Principals in Parish Primary Schools
A Parish Perspective

(A Sub-project within The Queensland Leadership Succession Project.)
This Sub-project was sponsored by:
A coalition of 18 Queensland Catholic Education Authorities, with coordination through the Queensland Catholic Education Commission

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was financially supported by a group of ‘funding partners’ within Queensland Catholic Education (see Appendix One). The ‘Principals in Parish Primary Schools – a Parish Perspective’ project was one of six sub-projects within the ‘Queensland Leadership Succession’ project. This ‘umbrella’ project was overseen by a Management Group consisting of:

Garry Everett – Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC)
Dianne Reardon – QCEC
Pam Varcoe – Brisbane Catholic Education
Ron Holmes – Brisbane Catholic Education
John Lyons – Rockhampton Catholic Education
Margaret Hendriks – Toowoomba Catholic Education
Dr Gayle Spry – Australian Catholic University

The members of this group met face-to-face throughout the life of the project as well as consistently collaborating via email and teleconference on all issues related to the progression of the research. The contribution of their individual and combined knowledge and experience, their cooperation and their willingness to make themselves available within busy schedules are all acknowledged with appreciation.

A specific Reference Group was appointed to the sub-project ‘Principals in Parish Primary Schools – a Parish Perspective’. Membership of this Group was as follows:

Sr Cecilia Anning rsj – Faith and Life Vicariate, Brisbane Archdiocese
Vicki Tanzer – Brisbane Catholic Education
Garry Everett – QCEC
Dianne Reardon – QCEC
Fr William O’Shea – Priest, Brisbane Archdiocese
Dr Gayle Spry – Australian Catholic University.

(Sr Cate O’Brien rsc, Pastoral Associate, joined the Group for the final drafting of the report.)

Reference Group members are acknowledged and thanked for their generous contribution of time and expertise.
**INTRODUCTION**

**Rationale and Background**

This project is contextualized within three other research projects.

The research project, titled *Principals in Parish Primary Schools – a Parish Perspective* is situated within a growing body of research in respect to leadership succession within education (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1998; Olsen, 1999; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2001; Sacha & Preston, 2002; Lacy, 2001) Concern for leadership succession in Catholic education prompted the commissioning of Australian Catholic University (ACU) to carry out research in NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. This research sought information on what would encourage suitably qualified people to apply for Principalship in Catholic schools and what would dissuade them from such a career move. When the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) considered the outcomes of the ACU research it was decided that, rather than replicate this research in Queensland, a proactive approach would be adopted and the Queensland Leadership Succession Project came into being. This research project consisted of 6 sub-projects each one addressing an issue related to the ‘dissuaders’ identified in the ACU research. The *Principals in Parish Primary Schools – a Parish Perspective* is the 6th and the last, of the sub-projects, to be implemented.

This sub-project addresses the issue of the changing relationship between school and parish. In designing the project, the QCEC decided that it would be appropriate to extend a prior research project carried out by the Australian Catholic Primary Principals’ Association (ACPPA) titled *Principals in Parishes – A study into the complexity of the role of the Catholic Primary School Principal as a member of the Parish Community*. (2005) The ACPPA research sought to gain an understanding of the role of the primary school principal in the parish from the perspective of principals. At the same time, this ACPPA research recognized that the perspectives of principals represented only one aspect of the issue, and its final report recommended that future research focus on the perspectives of parish personnel and employing authorities. Consequently the QCEC
sub-project sought to gain an understanding of the expectations of the role from a **parish perspective**.

**Project Management**
In its development stage the project was managed by the Queensland Leadership Succession Management Group. The implementation of the project and the construction of the final report were overseen by the Project Reference Group. The people involved in this management structure are acknowledged in Appendix 1.

**Methodology**
Influenced by the research paradigm of social constructivism (the major tenents of which are that human beings construct rather than discover knowledge and that social interaction and interpretation are key components of this process) the major data collection method within the project was the conducting of group interviews with Pastoral Parish Council members. These interviews were structured around three research questions.

Q1  **Given that the core role of the Principal of a Catholic school is the leadership of that school, what reasonable expectations do you have of the role of a Catholic school principal within your parish community?**

Q2  (a)  **Thinking of the future – what changes do you expect to see in the way your parish operates?**

   (b)  **How might these changes impact on the principal’s relationship with the parish community?**

Q3  **What suggestions do you have for building into the future, a positive and mutually supportive relationship between principal and parish?**

After a group discussion written individual responses to Questions 1 and 2 were collected along with a written group response to Question 3.

Parish Leaders were offered the options of an individual interview or joining the group interview. If they opted to join the group interview they were asked to identify their written response so that data from leaders could be analysed in comparison to that of Pastoral Council members. Such analyses in fact showed that there was no significant difference between the responses from the two groups.
Catholic Education Office Leadership Teams were offered the opportunity of a group interview. Three Leadership Teams participated in such an interview.

The data collected was qualitative in nature. The intent of the project was not to look for definitive answers but to provide information that would, together with data from the APCCA research, guide the development of a framework of ‘ideas for discussion’ that would assist parish and school leaders in negotiating and clarifying role expectations. Such data is often called indicative data as it points to the direction for action without prescribing or recommending what that action should be.

**Data Statistics**

Data was collected in 21 parishes from the following people:

**Rockhampton Diocese:**
- 25 Parish Pastoral Council Members
- 3 Parish Leaders
- 9 CEO Leadership Team Members

**Brisbane Archdiocese:**
- 29 Parish Pastoral Council Members
- 6 Parish Leaders (1 lay Parish Pastoral Director)

**Toowoomba Diocese:**
- 20 Parish Pastoral Council Members
- 3 Parish Leaders (1 lay Pastoral Leader)
- 6 CEO Leadership Team Members.

**Townsville Diocese:**
- 41 Parish Pastoral Council Members
- 6 Parish Leaders (2 lay leaders)
- 4 CEO Leadership Team Members.

**TOTAL** – 115 Parish Pastoral Council Members; 21 Parish Leaders; 19 CEO Leadership Team Members.
FORMAT OF THE REPORT

The findings of the project are presented under the headings of the three questions that were used in all interviews. This account is followed by “LEARNINGS FROM THE RESEARCH”. The report then culminates with “DIALOGUE FRAMING ISSUES”, that it is hoped will be of assistance to school and parish leadership in building into the future a mutually supportive relationship.

Interviewees were strongly in agreement in their responses to the three interview questions. The data in this report should therefore, in general, be read as representing the majority opinion of all groups of interviewees in all interview localities. When there is an exception to this situation it is acknowledged in the text of the report.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS


Public practice of faith
The major expectation expressed by both parish leaders and Pastoral Council members was that the principal be “a practicing Catholic”. To most this meant attending Mass every Sunday. In rural parishes with one Catholic primary school and one Catholic church, where that attendance took place was not an issue – the principal was a parishioner and weekend worship was in the parish church. In situations where the principal was not a parishioner of the parish in which his or her school was located, the general view was that it was an unreasonable expectation that principals would leave a ‘home’ parish to worship regularly in the school’s parish. It was considered, however, a reasonable expectation that they have some presence at weekend masses in the school’s parish. It was suggested that this could be on occasions involving students from the school, e.g. monthly children masses; on occasions significant to the parish, e.g.
feast days; participating in parish roster systems, e.g. bi/tri-monthly commitment to the reading roster. The important thing seemed to be that the principal was ‘visible’ in the life of the school’s parish. Such involvement was very much seen as a subject for negotiation between the principal and parish leadership.

The term ‘active parishioner’ was frequently used to describe the expectation that principals would be more than ‘mass goers”. It was expected that they would use their talents in the service of the parish to which they belonged, as would any other ‘active parishioner’. Participation in the liturgical life of the parish was particularly mentioned.

While it was frequently said that no more should be expected of Catholic school principals than was expected of other parish members it was acknowledged that parishioners with the personal resources of principals – e.g. relative youth, education, commitment to faith practices, formal faith formation, theology, leadership qualities, high status employment within Church – were rare and would be expected, rightly or wrongly, to exercise leadership within a parish.

Quote from Parish Priest: *(I expect) that they have a realistic appreciation of their position as a resource person in the parish.*

A minority view to the one expressed above re active parish participation was one that proposed that the principal was “up front”, “on show” in the school leadership role and that as a parishioner he or she deserved the right to relax and just be “one of the crowd”.

**Exercise school leadership as a parish and broader church ministry**

There was consistent support for the role of principal of a Catholic school to be understood as a key leadership role within the ministry of the parish and of the broader church and for parish leadership to actively support the principal in fulfilling this church/parish ministry.

Respondents understood and supported the reality of the core role of the Catholic school principal being the leadership of the school. Because they considered the school as part of the parish they held expectations that such leadership would be exercised in supporting the life of the parish. It was therefore expected that Catholic school
principals would encourage staff, students and parents to be part of the liturgical, pastoral and social life of the parish.

Some groups saw the principal as having an exceptional opportunity to support the evangelizing mission of the broader church and held the expectation that the principal would take this responsibility as being inherent in the role.

Quote from Parish Council member: *(I expect principals) to communicate to the school community various aspects of the life of the parish, encouraging staff/families to participate more in broader parish life and not simply the “school church”.*

**Liaison role between parish and school communities**

It was expected that the principal would encourage and enable a close and mutually supportive relationship between parish and school. Communication was seen as key in establishing and maintaining this relationship and the principal was expected, either directly or by delegation, to organize, monitor and maintain strategies to promote a steady two way flow of information and participation. In order to fulfill the expected liaison role it was expected that the principal would have a sound knowledge of the parish, (e.g. mission; history; structure; culture) and that he or she would have a positive attitude towards parish/school unity. It was also expected that he or she would be able to clearly articulate to the parish the purpose of their own role, the mission and purpose of Catholic education in general, and of the parish Catholic school in particular.

Quote from Parish Council member: *(I expect) that the principal will meet with us – the Parish Pastoral Team – on a regular basis. There is a sharing of ideas and this makes way for mutual support in all our ministries to the whole parish.*

**A positive relationship with Parish Leadership**

It was expected that there would be regular and frequent dialogue between the principal and parish leader. The practices of ad hoc “as is needed” meetings and regular scheduled meetings seem to be roughly equally common, but in many parishes where meetings were ad hoc interviewees suggested that scheduling regular meetings would be a better practice. In no parishes using regular meetings was it suggested that an ad hoc practice be implemented.
The important role that personality played in establishing and maintaining a positive interpersonal relationship between principal and parish leader was recognized. There was an expectation that principals would be people with the interpersonal skills and dispositions necessary to build positive relationships.

Most interviewees believed that the principal should be a member of the Parish Pastoral Council (or its alternative) but there was a reasonably strong minority view that the principal need not be an actual council member, but should attend on a regular basis to inform on school matters. It was recognized that as lay leadership in parishes increased it was important that the principal establish a strong dialogue not only with ‘the’ parish leader but also with lay led parish decision-making structures.

Quote from Parish Priest: (I expect) that a healthy open dialogue exists between principal and parish leader and that each seeks to offer the other support.

Parish support for the principal
Even though the interview questions were firmly focused on the role of the Catholic school principal in the parish community in almost every group interview, after a time of discussion, the concept of ‘mutual support’ would be introduced. There was a strong feeling that there should be an expectation that the parish would support the principal in his or her school leadership role and that expectations expressed of the principal in relation to ‘communication’, ‘liaison’ etc were mutual responsibilities for principal and parish.
Q 2  PART 1  THINKING OF THE FUTURE – WHAT CHANGES DO YOU EXPECT TO SEE IN THE WAY YOUR PARISH OPERATES?

PART 2  HOW MIGHT THESE CHANGES IMPACT ON THE PRINCIPAL’S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARISH COMMUNITY?

As with most people, when asked to think of future changes, interviewees within this project named ‘change’ in terms of trends that were already present in varying degrees and which they saw accelerating in the future. In group interviews it was obvious that some parishes were embracing these changes with skill and optimism while others were simply overwhelmed by them and quite pessimistic about the future. This optimistic/pessimistic divide was also present among individuals within groups. It is certain that there will be a wide variance in the way the same change impacts on the way particular parishes operate and in the relationship they pursue with the parish Catholic school. A summary of ‘Changes’ and ‘Impacts’ are set out below.

CHANGE:
There will be fewer priests, this will lead to a number of changes in the way parishes operate: e.g. There will be more lay leadership in parishes; the nature of the priests role will become more focused on its liturgical aspects; there will be amalgamation of parishes, making the concept of parish a canonical one but not a lived reality; there will be more diversity among parishes as some embrace change with rigor and others struggle to move forward.

IMPACT:
It is likely that lay involvement and decision making in parishes will be through a team structure. This may mean that principals will need to interact with a number of ‘leadership groups’ rather than one ‘parish leader’. It is possible that members of these teams will not have the understanding of Catholic schools that a parish priest could be expected to have, making collaboration more difficult for the principal. It is also possible that there may not be effective coordination among parish teams, again making the principal’s liaison role more difficult.
In an amalgamated situation there could be 3 or 4 Catholic schools within the boundaries of the new ‘parish’. This gives the principal another group to collaborate with (i.e. principals of ‘parish’ Catholic schools).

With limited access to an identifiable ‘church leader’ in a parish people within both the Catholic and broader community might turn to the principal as a visible leader of a church agency on matters not directly related to education.

Limited access to an ordained liturgical leader may increase the need for the principal to become such a leader.

**CHANGE:**
There will be more parish priests from other cultures.

**IMPACT:**
The principal may become the ‘broker’ between cultures.

**CHANGE:**
There will be an increased sense of the insecurity that comes from change and a lack of clarity about the future. Some parish community members will be going through a process of grieving for the “way things were”.

**IMPACT:**
In his or her liaison role the principal may have to deal with this insecurity/grief. Skills and knowledge in the field of change theory, or other relevant areas, may need to be acquired.

**CHANGE:**
The profile of the parish worshipping community is changing. It is becoming fewer in number and the average age of members is increasing. As these changes continue it is probable that, as a group, practicing parishioners will be more traditional and conservative in their view of church.

The profile of the Catholic school community is changing. The proportion of non-Catholics is increasing and among those who are Catholic the proportion of people who do not practice is increasing.
**IMPACT:**
The change in the profile of parish and school community members will mean that it will be more difficult to connect the two communities. The principal may be under more pressure to have the school teach ‘the basics of the faith’ and to produce ‘practicing Catholics’ judged by the criteria of weekend Mass attendance.

It will be essential that a relationship of trust be built and maintained between principal and parish.

The change in the profile of Catholic school community members may increase the principal’s responsibility to ensure that the school is identifiably Catholic, that its life is permeated by a Catholic ethos and that Catholic values are taught and witnessed to even when they are counter cultural to those of the broader society.

For many school community members contact with the Catholic school will be the only contact with the Catholic church that they choose to have. As a person who shares in the church’s mission of evangelization the principal may have an increased responsibility to use the opportunities that his/her leadership position offers to fulfill this responsibility.

**CHANGE:**
There is a continuing change in the balance of resources between parish and school – parishes have, and will increasingly have, fewer material and human resources. By comparison, schools with substantial government funding, seem well resourced. There may be pressure for a new pattern in the sharing of resources (e.g. no longer parish to school, but now school to parish)

**IMPACT:**
The principal may be under pressure to negotiate an equitable agreement that meets Government and School Authority requirements and the needs of the parish community of which the school is a part.

**CHANGE:**
Technology will offer the opportunity to move beyond geographic boundaries and to involve people in different ways. The change in this area is continuous and almost ‘unknowable’. 
**IMPACT:**
In his/her interactions with the parish community and the parish leader the principal may not be dealing with face-to-face situations – a new skills-set may be necessary to deal with a new situation.

**CHANGE:**
The church’s commitment to ecumenism will increase.

**IMPACT:**
The principal may need to be well informed on issues of both philosophy and practice in this area. He or she may have to play a role in informing others.

**CHANGE:**
Parish activities and church attendance will focus more on ‘special/big’ events that are of popular interest rather than simply on Sunday Mass.

**IMPACT:**
As an evangelizer the principal may have increased opportunities to meet and work with people where they are interested – e.g. social justice issues, pastoral care work; the sacrament of baptism etc.

**CHANGE:**
The expectation of the principal’s “Catholicity” has broadened – for example it is expected that as a ‘good Catholic’ the principal is ecologically aware; and an advocate for global sustainability etc.

**IMPACT:**
Principals may be the carriers of the Catholic tradition. They may need formation opportunities so that they can ‘tell the story’ and relate it to the signs of our times.
Q 3. WHAT SUGGESTIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR BUILDING INTO THE FUTURE, A POSITIVE AND MUTUALLY SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRINCIPAL AND PARISH COMMUNITY.

If an idea was mentioned at least twice it has been listed under this question heading. Suggestions are very roughly ordered in terms of how many times they were proposed. In some cases there may be an obvious contradiction or overlap among suggestions, this is simply a consequence of their largely unedited presentation. It is important that it is understood that these suggestions are presented only as an ‘ideas resource’ from which report recipients can extract any suggestions that they believe may be useful in their particular situation.

Suggestions from Interviewees

☐ Use parish and school newsletters to promote two-way communication. The use of newsletter for this purpose was discussed within nearly every Council interview. It seems that it is common practice for the school newsletter to be left in the parish church but it is not common practice for the parish newsletter to be distributed within the school. Two related suggestions were: Produce a joint newsletter with an inclusive title such as “Newsletter of St Patrick’s Catholic Community”; Produce a “Twin” newsletter, i.e. one newsletter becomes an insert within the other, with the insert reversed depending on whether it was to be handed out at the school or the church.

☐ Ensure that in pastoral planning the school is recognized as an agency of the parish and that school leadership is recognized as a mission within the parish. Promote the notion of parish and school as a unit.

☐ Diocesan leadership to develop, as a resource for local parish communities, a discussion/reflection process whereby principals can identify and negotiate reasonable expectations of parish involvement outside the school ministry.
 Ensure that parish and school leadership members have a clear understanding of their own and each other’s roles.

 Organize regular and formal meetings between school and parish leadership teams.

 Organize regular shared events where parishioners and school community parents come together as a parish community.

 Affirm in Principal Role Descriptions a responsibility to promote a positive, open relationship between principal and school staff and parish leadership. It may be that in more remote areas principals are invited to accept a parish community leadership role as part of their package.

 Include principals as ex officio members of parish leadership teams (or their equivalent).

 Make provision for a parish representative (other than a parent) on the school board (or equivalent body).

 Any new member of the school leadership team is formally welcomed by parish leaders and parishioners e.g. the person is welcomed and invited to speak at a Pastoral Council meeting; welcomed at weekend masses; profiled in the parish newsletter.

 Any new person appointed to a parish leadership position (e.g. parish priest, Pastoral Associate; Pastoral Council Chair) is formally welcomed by the school leadership team and by members of the school community (e.g. invited to speak at a P&F and/or School Board meeting; introduced, with a short synopsis of their role, at a school assembly; meeting with school leadership and staff in a social setting; profiled in the school newsletter).

 New principals to have an induction session with the Parish Pastoral Council Chairperson/new Chairpersons to have an induction session with the school principal.
□ Parish and school jointly sponsor and deliver the sacramental program and adult education programs.

□ A planning session between school and parish leadership to identify how a positive mutually supporting relationship can be built and maintained to be held annually. The process should ensure that there is shared understanding of the characteristics that might mark such a relationship. The use of an external facilitator would enhance this process.

□ Provide opportunity for key leadership personnel (school and parish) to acquire skills and knowledge in areas such as – grieving rituals; change theory; group formation; ‘win/win’ negotiating; shared ministry.

□ Limit the time that can be served in parish roles so that people can take them on knowing that there is a defined period to their service.

□ Teach parish history as part of the school’s RE curriculum – involve suitable parishioners as ‘living resources’ in the development and teaching of such a unit of work.

LEARNINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

□ A spirit of good-will permeated every group and individual interview. Parish leaders and Pastoral Parish Council members, who participated in this project, had a clear understanding that the core role of the principal of a Catholic school was the leadership of that school and they saw themselves as having a responsibility to support the principal in this role, which by many was conceptualized as a parish ministry. The notion of ‘a community of communities’ was how most interviewees understood the relationship of Catholic school and parish – i.e. the Catholic school was an identifiable community within the parish community. Parish leadership was clearly committed to building a ‘positive and mutually supportive’ relationship between the principal as leader of the school community and the parish community within which that community resided.
Despite the stated view that a ‘reasonable’ expectation was that the principal worship in the parish of his or her choice there is little doubt that most respondents held a preferred position that the principal worship in the school’s parish. The holding of this position was mostly justified on the grounds that the principal was a person of influence to parents and students and their ‘visible’ witness to practice was extremely important. Active membership of the parish community within which the school was situated was seen as the most effective way of giving this witness. The fact that in all cases interviewees were willing to move from this ‘preferred’ position to a situation of ‘reasonable visibility’ that was negotiated, was a reflection of the spirit of good-will spoken of earlier.

During interviews two issues that present a dilemma (i.e. a situation requiring a choice between difficult or undesirable alternatives) were consistently discussed. Almost universally interviewees were sympathetic to the tremendous workloads that principals carried and were conscious that the range of legal, financial, accountability and social pressures were likely to continue to increase and make the role even more difficult in the future. They were also acutely aware of the increasing workloads that were being asked of parish leaders, ordained and lay, at a time when their numbers were decreasing and their average age increasing. The personnel and financial resources of parishes, particularly small rural parishes were diminishing and were likely to continue to do so. In many parishes, especially those located in rural areas, Pastoral Council members admitted that expectations of the Catholic school principal in terms of lay parish leadership would increase despite their acknowledgement of the injustice and impracticality of such an expectation.
CONCLUSION

Within the 21 parishes that participated in this project there was a very positive view of Catholic schools and of the principals heading those schools. Interviewees were eager to support a collaborative relationship between school leadership and parish leadership and they appreciated that the purpose of this project was to identify at least a basic list of issues that could frame conversations that would facilitate the building of such relationships.

It is hoped that those people who have an intimate connection with the issues raised will take the findings of the report and work with them to achieve some practical outcomes – e.g. the development of a resource which would provide a process for negotiating local duty statements and expectations within each school and parish context; the presentation of workshops/discussions based on the findings at priest/principal in-services/meetings.

Like all such reports this report will only ‘live’ when its findings move from the written page to human action.
APPENDIX ONE

FUNDING PARTNERS
The Queensland Leadership Succession Project
Funding Partners

Queensland Catholic Education Commission
Brisbane Catholic Education, Archdiocese of Brisbane
Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Toowoomba
Diocesan Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Rockhampton
Catholic Education Services, Diocese of Cairns
Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Townsville
Edmund Rice Education
Downlands Sacred Heart College, Toowoomba
St Ursula’s College, Toowoomba
St Ursula’s College, Yeppoon
All Hallows’ School, Brisbane
Brigidine College, Indooroopilly
Corpus Christi College, Nundah
Loreto College, Coorparoo
Lourdes Hill College, Hawthorne
Marist College Ashgrove, Ashgrove
Mt Alvernia College, Kedron
Padua College, Kedron