



**Diocese of Toowoomba
Catholic Schools**

Mary MacKillop Catholic College HIGHFIELDS

**Quadrennial school review
Executive summary
February 2018**





Foreword

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)

The philosophical approach to the review is based on Appreciative Inquiry, a well-established approach used by organisations varying from international corporations to not-for-profit social organisations. Appreciative Inquiry begins with the assumption that there are good things happening in the organisation and identifying these. It then moves to what people see as areas needing attention, improvement or change. The key principle is that these are placed in the context of what the organisation does well, so it moves beyond a problem-solving agenda to an improvement agenda.

Appreciative Inquiry aims to bring ownership to the school. The review team heard ‘the story’ of the College through its stakeholders, and this informs the key findings and improvement strategies that the review team has recommended. Exactly how the College addresses the key findings and improvement strategies is left for the school to determine, but it is mandatory for the school to address them over the following four years.



Methodology

The review was conducted from Monday 19th February 2018 to Wednesday 21st February 2018.

Reviewers

John Coman, TCS Senior Education Leader, Panel Chair
Jim Midgley, TCS Director Teaching and Learning
Norman Hunter, Education Consultant, Brisbane
Michael Newman, Principal St Mary's College, Toowoomba

The review consisted of structured interviews of the following school personnel

- All Leadership team members
- 14 Parents (Board, P&F and self-nominated)
- 36 Teachers
- 21 school support staff
- 1 Parish Priest
- 12 Students (years 7-10)

Excellence in Catholic Education

The reference documents for the review was the February 8, 2018 draft of the *Excellence in Catholic Education Framework* and the February 8, 2018 draft of the *School Renewal and Improvement Procedure*. A supporting background document was the seven principles of the Diocese of Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office *Excellence in Catholic Education*.

DOMAIN 1: MISSION and 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: CONTINUAL RENEWAL

3.1 School Improvement Culture

3.2 Community Partnerships

DOMAIN 4: SUSTAINABLE RESOURCING and STEWARDSHIP

4.1 Staff Wellbeing

4.2 Use of Resources Facilities and the Learning Environment



Prologue

The framework for this report is the reference documents cited on the previous page. As the review of the college evolved, the review team found a number of themes emerging which range across the four Domains. Over the three days these themes became stronger, and the reviewers feel that it will be helpful to state them here before the full report is read.

There is much that is impressive in the college, and the reviewers have tried to identify these areas and affirm them. At the same time, the purpose of the review is improvement, so it is important to identify areas that do not appear to be working to potential, and to offer strategies for improvement. Four particular themes emerged quite early in the review.

The first theme is *communication*. It is clear that the college has a job to do in establishing clear and consistent communication systems. The current situation is impeding the progress of the college.

The second theme is *coherence*. While there is impressive collegial work happening through the Professional Learning Teams, there is no apparent formal coherence vertically from Prep to Year 10 in agreed values and beliefs about learners, learning and teaching, and other important issues such as school-wide pedagogy and agreed approaches to using technology in the classroom. Research makes clear that it is important to collaboratively establish this kind of vertical coherence if the students' learning capabilities are to be maximised.

The third theme is *the conceptualising of leadership*. The College Leadership Team is respected by the college community, and their deliberations appear to the review team as well founded. The next stage – from decision-making to enactment – is currently not occurring in ways that are clear to the college community. It presents as an imbalance between leadership and management, with improvement needed in the management area.

The fourth theme is *Catholic Identity* in the college. The Catholic presence in the college is strong and widely recognised through prayer, liturgy and various visual icons strategically placed around the campus. While this element of Catholicism is strong and widely recognised, other elements are less known and not widely associated with the Catholic identity. Academic achievement, social justice, music and the arts, relationships within the college, are all enacted in the college in ways that strongly reflect the richness of Catholic tradition, and should be identified as such.

The review team has tried to elaborate on these themes throughout the report, and to offer suggested improvement strategies intended to assist the college in addressing them. They present as themes within a context of much that is good in the college, and acting on them is very likely to flow through the life of the college in widely positive ways. The review team suggests that these themes be kept in mind as an 'umbrella' over the reading of the four Domains and the suggested improvement strategies that follow.



Domain 1 Catholic life and religious education

Findings

- 1.1.** The college has deliberately developed a strong and highly valued culture, acknowledged by students, staff and parents alike. This is promoted by the college leadership and is characterised by respect for the human dignity of each person that flows into everyday life and action:
- the Parish Priest, staff, students and parents almost universally speak of this as a feature of the school. Students demonstrate this in their interactions with each other, with their teachers and staff at the college and to the visiting panel members. This is a well-established feature of the life of the college.
 - The connections between community members are valued as a major part of the culture of the college with its origins as a small country community school. There is a strong, widespread desire for these aspects of culture to be maintained as the college grows into a full P-12 school in the future.
 - The Helping Hands initiative of the P&F is highly valued as a visible practical support to all members of the community in need, and the support provided is important.
- 1.2.** A strong sense of respect for the community and pride in belonging to the college community exists in the student body. These are demonstrated by the way in which the students wear their uniforms, take care of the school environment, and treat one another.
- 1.3.** The celebration of faith and life in the college is evidenced by:
- Daily prayer which has become an established and valued part of the Catholic life of the college;
 - School liturgies and Masses with the participation and involvement of students;
 - Strong connections to the parish with the College being used as a Mass Centre for the Parish with monthly Masses being year level planned and supported;
 - The Parish Priest is an active and frequent presence in classes, in the school and as an actively participating member of the College Board.
- 1.4.** The Catholic ethos in the college is visible and strong. At the same time there is a widespread perception that Catholicism at the college equals prayer and liturgy and other directly religious activities: essentially a one-dimensional view of what it means to be Catholic, conducted through a narrow religious 'silo', led by a small number of people. The reality is that Catholicism is practised at the college in a much richer way, by many more people, such as in academic learning, music and art, the way people treat one other, and outreach to the wider community. It appears that these are not widely understood or appreciated as inherent in the Catholic tradition.



- 1.5.** Making Jesus Real (MJR) is a way of life that is embedded across the curriculum. Staff have received professional development in its implementation. Students are taught the values and attitudes of Jesus so that they can articulate what these are and re-contextualize the Gospels in their own behaviour. The aim is for students to experience Jesus in all that they do.

The Catholic Schools Youth Ministry Australia (CSYMA) provides opportunities for Year 9 students to work with Year 4 students in a mentoring role, developing and supporting their understanding of faith in action.

Secondary students in particular expressed how uplifting the experiences of working with students in the CSYMA program are and how much they are valued. As both cohorts progress through the school, it is intended that the program will continue for these year levels and begin for the cohorts below so further strengthening the experience and outcomes for students.

Both of these programs (MJR and CSYMA) are highly valued by students, staff and parents.

- 1.6.** Currently the role of Religious Education Coordinator is filled by a part-time teacher who also has responsibilities in the implementation of MJR and also classroom teaching and secondary retreats. This expectation and structure in a growing school requires review, as it is a significant responsibility for one person.
- 1.7.** The recently developed Vision, Mission, Values and Motto which form the college Credo are impressive. At this point, the wider school community appears unaware of these important statements, and the next step is an important communication process, necessary to begin embedding them in the life of the college.

Improvement strategies

- 1.1.** Engage staff and students in a concerted effort to convey to the college community a wider and richer understanding of what being Catholic means at Mary MacKillop Catholic College.
- 1.2.** Continue to maintain the high levels of connection to Parish and the whole school understanding of and commitment to be an authentic Catholic school.
- 1.3.** Assign a member of the College Leadership Team the responsibility of leading and working through a consultative process aimed at moving the recently devised Credo from a set of guiding ideas through to an embedded reality with widespread ownership by the school community.



Domain 2 Teaching and Learning

Findings

- 2.1.** Staff and parents consistently refer to the high quality of the teaching staff. Their professionalism and goodwill are universally admired. Teaching staff are seen as highly committed and are recognised by parents and colleagues as experts in their respective fields. Staff report that both internal and external professional development is of a high standard and entered into positively by all staff.
- 2.2.** Students report that teachers have high expectations of them and are explicit in their explanations on how to meet these standards. The College is fully engaged in the Diocesan Reading Improvement strategy (RIS) and teachers understand and are implementing the high impact strategies. Teachers involved with the RIS would appreciate guidance and support from the College Leadership Team with data collection processes and timelines.
- 2.3.** Teachers and parents acknowledge the assistance and effectiveness of the Learning Support Teachers (LST) and school officers (SO) in catering for learning difficulties and disabilities, and the different needs of students in the classes.
- 2.4.** It is evident that there is agreement emerging around school-wide pedagogical approaches and high impact class teaching and learning strategies. It is not evident that this is occurring beyond Professional Learning Teams. The college has yet to achieve school-wide collaborative agreement and clear articulation of its beliefs and values about learners, learning and teaching. While this takes time, it is a critical element identified in research about high achieving schools.
- 2.5.** Teachers plan and build curriculum knowledge collaboratively within their year level groupings. They report that curriculum leadership is not yet in a state of coordination or coherence developmentally across the college from Prep to Year 10. Current structures around responsibilities and leadership in curriculum development need greater clarity, along with clear guidance around transition from one year to the next.
- 2.6.** The collegial activities involved in the Professional Learning Teams (PLT) approach are driving the development of pedagogical knowledge and strategies. These teams are well supported and appreciated in the junior school. The PLT initiative is creating strong teacher efficacy within its own context. It is not evident that this collegiality yet extends vertically and developmentally across the college.
- 2.7.** Parents indicate that they would appreciate opportunities to be more engaged in their children's learning. A number of parents suggest that if they know what is being taught and how it is being taught and assessed, and, if they wish, the opportunity to see how their child is progressing in their year group, they would be better able to support the children at home.



- 2.8.** Research indicates that there is significant advantage on offer for student academic achievement within the middle years of schooling in a P-12 context. This is connected to curriculum coherence and continuity, minimal disruption and positive student relationships with teachers. This is a point of difference for the college that is not yet evident in the college narrative.
- 2.9.** The College Leadership Team is working to understand and analyse the College's NAPLAN data. The "salient findings" from the recent analysis are well articulated. Some of these trends were reported as a surprise to teachers, who appear eager to plan responses to address these trends. Teachers are already discussing ways to address the trends in their year levels and are ready to work on how to address them.
- 2.10.** Teachers report that students are eager learners, well-mannered and generally a delight to work with.
- 2.11.** Students report that bullying is almost non-existent at the college, and that on the rare occasions that it does occur it is dealt with quickly and effectively. This is a significant achievement of staff and students of the college and reflects strongly on the way pastoral care and student wellbeing are managed.

Improvement strategies

- 2.1.** Collaboratively develop the core values and beliefs of the college about learners, learning and teaching, in order to consolidate and strengthen the professional life of the college. Strategies might include professional conversations among teachers and with the College Leadership Team about teaching and learning, leading to articulating these core values and beliefs, and how they translate to classroom practice and student achievement.
- 2.2.** Allocate a person to the responsibility for curriculum leadership and coordination in each of the junior school and senior school (middle years at this point in the College's development). Their responsibility should be to build continuity and coherence into curriculum development and pedagogy in their respective schools and from the junior school into the senior school.
- 2.3.** Devise a template to be used consistently by teachers so that students and parents are made aware of the content of planned curriculum units and what is required to achieve the expected standard. This will take time and should be progressed consultatively with teachers and parents.
- 2.4.** Engage teachers, and perhaps teacher aides, in regular review and response cycles around the college's NAPLAN data. This is an opportunity for clarity, targeting student weaknesses and strengths as revealed in the data.



Domain 3 Continual renewal

Findings

- 3.1.** Based on discussion with staff, parents and students, a very clear culture can be seen as prevalent at Mary Mackillop Catholic College. The religious values and expectations of the college are strongly presented including visible representations of the charism of Mary MacKillop. The experience of staff, parents and students is one of a most welcoming, supportive, friendly, caring and safe community.
- 3.2.** The College Leadership Team is seen as supportive of new ideas that staff wish to instigate at the college. Some examples are 'Teach like a Champion' and 'Making Jesus Real'. The Principal and College Leadership Team members value, lead and model this high level of commitment to professional development.
- 3.3.** Students and parents report that teachers demand high expectations of the students and ensure this is achieved. They are seen as showing interest in and building positive relationships with students. The wellbeing of students and the quality of learning support are also recognised and commended, and the significant growth in student experiences around music, drama and art is widely praised and acknowledged as enriching the culture of the college.
- 3.4.** The review team notes that 98% of parents report in the latest Radian Survey that they feel staff care for their children at Mary Mackillop Catholic College. It is evident that a culture of genuine interest, empathy and encouragement of each child is the norm.
- 3.5.** There is clear evidence of a developing culture of teacher efficacy. Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) are acknowledged by staff in the primary school as highly productive and beneficial. The work of PLTs has included professional sharing: guaranteed and viable curriculum elements, proficiency scales ("I can" statements), pre and post-test data analysis and the implementation of reading improvement strategies. Teachers and parents indicate their support for greater recognition of academic achievement by students in school communication and rituals, including assemblies.
- 3.6.** There is a strong impression in the College community that the College Leadership Team members are seen to be approachable, and have an authentic ability to listen. The Principal is widely commended on his appointments of staff. A number of staff referred to the lack of females on the College Leadership Team of a co-educational college, though it was pointed out that there were very few female applicants for the advertised roles. There is a perceived lack of clarity and coherence in the responsibilities of the College Leadership Team, including who takes responsibility for what, and a perception that its members at times lack a united voice. These perceptions appear quite widespread, and sometimes cause frustration when a timely response to an issue is needed.



- 3.7. There is a strong sense of partnership with the Parents and Friends Association and the College Board. The Parents and Friends Association has been widely acclaimed as a vital and energising group of parents for the College. It has particularly been commended for the caring, financial and community development aspects of its work. Of particular note are the 'Healing Hands' project which provides support not only to families within the school but throughout the wider Highfields community. The Parents and Friends Food Festival initiative is an enjoyable and uniting community event which raised some \$20 000 for the College. The staff were commended by parents for their support and positive disposition whilst attending these community events. This group is a vital and sustaining fabric in the culture of the College.
- 3.8. The College Board is widely recognised as a productive group of parents strongly supporting the efforts and policies of the College. Parents report that the College Leadership Team listens to and acts on the advice and recommendations of the Board.
- 3.9. As the College grows, there is a formal plan to further develop ties with the local community through the students' undertakings in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. This presently includes part-time jobs and will include a process of SET Planning and work experience from Year 10.
- 3.10. Teacher collegiality is strong at the college. Peer walkthroughs have begun to take place, with further plans for teacher learning walks and observations to follow. More advanced peer activities such as peer observations and feedback, and peer coaching, are still in the early stages of development.
- 3.11. There is a highly visible culture of community among staff, students and parents. Staff appreciate working at the school, parents see the staff and College Leadership Team as approachable and welcoming, and students express pride at being members of the school community. A significant number of staff, students and parents express concern that this culture of community might be diminished or lost as the school grows through to the larger numbers of a full P-12 school.

Improvement strategies

- 3.1. Explore ways to build greater recognition of academic achievement and effort by students into assemblies and other relevant rituals.
- 3.2. Within the College Leadership Team, identify the specific roles of each member of the College Leadership Team, then publish it verbally and in writing, so that the team itself, and staff, students and parents, are clear on the responsibilities of each team member, and who they should approach for particular issues.



- 3.3. Continue to develop and strengthen the culture of teacher collegiality through learning walks peer observations, peer coaching, and other professional exchanges and feedback activities. Involve the College Leadership Team in these initiatives.
- 3.4. As the school continues its growth through to a P-12 school, introduce strategies to preserve the culture of community which is so highly valued by the school community.

Domain 4 Sustainable resourcing and stewardship

Findings

- 4.1. Staff indicate that professional development opportunities aligned with the college's strategic priorities are available and teachers are encouraged and supported in availing themselves of these opportunities.
- 4.2. Teachers convey that they are treated with personal and professional respect by the College Leadership Team, and are empowered to make important decisions about their work.
- 4.3. It is widely felt across the college community that the college's communication systems are in need of significant attention. Staff, parents and students are experiencing problems and uncertainty as the communication systems currently operate. Staff, students and parents generally agree that this has begun to improve. At the same time, significant gaps in the school's ability to communicate important messages effectively are evident in comments from a cross-section of the school community.
- 4.4. Particular issues referred to include how to find information about school activities, whom to go to with a particular issue, difficulties in navigating the website, lack of follow-up communication when an issue has been raised with a member of the College Leadership Team, staff giving wrong information, a need to explain the rationale behind decisions, and the volume of information which at times makes it difficult for parents to discern what is important and what is less important.
- 4.5. Induction processes are in place to welcome new staff. New staff express appreciation of the warmth and generosity of the support they receive from the leadership team and colleagues.



- 4.6.** Newly appointed teachers state that their professional induction to their teaching responsibilities was less helpful than their personal welcome. Introduction to curriculum content and pedagogy was largely ad hoc, and while their colleagues were generous with their time and expertise, the new staff feel that this element of their induction needs to be more formalized. It was also suggested that the start of year processes need to leave time for personal planning time for teachers.
- 4.7.** Priority areas in teaching and learning are reflected in the budget and supported by the TCSO and both the College Finance subcommittee of the College Board and the Diocesan Finance Board.
- 4.8.** The Business Manager and Principal have put into place protocols to ensure the most efficient ways to manage human and physical resourcing in the college. These are seen as still developing toward maximum effectiveness.
- 4.9.** The school has processes in place to identify and provide for student needs, including those requiring additional or specialist support. The allocation of a School Counsellor for four days each week is seen as very helpful and is widely appreciated.
- 4.10.** Learning Support staff work with students with special needs and disabilities, and their work is highly respected by classroom teachers. Work with special needs students is moving to be mainly inclusive in classes, with a small component of withdrawal for specific needs.
- 4.11.** Teachers, parents and students state that the school is well-resourced. With a small number of exceptions, the school's facilities are highly regarded by the school community, and are conducive to offering a wide variety of learning experiences for students. New buildings are designed to encourage contemporary evidence-based teaching practices.
- 4.12.** Teachers give significant time and expertise to co-curricular activities for students. This is seen by parents as a valuable resource. These activities are essentially dependent on the goodwill of teachers, and some teachers suggest that in some cases this goodwill is being stretched and may not be sustainable.

Improvement strategies

- 4.1.** Work with the school's Marketing and Communication Officer to identify the issues currently hampering effective internal and external communication, and work consultatively



with staff, parents and students to put in place systems that will facilitate clear and effective communication.

- 4.2.** Investigate ways to systematically induct new staff into their professional responsibilities more formally than currently occurs.
- 4.3.** Monitor staff contributions to co-curricular activities, ensuring equitable workloads so that people are not over-committed to the extent that their goodwill may be lost.

Conclusion

The review team wishes to commend the members of the school community who participated in the review so openly and with great trust, to identify what is working well at the college and to identify what can be further developed from those identified strengths to assist the college to become all it can be. This process aims at ensuring that the college provides the very best educational and holistic developmental opportunities for children placed in the care of the college by their parents, and to support the college leadership and staff as they work to achieve this.

The review team has made a significant number of findings that affirm the college for a variety of aspects of its life and operation, ranging across a wide ambit, from the welcoming nature of the community as confirmed by staff, parents and students, the strong and well established Catholic ethos, the strong professional commitment of the staff, the safe and positive relationships among students, to the support of teachers by the College Leadership Team to implement their professional learning.

At the same time, there are a number of improvement strategies that encompass several areas of the life of the college. These improvement strategies need to be incorporated into the strategic plan for the college, then acted upon and ultimately embedded in the daily life of the college. Some of these strategies require immediate attention and implementation. Others will need to be attended to in the shorter term, and some are big picture issues that need work to begin now, but will take time to be fully realised. The review team sees all the improvement strategies as necessary for the college to flourish and reach its full potential in both the short and long term.

The first step is for the College Leadership Team to work with the TCS Senior Education Leader to prioritise and sequence the improvement strategies suggested in this review. Concurrently an action plan needs to be developed which will sequence the implementation of the improvement strategies and the related resourcing requirements within the school on a timeline. This may involve support from TCSO and from relevant external providers to make this action plan a reality.

The review team sees that the college is genuinely striving to be a Christ-centered educational community, engaging minds, igniting hearts and serving others, forming faith-filled people who strive for excellence in all they are and all they do. The review team wishes the college well in this endeavor and hopes that this exercise has provided illumination, clarity and support for the journey ahead.



Epilogue

To assist the College Leadership Team in prioritising and working through the improvement strategies in the report, the review team suggests that while there are many suggested issues and related improvement strategies, there are some 'big rocks' that are listed in the Prologue as important. We reiterate them here:

- 1) An imbalance between leadership and management on the College Leadership Team, mainly seen as a lack of ability to move big picture deliberations through to the day to day life of the school.
- 2) Communication systems, both internal and external, are not working effectively, and need serious attention.
- 3) A school-wide process to engage teachers in articulating and sharing their key values and beliefs about learners, learning and teaching is an important element in a high achieving school.
- 4) Coherent curriculum development, co-ordinated vertically throughout the school, reflecting agreed school-wide approaches to pedagogy, is shown in research to be a key driver of improved student achievement.

These are the responsibility of the Principal and the College Leadership Team, and will require some thought, as well as the ability to make them happen in the life of the college. TCSO has made clear the offer to assist and support the college in addressing these important issues. Amid all that is good in the college, these 'big rocks' appear to the review team as the college's biggest challenges, and addressing them will move the college a long way toward achieving its potential.