Quality Catholic Schools (1997)
Challenges for Leadership as Catholic Education Approaches the Third Millennium
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Chapter 9 - School Boards: the South Australian Experience (pp 83-93)

Summary of key points:

1867: Father Julian Tenison Woods was appointed by Bishop Sheil as the first Director General of Catholic Education in South Australia. The Local Boards of Education, each comprising several laymen under the leadership of the pastor, were to oversee the running of the schools in their own area and arrange the collection of funds for their support.

1867-1871: Father Woods set to work with a will and the number of schools grew from 23 to 65. Once he had to vacate the South Australian scene, many of his administrative procedures lapsed. He may have been a pioneer, but it was fairly obvious that he did not have the general support of the clergy and leading citizens for his direction in Catholic education in involving School Boards.

1967: South Australian Federation of Catholic Schools Parents and Friends Association is instituted.

September 1968: School boards were reformed under Archbishop Beovich who was able to rely upon much more evident clerical support than was available to Fr Woods one hundred years earlier. Fr Woods foresaw in 1867 that if schools were to survive, let alone flourish, they would need the active support of the parent community. 100 years later, Archbishop Beovich was to write, “it is now clear that without such boards, we shall not be able to provide efficiently for the needs and development of our schools, to encourage greater confidence and generosity of their supported well-being, and handle adequately the financial grants from the government, beginning next year”.

1968: Parish schools needed assistance and expertise in the financial area, and so when school boards were constituted, they were given responsibility for the financial management of the schools.

1970s: Growing demands from parents emerge for increased participation in schools. Various models of boards emerge, for example advisory board, board of advice, responsible board, pastoral board, board of management (usually financial management), parish education board - to name but some. Federal intervention resulted in a massive escalation of funding for Catholic schools in the middle 70s and onwards, resulting in the salvation of Catholic schooling as well as the devolution of responsibility to local schools. In order to qualify for federal money, the Catholic school sector had to systematise and to coordinate its operations through a Catholic Education Office.

1976: A new School Board Manual set out the responsibilities of parish and diocesan school boards. Their powers were widened for involvement in decision-making on general educational matters. The two main functions were to ensure that the parish school fulfilled its Christian educational responsibility, and to administer school finances. Financial responsibilities, procedures and accounting methods were clearly set out in the Manual. School boards might have needed more practical assistance to carry out their responsibility to safeguard the Catholic ethos of the Catholic school.

1980s: By the early 1980s there were signs of frustration among Catholic South Australian systemic school boards. There was a growing uneasiness that probably they should be doing more. The financial management as they saw it was probably under control and did not require their constant and sole focus.

1983: A consultant was appointed to work with school boards, and to draw up the new Manual which had been promised. The Archbishop also set up a Diocesan Renewal Committee, culminating in the 1985 Diocesan
Assembly. Shortly after the Adelaide Renewal Program, the Port Pirie diocese also entered upon a program of renewal. School boards entered into their own renewal taking on a deeper appreciation of a new vision of Church, church as the People of God, sharing responsibility with government and diocesan agencies for the school's well-being. Responsibilities were widened to include Catholic ethos, financial management, planning and development of school plants and facilities, pastoral care for staff, students, parents and all those involved in some way with the life of the school, and an evaluation of whether the school was meeting the proper expectations and standards of good Catholic school.

1985: The Guide for School Board Members was published and distributed, revised twice by 1997

1990: School Boards Assembly introduces the commissioning of school board members with certificates of membership.

The umbrella role of the school board is to provide policy direction to educational programs on behalf of the school community; through its policy statements, to nurture and develop the Catholic ethos of the school; to carefully manage resources and finances; to be involved in planning and development for the future; to take on a special responsibility in regard to care for others, towards staff in particular, and towards all others involved in the Catholic school, students, parents, volunteers, special school groups etc.

A RESPONSIBLE school board demands of its members a realistic appreciation of their responsibilities and acceptance of their accountability to the community and higher authorities for their mandated areas of concern. The proper use of their formal powers is vital to the well-being of the school. Through its elected members on a responsible board, the community exercises responsibility for educational decision-making in mandated areas.

An ADVISORY board may be a means of broadening the base of decision-making responsibility but decision-making responsibility does not rest with them. At worst, an advisory board can be but a token of shared decision-making, a nominal acknowledgement of some form of participatory decision-making. Indeed, advisory boards may in fact, stifle community participation

Boards of MANAGEMENT (often financial management) are often based on the corporate business model of raising and managing finances. Influence on educational decision-making may only be indirect.

South Australian Catholic parish and diocesan school boards have had a continuous 35+ year story of RESPONSIBLE board structures, but over that time the areas of responsibility have grown.

The definition of these boards as responsible (as distinct from advisory) seems, in the view of this author, to have solicited from board members greater dedication, participation, talents, expertise, honesty, strength of purpose and loyalty. If school boards purport to be community-based, then they must work to be accepted as such, and to be seen to be accountable.


The Manual sets out as clearly as possible, the parameters of school board responsibility. The principal and staff are responsible for the day-to-day running of the school. While school board has a responsibility to see that appropriate policies are formulated, it is the principal and staff who usually implement the policies, drawing up programs, rules, procedures necessary for implementation.