



**ST ALBERT'S
CATHOLIC SCHOOL**
LOXTON

SCHOOL BOARD 2020 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Principal's Report

Do you recall at our AGM last year, I quoted a phrase used by Queen Elizabeth II in 1992 to describe what had been a less than desirable year for her family? She called in an 'annus horribilis.' I then went on to describe how the beginning of 2019 was something of an annus horribilis for St Albert's as our server crashed, the back-up server also failed (which has now been replaced), the COLA retaining wall collapsed and a family moved to Adelaide. So if annus horribilis could be used to describe those events, I am at somewhat of a loss to find a Latin phrase that might encapsulate all that happened in 2020!

Staff had a most enjoyable start to the year as we headed to the Barossa Valley for a spiritual retreat on Dominican Spirituality. Former APRIM and Spiritual Director, Mrs Raelene Edwards was the facilitator and did a wonderful job despite issues with reading glasses and levels of concentration during the first session as the principal thought it a good idea to do some wine tasting over lunch before arriving at the retreat centre – sorry Raelene! Over the course of the two days, we wanted to learn stories about St Dominic, to come to know him better. We wanted to understand the four pillars and how we are connected to a global Dominican family. We wanted practical ideas which we could use in the classroom and to share with children. Raelene was able to provide all of this, and much more; we are wiser for the experience and closer as a staff for having attended.

Not too long after our retreat news stories were circulating of a nasty bug in China which had then moved to Northern Italy and eventually made its way to our own shores. By the end of Week 6 Term One, circulars about COVID-19 were becoming more frequent and the world held its breath. I do not wish to provide a detailed narrative of the pandemic here suffice it to say that staff and our community responded in a way that was supportive, understanding and life giving. Parents were more than happy to support decisions made by the school designed to sustain learning and support matters of wellbeing during those uncertain times. There were very few, if any, demands made of the school by parents. Our staff went above and beyond to keep children informed, yet calm at the core. I appreciate that at times this was not an easy task, especially when information needed to be disseminated

quickly and they had their own family and friends to care for, too. We were tested during border restrictions and learnt about travel bubbles and adapted to change at lightning speed. We designed new methods of curriculum delivery overnight and learnt about Microsoft Teams. We organised home visits and sent home Birthday cards to children who were unable to celebrate their special day at school. Karen staged online music concerts and assemblies become part of our online universe. We came to appreciate what we have always known, that learning is best done in partnership and that it truly does take a village to raise a child. No doubt COVID-19 has taught us a little about ourselves and how precious family is, but as principal of this learning community, it demonstrated to me how the worst of times can bring out the best in people. The wonderful emails, gifts and phone calls of affirmation lifted the spirit and carried us over the line. We came to accept the new normal and prayed for those interstate whose experience of the pandemic was very different to our own. The work continues but we are battle hardened.

A cluster initiative called *Making Space for Learning Enquiry* was completed amongst the four Riverland Catholic Schools. A project many years in the making, the enquiry was designed to look at matters of wellbeing, mindfulness and mental health for young children. It has seen a restructure of our instructional time, particularly those critical moments after transition. Data suggests the explicit teaching of a wellbeing curriculum immediately after Recess and/or lunch has positive, immediate and long lasting effects. The precursor to this program was looking at the executive functioning of the brain and how we can better regulate emotions. The Mindup Curriculum has now become a permanent feature of our wellbeing program in addition to other resources such as Prayerful Kids and the Biglife Journal. Leader of Wellbeing, Brogan Whitelaw oversaw the project and is now looking into a new program from the UK called iHeart which seeks to expand on this initiative. More on this in 2021.

Catholic Education launched a Wellbeing Survey which every student in Catholic Education will be required to complete in Week 5 of each term. The survey asks questions around identity, relationships, learning and belonging. The data we collected from this survey was much as we expected. However, some students highlighted that perhaps their teacher was working faster than they could 'process' information so this was a particularly good insight. Almost all students indicated they felt very safe, enjoyed coming to school, maintained good friendships and felt their teacher cared about them. The most interesting and varied response was around the questions, 'Do I have a say in my learning' (co-construction). This concept was particularly difficult for Junior Primary to understand. Their interpretation was more around 'if I can't do what I want, then I don't have a say in my learning.' Teachers have been asked to be much more explicit with children, to give them examples and to explain exactly when co-constructed learning is occurring

in the classroom. As a result of this survey and the Living Learning and Leading Framework, teachers have come to realise that the language they use in the classroom needs to be modified to reflect both the survey and the framework. Only good can come of this and I am pleased it has become a permanent feature of our Wellbeing landscape.

A highlight of the teaching and learning environment this year was the introduction of the *Talk for Writing* program.

Many students find the writing process, both fiction and non-fiction, extremely challenging. These students may have wonderful ideas, but struggle to get their thoughts onto the page. Even those who read reasonably well can experience difficulty with written expression. As children read and are read to, they store patterns that form the building blocks of written expression. In order to write sentence patterns appropriate to a given text (e.g. a recount starts with 'when, who, what and where' elements) children need to have these patterns modelled with multiple opportunities to say them before being expected to write them. In *Talk For Writing*, the process of "Imitation – Innovation – Invention" is explored.

Students learn to orally recite and act out popular stories through listening and reading. The teacher maps out the story using pictures to aid students' memory. The repetition allows the students to interact with the text and helps them to internalise the language patterns and text features. Students are then taught to use the underlying structure of the original text to create their own version on a different topic. Over time, they move towards independent writing as they create texts about their own topics.

Talk for Writing is a unique process that uses spoken activities to develop writing skills. Quality writing is created by first expanding and developing students' oral language skills and then teaching the necessary steps for exceptional sentence, paragraph and text construction.

Director of Catholic Education, Dr Neil McGoran announced three new strategic goals for our organisation. They are significant and part of his vision for Catholic Education SA to become the best education provider in the country by 2025. The three goals are...

1. Strengthening educational outcomes for all students in catholic schools
2. Improving the accessibility of our catholic schools
3. The affordability of our catholic schools

Points 2 and 3 have already been actioned by way of school fee reductions and rebates to families who use buses to travel to and from school. On the first, 'strengthening education outcomes for all students in catholic schools', he

references a document published later in the year called '*A Blueprint for step change*' in Catholic Schools. This Blueprint intentionally moves CESA to a greater level of 'systemness' underpinned by the values of subsidiarity, co-responsibility and common good. His desire is to build a clear system agenda to support learning, teaching and wellbeing to improve student outcomes and to educate thriving people, capable learners and leaders for the world God desires. No doubt we will hear much more of this in 2021.

A key strategy for the school board is looking at new ways to increase our market share of enrolments. To this end, I have started a dialogue with the Strategy team at the Catholic Education office. Loxton is in a unique position, quite distinct from any other catholic primary school in the diocese: we are four primary schools in a town with a population of just under 5,000; we are a catholic school competing in a German town with two parishes and a Lutheran school which is seen by many as the 'school of choice'; we do not have an early learning centre which affects our capacity to attract new enrolments from the Loxton Kindergarten. No other catholic primary school is confronted with such a reality. Imaging having a catholic primary school in downtown Hahndorf or Nuriootpa! Although COVID interrupted our planning, it remains a priority as we plan for future generations of students at St Albert's.

Our financial position remains strong with sufficient reserves this year to enable the purchasing of a brand new bus. The old one had been a great workhorse for us over the last ten years or so but has long been in need of replacing. We were pleased to be able to dispose of it to a local family so expect you will still see it around the place! Our new Mitsubishi Rosa is simply a delight to drive and far more economical than its predecessor. The signage was designed by de.co in Adelaide and connects our corporate identity and looks spectacular. Other marketing initiatives this year included a series of bespoke thank you cards, a new advertising sign for the round-about, tear-drop banners for promotional purposes at community events and a suite of PowerPoint templates for assemblies, staff meetings and the like.

With some fanfare and after about 20 years in the making, Catholic Education announced that a new Catholic Secondary College is to be built in Renmark. Opening in 2022, the school will initially open its doors to Year 7 and Year 8 before slowly growing to include Year 12 by 2026. Mr Nathan Hayes, a country lad himself, has been appointed the inaugural principal and will settle into Renmark with his family in the New Year. The announcement was somewhat strategic as all secondary schools look to welcome Year 7 next year but now parents have an additional choice which builds on the foundation of catholic education established in the Riverland in the 1950s. Further to this, St Albert's has been planning for our Year 6 and Year 7 class to graduate concurrently for some time now. Decisions will soon be made about

how that might look for our families with the focus, as always, on the pastoral care and wellbeing of the children.

At the end of our year together, sadly, we said farewell to Kali Rodda. It would be fair to say Kali burst onto the St Albert teaching scene following her appointment to staff. She immediately connected with our community with her trademark sense of humour and hard work ethic. When speaking with children from her class, many talked about her unique way of teaching that helped the children learn better. They said she helps them to do their work and never, ever gives up if they find something challenging. One child said Miss Rodda had a way of turning things they thought would be boring into things that were fun!

Similarly, staff quickly welcomed Kali into the fold. She was extremely collegial and willing to help out when the going got tough. Although her time with us was brief, through the course of events that was 2020, it really does feel like Kali had been with us for much longer. We have genuinely enjoyed, indeed loved, having Kali as part of the St Albert's community. Kali moves back to familiar territory in the surrounds of Port Pirie to take advantage of a business opportunity with her partner, Bailey. Kali has been a beacon of kindness and good humour to not only our Year 3/4 but the whole school. Her work acumen and commitment to providing high quality teaching and learning was palpable spending many hours here after school each day marking, preparing and fine tuning lessons. We wish her every success and thank her most sincerely.

So despite the tribulations of 2020, we acknowledge and celebrate all that has been achieved. The New Year will bring with it new things.

Brett Czechowski
Principal