



Our Quest for Hope - The Gift of Faith

A discussion paper for families and schools in support of the journey of faith



Photo: Sacred Heart Primary, Beagle Bay

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The National Catholic Education Commission acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which our school communities are located. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. The National Catholic Education Commission is committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.



FOREWORD

I welcome *Our Quest for Hope - The Gift of Faith: A discussion paper for families and schools in support of the journey of faith*, published by the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) as a hope-filled contribution for all school communities.

In 2017 the NCEC published *A Framework for Formation for Mission in Catholic Education* and the central understandings of formation discussed in this paper, provide the basis for understanding the nature and purpose of formation.

This discussion paper aspires to support the shared journey of parents and schools in the faith formation of the children and young people in their care. It responds to the commitment of the Plenary Council to the prioritisation, strengthening and renewal of faith formation for families¹ through acknowledging “the generational, cultural and ethnic diversity of the contemporary Church in Australia.”² For a sacred and true education aims at the complete formation of the human person.³

We commend this work to all engaged in the religious education, catechetical and evangelisation ministries of the Church.

This guide supports a shared conversation between families and school leaders to reflect on and evaluate current practice, renewing and revitalising the commitment to partnership with families as first educators.

On behalf of the Bishop’s Commission for Catholic Education, I thank all those involved in the preparation of this important resource. May all be rewarded for their efforts by seeing our ministries within and beyond schools increasingly become places where together, we build the Kingdom of God.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Anthony Fisher OP
Chair, Bishops Commission for Catholic Education

PREFACE

The National Catholic Education Commission offers this document as a resource for school communities. “Formation for families requires new and creative strategies that correspond to the rhythms of family life and provide accompaniment at all stages of their journey.”⁴

This work is provided as an invitation for school communities to consider how they come together to enhance the partnership between schools and families; as together with the parish they support children and young people in exploring their faith.

It is a resource for the evaluation of current practice and the discovery of imaginative responses and new opportunities for school communities.

“The family today is more than ever a sign of the times, and the church is invited above all to listen actively to families, and at the same time to involve them as subjects of pastoral care.”

(Francis, June 2021)



Photo courtesy of Catholic School Parents South Australia

JESUS AMONG THE TEACHERS OF THE LAW

Every year his parents used to go to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. When he was 12 years old, they went up to the festival as usual. When the days of the festival were over and they set off home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem without his parents knowing it. They assumed he was in the party, and after a day's journey they started looking for him among their relations and acquaintances. When they could not find him they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.

It happened that, after three days, they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions; and all those who heard him were astounded at his intelligence and his replies. When they saw him they were overcome, and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? See, your father and I have been searching for you anxiously." He said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

He went down with them and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority. His mother stored up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in divine and human favour. *Luke 2:41-52*



Image: Holy Family, Jen Norton

REFLECTION

This is the story of a child, Jesus, whose family nurtured his faith in their time, in their culture and their place. In the Jewish culture to which Jesus belonged, faith and spirituality are encouraged in the family and supported by the community in every moment of every day.


Jesus, like most children, inquisitive to explore his faith, found himself sitting among the teachers listening and asking them questions. He was so engaged in the dialogue and learning that his family unwittingly began their journey home without him.

Mary and Joseph, on their way home, discovered their child was not with them and like any parents, were greatly distressed. Any parent who has had a child go missing will know what this felt like. On finding him, they must have been deeply relieved. One can only imagine the conversations likely to have happened between him and his parents, not to mention the feelings of probably distress, confusion, fear and despair followed by relief.

Parenting can sometimes seem an impossible task! Whether it be the early years of clinginess and sleepless nights, the teenager boundary pushing or perhaps a child with chronic illness. But it need not be done alone. It was within a community that the child Jesus grew and his family were supported. We recall he increases in wisdom, in stature, and in divine and human favour within his family.

All parents have dreams and hopes for their children. God has dreams for them too! This story points to a future not of his parents choosing, but one led by God. Trusting the discernment of children and young people in their own future, setting family expectations aside and allowing the Spirit to be present is enormously challenging.


While families may not see themselves in every element of this story, they do want the best for their children, to share their heritage, their culture, their story and often their faith.



**Every child is destined to grow, to become strong,
to acquire knowledge and receive the grace of God,
just as happened to Jesus.**

(Francis, 2017)

THE QUEST FOR HOPE



Hope is the door that opens onto the future. Hope is a humble, hidden seed of life that with time, will develop into a large tree. It is like some invisible yeast that allows the whole dough to grow, that brings flavour to all aspects of life.

(Francis, April 2017)

Humanity has a great capacity for hope, a capacity to dream of and aspire to something bigger than itself. Faith is a gift that helps us to discover hope in relationship with God and all those in creation. It is light in the darkness, courage in the face of fear and trust in the presence of the Spirit in our lives.

Every moment spent nurturing children and young people is an act of hope for the future.

Together with families and parishes, Catholic schools share this hope as a commitment to the development of the self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables children and young people to grow and integrate their emotional, mental, cultural, spiritual and physical wellbeing.⁵

Catholic schools provide a holistic range of formative experiences inspired by the Gospel.⁶ These awaken in students a sense of belonging and responsibility to something beyond themselves. In encountering Christ, they intensify their knowledge and love of God so as to form them as more thoughtful, effective and compassionate contributors to Australian society and the world.

In supporting families to develop their capacity to nurture the faith and spirituality of their children, the Catholic school participates in the evangelising mission of the Church as a community of faith.⁷

This paper situates itself within the context of the contemporary reality of family, acknowledging the complexity and beauty of modern society. It is in the vitality of the family that the future depends, and we must therefore work together to strengthen the capacity of every family.

“We hope all our students will emerge from our schools with a deepened sense of the sacred and a greater appreciation of the true, the good and the beautiful.”⁸

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE

“Children are loved before they arrive... they are loved before being born... they are loved before having done anything to deserve it, before knowing how to talk or think.”

(Francis, February 2015)

As with the Christian story, Catholic schools and families are brought together by the most precious gift – a child.

The lives of all children and young people are a great joy – to families, school communities, to the Church and to God. As children and young people grow in awareness of themselves, they search for meaning and purpose in their lives and the world around them.⁹ Each Catholic school community works together to encourage the growth, flourishing and transformation of their students. “We seek to draw out our students’ gifts, address their challenges and enable them to experience fullness of life.”¹⁰

Parents, as Pope Francis notes, have the great joy of nurturing their children’s flourishing in all areas of their life.¹¹ Schools are gifted with the sacred privilege of supporting this work:

The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also our home; it trains us how to live together in this greater home. In the family, we learn closeness, care, and respect for others. We break out of our fatal self-absorption and come to realise that we are living with and alongside others who are worthy of our concern, our kindness and our affection.

(Amoris Laetitia, n. 276).



FAMILY

Dignity and Uniqueness

“Families are society’s most important building block. Strong families equate to strong communities because they embody caring for others, connectedness with people, and providing hope, support and comfort.”

(Babbington, 2021)

Each family is unique; their circumstances and make-up are rich in diversity. Whilst in Australia it is most common for children to live with their biological parents, there is a long-term trend away from such family arrangements.¹² Families today are made up of biological or non-biological parents, carers, kin carers, siblings, aunts and uncles, as well as close friends and neighbours - and all contribute in significant ways to a child’s education. Grandparents too, play a special role in the life of many children and young people, particularly in their faith formation. Nurturing intergenerational relationships can provide the gifts of experience, time, praise and affection in the example of a life lived in faith, hope and love.¹³

There is an increasing prevalence of family changes which result in children living in blended, re-blended and single parent families¹⁴ as well as other expressions of family. Such models include an increase of multi-generational households significantly represented by an increasing diversity of cultural backgrounds for whom such models are important.¹⁵

As we discuss parent engagement and partnerships with parents, we extend the terms of parent and family to include all those who provide regular care, guidance and support, whether they be carers, grandparents, siblings, relatives or others who are central in the lives of children and young people.

“...there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems.”

(Amoris Laetitia, n. 57)

In society, education and the Catholic Church

The family is the most natural and fundamental unit of society. “As the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live.”¹⁶

The family is ‘the primary place of humanisation for the person and society and the cradle of life and love’¹⁷; it is an initiation into life in society. In families each person can be nourished, experience love for the very first time, explore limitations, work together, learn to debate and resolve conflict. “The family is the first core for relationships: the relationship with one’s father and mother and with one’s brothers and sisters is the basis, and it always accompanies us in life.”¹⁸ Families can offer care and support for parents and children and are at the very heart of society. For many, family begins in marriage which ‘protects and shapes to deeper growth in love and commitment to one another, for the good of society as a whole.’¹⁹ As communities it is beholden to all of us to support, nurture and recognise the primary role of families in the lives of people, the future of humanity depends on it.

“The family, as the fundamental and essential educating community, is the privileged means for transmitting the religious and cultural values which help the person to acquire his or her own identity. Founded on love and open to the gift of life, the family contains in itself the very future of society.”

(St John Paul II, 1994, n. 2)

Catholic education is committed to honouring the partnership with families in every community. Catholic schools, along with the wider society, have the responsibility to ensure that each family is respected, protected and sustained.

The Catholic Church, through the parish community and school, is committed to accompanying the faith formation of families.



LEARNING TOGETHER

Catholic school communities are privileged to support families in their primary role as a child's first educator.²⁰ Parishes share the responsibility to offer continued support for the formation of Catholic school parents to enable them, in turn, to nurture the Christian formation of their children.²¹

The family is a proclamation of faith in that it is the natural place in which faith can be lived in a simple and spontaneous manner. It has a unique privilege: transmitting the Gospel by rooting it in the context of profound human values.

(Directory for Catechesis, 2020, n. 227)

As first educators, families are important role models for their children. It is through them that their children can first learn and witness God's love. "Faith grows when it is lived and shaped by love. That is why our families, our homes, are true domestic churches."²² For young Catholics, both encouragement and engagement with religious activities at home contribute positively to sustained church attendance and participation.²³ In supporting this, Catholic schools, in partnership with parents, aspire to do all that they can to help parents fulfill their responsibilities while recognising the diversity of backgrounds, cultures, experiences and stories, and understanding the importance of nurturing trusting partnerships. It is precisely because school communities understand that the family is the "first and fundamental school of social living"²⁴ that there is a commitment to working together.

Parents, carers and families are the first and most important educational influence in a child's life. They have a critical role in early development, including social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical wellbeing. They instil attitudes and values that support young people to access and participate in education and training, and contribute to local and global communities. It is critical for the education community to work in partnership with parents, carers and families to support a child's progress through early learning and school.

(Mpwartne Declaration, 2019, p. 10)

Partnering with a Catholic school for their child's learning is an act of great respect and trust by families that must be honoured. Parents and families best know their children and young people, they are well placed to be their advocates and champions, collaborating respectfully.

Respectful collaboration

Beautiful indeed and of great importance is the vocation of all those who aid parents in fulfilling their duties and who, as representatives of the human community, undertake the task of education in schools. This vocation demands special qualities of mind and heart, very careful preparation, and continuing readiness to renew and to adapt.

(Gravissimum Educationis, n. 5)

It is imperative that schools take this opportunity to build trusting relationships from the moment of first enquiry and enrolment. They must create an atmosphere where families feel honoured and opportunities for dialogue about what and how their students learn are realised. We know that when we engage in meaningful ways with parents in sharing the learning journey, outcomes improve for the learners; it “increases student graduation rates; improves students’ self- esteem, behaviour, and motivation; creates a more positive attitude toward school among parents and students; and increases parents’ satisfaction with teachers.”²⁵

Parent Voice

Parent and family engagement invites parent voice in learning and is a natural part of young people’s lifelong care and education, honouring and utilising parent knowledge and capacity in a relationship of shared decision making. As we “advance the quality of education, the opportunities afforded to students, families, and educators to work collaboratively will be a distinct measure of our success.”²⁶

Catholic school communities can “come to know the families and their needs, aspirations and life stories, and acknowledge and support them in their changing circumstances. As families and the community change, the school responds, always seeking new ways to build and strengthen relationships that support every child to flourish, embracing, respecting and celebrating diversity.”²⁷

Accompaniment

The basis for family engagement that applies across the broader context of school life is also apparent when we consider accompanying the faith journey of the children and young people in our schools. Such an opportunity for partnering with families must be considered in connection with the parish, particularly through the rich connections found in Sacramental programs, school feast days and other significant liturgical celebrations.

As Catholic education communities we support and partner with families and parents²⁸ in their primary role as a child’s first educator in faith, inviting parents into this journey with the parish. We walk together to do this whatever the circumstances of their lives, with a practical spirit of compassion, understanding and love. This is the art of accompaniment.²⁹

A community of love in faith and life

“No one can experience the true beauty of life without relating to others, without having real faces to love. This is part of the mystery of authentic human existence. Life exists where there is bonding, communion, fraternity; and life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity.”

(Fratelli Tutti, n. 87)

Catholic schools are gifted with an opportunity to accompany as a community of love in faith and life. This community seeks not to replace the fullness of parish life but be a place of invitation and welcome where this journey might begin anew. For “the Church is called to cooperate with parents, through pastoral initiatives, assisting them in the fulfilment of their educational mission.”³⁰

Fostering of partnerships with families requires the Catholic school community to endeavour to create an atmosphere that reproduces, as far as possible, the warm and intimate atmosphere of family life built upon a common spirit of trust and spontaneity, that promotes the involvement of parents in the life of the Catholic school.

“Love needs time and space; everything else is secondary.”

(Amoris Laetitia, n. 224)



Photo: Mary MacKillop College, Highfields

SIGNS OF VITALITY

This is an important opportunity in realising the evangelising mission of the Church. Schools and families must reach out to one another in communities characterised by welcome, dialogue and accompaniment.

Formation with families in Catholic education is characterised by:³¹

- sharing the story of Jesus³²
- engagement with Scripture
- opportunity for experiences in the contemporary Catholic Church
- respect and relevance for context and culture
- invitation and welcome
- dialogue and accompaniment
- building upon participants' personal story and everyday reality
- further appreciation of co-responsibility
- differentiation according to individual and community needs.

These characteristics can come to life when:

- the Catholic identity and charism of the school are clearly communicated to families from first engagement
- rich and respectful dialogue begins at the moment of enrolment enquiry
- families are invited and welcomed to school liturgy
- faith formation opportunities for staff, where possible, are opened to the whole community
- the principles and practices that inform engagement of parents in other areas of school life and learning are also present in faith formation
- schools encourage and support families in expressing faith at home through opportunities such as lighting a candle in prayer together, blessing their child and visiting nativity scenes, because 'children need symbols, actions and stories'³³
- families are given the opportunity to lead prayer in the school community
- families to participate in whole school community opportunities for prayer throughout the school year
- there are opportunities for intergenerational experiences of faith formation, such as grandparents' day liturgies³⁴
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are actively encouraged to share their culture and spirituality in culturally safe and appropriate ways
- school communities welcome and provide opportunities for faith sharing and dialogue with people from other faith traditions³⁵
- the parish, school communities invite families to receive the Sacraments
- faith formation opportunities and prayer are incorporated in community meetings, particularly for school advisory councils, boards and parents and friends meetings
- opportunities for families to be engaged in social justice and solidarity activities
- parents are engaged in the learning and teaching of Religious Education
- there are intentional opportunities to nurture the relationship between parish and school, and parishes support their schools in these important endeavours.³⁶ This might include the parish connecting with the school community and the school community celebrating Mass together with the parish
- the school community provides space and hospitality for shared faith formation opportunities with parents, families, students, staff and parish
- schools collaborate with one another and their associated parishes in providing faith formation opportunities for families.

QUESTIONS WE MIGHT ASK

As school communities work together in supporting children and young people exploring their faith, we offer these questions as a resource for the evaluation of current practice and the discovery of imaginative responses and new opportunities for school communities.

- How does our school community welcome families?
- How does the school community share and realise the mutual expectations, hopes and dreams for the children and young people in their care?
- How do we have respectful and fruitful relationships with our families?
- How does our school community describe positive relationships with families?
- How is the family/school relationship nurtured? Who takes responsibility for nurturing these relationships?
- How does the school community listen to the experience of families?
- How does the school community seek feedback from families?
- What do families value about their interaction with their Catholic school? What might we learn from this?
- How is the school attentive to the variety of needs of families in the formation of their faith and connections with the faith community?
- How do schools ensure welcome in opportunities for faith formation?
- Is family engagement in faith formation a priority in the school strategic plan?
- How does our school community share the story of Jesus?
- To what extent does the school community encourage being an engaged and active Catholic?
- How are we connected as a Church community, with our parish and broader Church?
- How do we support families in a faith and pastoral context in times of illness, grief and loss?
- How do we engage with those on the periphery?
- In remaining respectful of our diversity, how do we continue to ensure our distinctive Catholic Identity?

CONCLUSION AND INVITATION

“Catholic schools are a jewel in the crown of the Catholic Church in Australia... Alongside families and parishes they are the Church’s principal meeting point with young people. They are integral to the Church’s mission of transmitting the faith to the next generation. It is there that many young people encounter Christ, intensify their knowledge and love of God, and are formed as future contributors to Australian society.”

(ACBC, 2021, 200 Years Young, p. 2)

For two hundred years Catholic schools have continued their commitment to the faith formation of children and young people exercised in partnership with families and parish communities.

The National Catholic Education Commission invites all Catholic school communities to reflect on and share this document as a resource for evaluating current practice. The document may also assist Catholic school communities to bring renewed vitality to our commitment to supporting families to nurture the precious gift of faith in a world yearning for the hope that Jesus can bring.



Prayer to the Holy Family

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate
the splendour of true love;
to you we turn with trust.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel
and small domestic churches.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
may families never again experience
violence, rejection and division;
may all who have been hurt or scandalized
find ready comfort and healing.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
make us once more mindful
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God's plan.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
Graciously hear our prayer.
Amen

Prayer from Amoris Laetitia

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