Findings

St Patrick's School is implementing the approved (2013) Religious Education curriculum. School leaders express confidence that the program is being taught well. In teaching the curriculum, adaptation to the local context is evident: an example is the way the learning bytes have been adopted only after ensuring their relevance to the life of the school.

The way the Religion Education program is taught and experienced by students reflects a Catholic Christian worldview showing a close link to the broader Religious Life of the School (Component 1.2), with its elements of prayer and liturgy, social outreach and sense of the sacred. Teachers new to the school and to Catholic education are assisted in developing knowledge and skills in this area. The school community has made a conscious decision to provide substantial financial support for the introduction of the new (2013) Religion curriculum. This has seen a range of quality resources purchased to enhance the teaching of Religion

Quality resources are used in supporting the Religious Education curriculum. The school community has made a conscious decision to provide substantial financial support for the introduction of the new curriculum.

#### Improvement strategies

Ensure that the Catholic tradition of academic learning is articulated with teachers and students, embedding it in the Catholic ethos of the school, so that students' and teachers' understanding includes this as well as the liturgical and social justice dimensions.

Continue to ensure that all permanently appointed teachers of Religious Education have or are working towards gaining the appropriate accreditation to teach Religious Education.

### 1.2 Religious life of the school

#### Findings

The teaching and learning of Religion, overseen by the Assistant Principal Religious Education with the strong support of the Principal, is given significant status in the life of the school. This is particularly evidenced in the way St Mary MacKillop's words 'Never see a need without doing something about it', along with the school motto, "Unity is Strength", are extended beyond the Religion curriculum into the wider life of the school. It is clear that the charism of St Mary MacKillop, as lived by the Sisters of St Joseph who once led and staffed St Patrick's, plays an important role in the life of the school.

Evidence of Gospel values can be seen in the everyday life of the school, and this was noted by parents. On one occasion during the review a parent new to the school this year said: 'Other schools do care for students but there is something different, something extra, here at St Patrick's'.

The school and parish work together with each supporting the work of the other. Links between the school and the parish are evident, with a number of school personnel, led by the Assistant Principal Religious Education, strongly supporting the parish's program for sacramental preparation. In 2017 there have been 39 candidates for First Reconciliation. When the opportunity arises, all classes and the whole school join in prayer together.

The school community joins in the celebration of the Eucharist together at least once each term, and occasional class Masses are held. The school celebrates major feast days and important civic events such as Anzac Day in a way that fits the Catholic nature of the school.

Principles of Catholic social teaching are seen as important in setting the tone of the school community and animating its educational endeavour. This is evidenced through a focus on the dignity of the individual in the way new students and families are welcomed into the school community, including the 'buddy system', which sees stewardship of incoming Prep students by Year 6 students. The school also practises outreach to the local community as an expression of social justice through student involvement in Meals on Wheels and visits to aged care centres.

### **Improvement strategies**

Continue to facilitate meaningful links with the parish by staff and students. Ensure that students understand how these links are part of the Catholic ethos and tradition, and have relevance to their lives.

## **Domain 2 Teaching and learning**

### **2.1 Students and their Learning**

#### **Findings**

Saint Patrick's School leaders are committed to continuous improvement in teaching practices and are working to establish a culture necessary to achieve this. The staff are widely referred to in the school community as 'passionate, professional and committed'.

The school has demonstrated an improvement trend in all five domains tested in NAPLAN in Years 3 and 5 over the last three consecutive years. This is a feat rarely attained in any school, and deserves special commendation. The school leadership team and staff seem unaware of what has produced this outstanding achievement though, it is extremely unlikely that it has happened by chance.

There is a strong desire in the school leadership team, supported by a number of teachers, to now draw from the strengths in the variety of personal pedagogies currently practised in the school and synthesise them into an agreed school-wide pedagogy, thereby promoting consistency across year levels from Prep to Year 6.

This aspiration, relating agreed school-wide pedagogy to improved student achievement, is well supported in internationally acknowledged research such as that of John Hattie and Frank Crowther.

A high priority is given to building and maintaining positive caring relationships with students. The school leadership is explicit in its expectations that the learning environment is safe, respectful, tolerant and inclusive, and that the type of conditions required to promote learning are consistently nurtured. This was highlighted and obviously valued by all participants in this review.

Visible Learning with a focus on teacher clarity (learning intentions and success criteria) appears to be having a significant impact on student learning, and this presents itself as a potential foundation for the school-wide pedagogy journey. Students spoke very confidently on the difference it makes to their understanding of what they learn, how they will learn it and why they are learning it.

### **Improvement strategies**

Identify reasons why the successful upward trend in NAPLAN results is occurring. Draw attention to it and celebrate it with staff and parents. Collaboratively engage in discussion and action to consolidate and continue this improvement trend.

Build on teachers' support for coherence around school-wide pedagogy by collaboratively clarifying and articulating shared beliefs and values about learners, learning and teaching.

## **2.2 Curriculum structure and provision**

### **Findings**

The school has a coherent sequenced plan for curriculum offerings evidenced by its use of the Diocesan Learning Plans (DLPs) and the Learning Area Programs (LAPS).

A number of parents, including the Chair of the School Board, express appreciation at the sharing of information about school learning priorities. It is envisaged that further parent engagement in their children's learning will occur through opportunities to participate in parent forums to learn about new initiatives such as the Diocesan Reading Strategy.

The school leadership team has initiated staff meeting curriculum discussions about the best ways to maximise student learning and well-being, and a priority is given to providing learning experiences that are engaging and accessible for students. It is not evident that the school is also prioritising the provision of challenging learning experiences for high achieving, highly motivated and high potential learners.

The life and teachings of Jesus as understood by the Catholic ethos and tradition are embedded in the daily life of the school.

The school leadership team and teachers affirm the importance of academic learning and achievement. This is not clearly evident in the school's award system, which appears to give other related areas greater status.

Currently one teacher is responsible for teaching Music, Physical Education, Drama and Dance in accordance with the Australian Curriculum. There have been specialist teachers in these subjects at the school in the past, and some parents perceive that these subjects should still be taught by specialist teachers, with accompanying expectations for the learning experiences offered to students.

### **Improvement strategies**

Raise the status of academic learning and achievement in the life of the school, linking it with the Catholic tradition of scholarship.

Collaboratively begin planning to incorporate learning experiences for high achieving, highly motivated and high potential students into the pedagogy of day to day classroom activities.

Communicate to parents the difference between on the one hand offering Music, Drama, Physical Education and Dance in accordance with the Australian Curriculum, and on the other hand offering them as specialised subjects taught by specialist teachers, which is currently not possible at the school. If possible, engage in succession planning to replace specialist teachers who are known to be leaving the school.

## 2.3 Pastoral Care and Student Wellbeing

### Findings

The school is perceived by the parent community as a safe place for their children. In the main there is a strong sense of 'community' which is expressed by students, parents and school staff. The Pastoral Care aspect of the school underpins everything that is done at the school and the wellbeing of the students is central to the school's ethos. Parents expressed that their children were 'happy to come to school'.

Students identify the 'buddy system' as a way in which older students contribute to ensuring that the Prep students are welcomed and supported into a caring and nurturing environment where students 'look out' for each other (their term). Students state that their teachers are happy- 'always smiling and always say hello to us'.

Generally, there is an awareness of the school-developed Behaviour Management and Positive Behaviours Reward System: **Be safe, Aim high, In control, Thinking of others (BAIT)**. It is not evident that the full potential of the BAIT program is being utilised. The recent Research Australia Development & Innovation Institute (RADII) survey indicates strong understanding and support for the BAIT program by staff. The same survey indicates that the majority of the parents understand and support the program though not as strongly as the staff.

There is a view from those interviewed that the student behaviour management process is being well led by the current principal. Some teachers and parents expressed concern about the danger of personalising behaviour management informally in ways that lead to inconsistency among staff, and may be contradictory to the formal behaviour management program.

The Principal expresses the intent to explore the potential of the Diocesan classroom management strategy Ten Essentials with staff, at the same time ensuring that it is compatible with the BAIT program.

### Improvement strategies

Implement the complete BAIT program at the school in order to facilitate broader whole school behaviour management and student wellbeing strategies than are currently being utilised.

Collaboratively explore ways to include the Diocesan Ten Essentials framework in student behaviour management, ensuring compatibility with the BAIT program.

Work to ensure that behavior management is implemented consistently across the school by teachers.

## Domain 3 Leadership for school improvement

### 3.1 School improvement culture

#### Findings

Staff and parents report that teachers are dedicated and hard-working, and show significant care for their students. Many are experts in their fields and express enjoyment and confidence in their work. Teachers express commitment to continuous improvement in their teaching and in the learning of their students, and there is a widespread desire for professional learning that is relevant to their work and to the school's priority areas. Both external and internal professional development in priority areas are available for staff.

A number of teachers and parents offer the view that there is an increased sense of purpose and direction from the school leadership team this year (2017). The leadership team is intent on

nurturing this sense of purpose in staff meetings through professional conversations that lead to action in important school issues.

Staff and community members refer frequently to what they have seen as a 'revolving door' of leadership. There have been several principals over recent years, several parish priests, and new personnel at the Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office, all of which need re-establishing of relationships, along with different ideas on what is needed.

Many teachers and parents express a desire for greater stability in leadership. They suggest that the 'revolving door' has caused unsettling changes, and over the years it is seen by some parents and staff that the school has taken on some initiatives without following through to consolidate them. This is attributed to the changes in leadership and the shifting focus this brings. It is hoped that with this report informing the strategic plan of the next four years, if there are personnel changes in leadership the direction & priorities of the school will be much less affected, and continuity will be maintained.

It is clear that there are many passionate, committed and hardworking staff in the school. At the same time, there is no apparent agreed set of values and beliefs that underpin school-wide approaches to teaching and learning from Prep to Year 6. There is strong research to indicate that this kind of collaborative school-wide culture is essential for teachers to be able to maximise their students' learning and achievement.

Parents consistently express satisfaction with the levels of care in the school, both in interviews with the review team and in the recent Research Australia Development & Innovation Institute (RADII) survey with a rating of 90% satisfaction. Informal communication including emails between parents and teachers about students' progress and well-being is appreciated. The Parents and Friends' Association is an active fundraiser for targeted resourcing of the school, and parents particularly express pride in the St Patrick's fete, which has become a major community event in the life of the town.

The introduction of the Diocesan Reading Strategy, the improved satisfaction levels by staff about the school as revealed in the latest RADII survey, the continuity that will be brought with the new strategic plan, and stability in the school, parish and Diocesan leadership are beginning to contribute to potentially higher levels of collaboration.

It is hoped that this review brings clarity around the continuing and cyclical nature of the school's improvement cycle, enabling the school community to focus on celebrating and continuing the academic performance and success of the students, at the same time using the suggested improvement strategies to inform the four-year strategic plan and related action at the school level.

### **Improvement strategies**

Begin the necessary journey to build a culture of school-wide agreed values and beliefs that lead to coherence and continuity in pedagogy and student learning from Prep to Year 6.

Ensure that staff meetings engage teachers in professional dialogue about important issues, with a view to discussions leading to agreed practice.

Continue to provide relevant internal and external professional learning on priority areas for staff and the school leadership team.

Work to end any friction between staff members which is inhibiting the ability of the school leadership team and staff to build a school culture of coherence and continuity into the learning experiences of the students as they move through the school.

Ensure that there is clarity in the school community around the continuing and cyclical nature of the improvement cycle. This will allow the school community to focus on celebrating and working to consolidate the academic performance and success of the teachers and students.

The over-time data from NAPLAN from the past three years shows growth in all areas. The stage is now set for St Patrick's to begin the journey from being a good school to becoming a great school.

## 3.2 Community partnerships

### Findings

The work of the school in the wider community is well known and highly valued.

It is clear that the school has a number of productive partnerships within the local community. The school is well known for doing much 'heavy lifting' when it comes to supporting and maintaining local events such as ANZAC Day and the National Aborigines & Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC). A number of St Patrick's staff are playing pivotal roles in local sporting and cultural groups, contributing to the on-going survival of these groups during the rural down turn.

Parents convey that Parent Teacher meetings are well organised and most parents find these meetings to be informative and beneficial to the school and family partnership.

There is a strong sense that the school leadership value the partnership with the Parents and Friends Association and the School Board, and members of the Parents and Friends Association and School Board believe that their work is valued by the school leadership.

The current principal was praised for outlining a 'clear vision and sense of purpose' for the school at both these parent engagement bodies.

The school Prep teacher is involved in transition programs with the local kindergarten and meets with parents at the kindergarten to support the transition program for those children who will attend St Patrick's for Prep. Pre-Prep outreach is struggling to compete with what the local state pre-prep is able to offer, with a subsequent impact on enrolments at the school.

### Improvement strategies

Continue to strengthen the current links with the local community, particularly those that offer learning experiences for the students that the school cannot provide.

Consider the introduction of regular 'hot topic' informal forums for parents on topics such as 'interpreting your child's report card'.

Investigate the feasibility of Pre-Prep and before and after school care as viable options for St Patrick's.

## Domain 4 Strategic resourcing

### 4.1 Staff well-being

There is a caring school culture which welcomes new members to the community and the school is seen as a happy place for staff and students to attend. Staff show a clear understanding of the school's culture and are justifiably proud of their efforts to uphold this culture. Generally staff members are viewed as approachable to one another. Some staff express the desire for a greater sense of teamwork from Prep to Year 6.

The school provides a safe and supportive environment for staff to work in and staff are valued by the members of the St Patrick's community. In general, parents and students describe the staff as kind and caring and state that the staff always assist them in the students' learning endeavours. The school leadership team demonstrates an awareness of the specific needs of the staff and attempts to support these needs.

A number of staff express appreciation for the growing sense of purpose in the school this year (2017).

Staff and parents see a need for improved internal and external communication processes. A weekly staff bulletin or 'Monday briefing' for staff were suggested, as currently the main information sharing seems to be through staff meetings. Support staff convey that sometimes they are left out of the loop on decisions, resulting in embarrassment when parents inquire about something the support staff aren't aware of. It is claimed that the electronic newsletter is only read by 40% of the 90% of parents who requested receiving the newsletter in e-form.

### **Improvement strategies**

Explore ways to build a more formal internal communication structure that provides an environment of transparency, openness and trust. Staff news bulletins, and parent engagement forums are two suggestions offered by staff or parents.

Share details of school events, once finalised, with office and other support staff and teachers so they are equipped to deal with inquiries from parents and staff in an informed and confident manner.

## **4.2 Use of Resources, facilities and the learning environment**

A number of policies, practices and programs are in place, and flexible structures and processes such as the provision of Learning Support so as to improve student learning and support the Diocesan Reading Strategy, enable the school to respond appropriately to the needs of individual learners.

Programs for students with identified learning difficulties or disabilities are evident, mostly led by the Learning Support Teacher. School-wide collaboration on these programs is less evident. School-wide approaches to resourcing for high achievers and highly motivated students is not evident.

The school has identified processes such as the use of external and internally-devised testing and assessment for identifying and recording student learning needs and ensuring that data is passed on to the next year level teacher. School leaders encourage teachers to address individual learning needs in classrooms and to share data from these across the year groups. These data are not as yet used collaboratively to inform transition decisions about student learning needs from class to class across the school.

Students express appreciation for the work of their teachers and teacher aides, and speak positively about the resources and the library staff. A small number of younger students say they would like some 'more advanced' books in the library to challenge their reading abilities.

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in classroom teaching appears variably valued and implemented in classrooms. Professional learning in the use of ICT has not been a priority at this stage, and a vision for the coordinated incorporation of ICT into day to day classroom activities across the school is yet to be developed.

Physical spaces in the school are well organised and resourced and have the potential for flexible arrangement to cater for whole group, small group and individual work. The school presents as a community that takes pride in its facilities which are well developed, cared for and maintained. The buildings, playground, gardens and ovals are also very well maintained. This contributes significantly to a school culture which has as its goal improved student achievement and a sense of belonging for all students.

### **Improvement strategies**

Ensure that the annual provision of human and physical resourcing is based on a systematic whole school analysis of student needs.

Establish an agreed school-wide policy to ensure that quantitative and qualitative student data are communicated in a professional manner, in a systematic approach so that the learning needs of all students are best met in the transition from one-year level to the next, and from one teacher or teacher aide to another.

Collaboratively develop a school-wide pedagogical framework for the embedding of digital literacies and the use of ICT as natural elements in teaching and learning at the school. Include relevant professional learning for teachers and teacher aides, and accompanying familiarity with software and hardware that are necessary to support this approach.

Explore the provision of 'more advanced' books in the library for high achieving and highly motivated students.

## **Conclusion**

The review team thanks the school for the openness and hospitality extended throughout the review. The team is left in no doubt that St Patrick's has many of the qualities of a good school. It is the hope of the review team that the report has identified these strengths so they can be consolidated and strengthened further, and that the improvement strategies offered in the report are empowering for the school as it continues its journey as a significant contributor to the young people and the wider community of St George.

The Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office is committed to an ongoing relationship of support and guidance for the school, and offers the support of the human and other resources available through the Office.

The review team wishes the St Patrick's community well as it continues its journey of faith and learning.