

---

## THE QUIET REVOLUTION IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLING IN AUSTRALIA

KELVIN CANAVAN, FMS

*Catholic Education Office, Sydney, Australia*

*This brief overview of changes in Catholic schooling in Australia over the past 30 years identifies four key factors—the smooth transition from religious to lay staff, the reintroduction of government financial assistance, the development of strong Catholic Education Offices, and the steady increase in enrollments—to explain the robust state of Catholic schooling in Australia.*

Seventy years ago the Sisters of Charity employed my mother as a Catholic high school teacher in Sydney. She was 16 years old. She had graduated from the same school the previous year. It must have been a struggle, because she taught all the subjects in grade 8 except for religious education. She was paid about one dollar a week and remained for five years before moving into other employment.

I began teaching at Parramatta Marist Brothers in 1960, after one year of teacher training. My first class consisted of 60 boys in grade 4. I was fortunate to be in a new elementary classroom that accommodated only 60 students. At this time, many of the nuns and brothers taught in much larger classrooms into which 80 or even more students were crowded.

A history of Catholic schooling in Australia during the past 30 years is still to be written, but after reading Walch's (1997) article in *Catholic Education*, I was prompted to sketch a very broad outline of some developments on that front. In many respects, the more recent stories of Catholic schooling in the United States and Australia have unfolded quite differently. Catholic schools in Australia have changed dramatically in the past three decades. The replacement of nuns and brothers by lay teachers, the reintroduction of government financial assistance, the emergence of large Catholic

Education Offices, and the record level of enrollments have had a profound impact on the shape of Catholic education.

## RELIGIOUS TO LAY STAFF

From 1900 until the early 1950s, Catholic schools were staffed almost entirely by religious, and many students graduated from Catholic schools having been taught exclusively by nuns and brothers. But the post-war population increase and the strong demand for places in Catholic schools saw more lay teachers joining the religious in the staffing of Catholic schools. In 1965, there were 3,654 religious women and men teaching in Catholic schools in the State of New South Wales (NSW). By 1996, only 354 religious remained, and many of these were working in a part-time or support capacity rather than teaching.

Table 1 illustrates the changing nature of Catholic school staffing in NSW and the gradual replacement of religious by lay teachers, who have filled the majority of teaching positions since 1970.

**Table 1**  
**Teachers in New South Wales Catholic Schools**  
**1965-1996**

	Religious	Lay	% Religious
1965	3,654	1,628	69%
1970	3,240	3,258	50%
1975	2,530	5,343	32%
1980	1,809	8,397	18%
1985	1,168	11,688	9%
1990	707	13,040	5%
1995	412	14,311	2.8%
1996	354	14,502	2.4%

Source: Catholic Education Commission, New South Wales

The rapid increase in the number of lay teachers can be attributed to a gradual reduction in class sizes and to students staying in school longer, as well as to the withdrawal of religious from the schools. In 1970 the average class size in Catholic schools in NSW was 40 in the elementary (K-6) schools and 36 in high (7-12) schools. Twenty-five years later, average class size halved. Despite these fairly dramatic changes, the transition from a religious to a lay teaching force in Catholic schools has been remarkably smooth.

The past 30 years have seen a decline in the membership of religious institutes—not only in Australia, but also in many other Christian countries. The

number of young people entering novitiates has decreased, while the number of those choosing to leave religious life has increased. However, many who left religious life or decided not to enter the novitiate have gone on to play important roles in Catholic schooling.

To help ensure a steady supply of teachers opting to teach in Catholic schools, Catholic Teacher Training Colleges were established and subsequently amalgamated and developed into Australian Catholic University. Female lay teachers for elementary schools were the first to receive training when the Sydney Catholic Teachers' College was established in 1958. These young women were seen as sacrificing themselves for a worthy cause (Luttrell, 1996). In the early years, lay teachers accepted employment in Catholic schools despite the low rates of pay and uncertain career opportunities. It was not until the first Industrial Award for teachers in Catholic and other church schools in NSW was implemented in 1973 that pay scales for teachers in Catholic schools became comparable with those for teachers employed in public schools. A superannuation scheme for staff working in Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Sydney was introduced in 1981.

Today, the Australian Catholic University is part of the national system and is funded along lines similar to other universities in the country. About half of the beginning teachers employed in Sydney's Catholic schools in recent years are graduates of Australian Catholic University, which has seven campuses in the three eastern states and in the Australian Capital Territory. Very few teachers leave Catholic schools to work in public schools. However, each year a significant number of teachers move from public to Catholic schools. In 1996, 16.3% of all teachers employed in Catholic schools in NSW were non-Catholic.

The leadership transition at the level of principal, which began in the early 1970s, has also been smooth. In 1972, all Catholic schools in NSW had a religious principal. In 1996, just 19% of schools had religious principals, with even more retiring in the past year.

Lay principals have availed themselves of the opportunity for leadership development and today, as a group, are very well qualified academically. The development of lay leadership has been a priority for Catholic Education Offices, religious institutes, and Australian Catholic University. The Sydney Catholic Education Office, for example, has provided all principals appointed since 1975 with a variety of leadership and renewal programs. This training is ongoing and continues until a principal is close to retirement.

## **GOVERNMENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

The transition from religious to lay teachers and principals was greatly facilitated by the reintroduction in the late 1960s of government financial assistance to Catholic schools in all Australian states. Since the Education Acts of

the late 1870s, Catholic schools had struggled without financial assistance from governments, and the employment of lay teachers placed a heavy financial burden on schools and parishes. The six state governments and two territory governments in Australia have the primary responsibility for the education of the country's 3,143,015 (1996) school students. The Commonwealth government, as the major source of funding, exercises considerable influence in school and tertiary education.

The 1960s saw a marked increase in the campaign for educational justice for parents with children in Catholic schools. Politicians from major political parties accepted invitations to speak at public meetings organized by Catholic parents, while the bishops issued statements and encouraged the lobbying of political parties and individual politicians. The most dramatic action of the campaign was the Goulburn school strike in 1962. The parents of 2,000 Catholic school students voted to close their schools and enroll their children in the public schools. Although called off after a week, the strike "gave momentum to the National State Aid campaign and to Catholic lobbying of politicians" (Luttrell, 1996, p. 39).

The breakthrough for Catholic schools in NSW came in 1969, when the state government introduced grants of \$27 for each elementary school student and \$36 for each high school student attending a non-government school. At about the same time, the other states and territories began to provide some financial assistance to students in all non-government schools. Initially the grants were modest, but they were sufficient to keep the schools open. In 1970 the Commonwealth government also began to fund grants to assist with the ongoing funding of non-government schools in Australia. Following a national inquiry in 1973 into the needs of schools, Commonwealth funding for Catholic schools increased significantly.

In 1981, a group known as the D.O.G.S. (Defense of Government Schools) organization challenged the constitutional validity of financial assistance to non-government schools by the Commonwealth. By a 6-1 majority, the High Court of Australia dismissed the challenge.

These grants have progressively increased, and now provide the bulk of the annual budget for parish elementary and diocesan high schools (see Table 2). Government grants are disbursed according to need and to the level of student enrollment.

An unanticipated consequence of the reintroduction of government financial support was less pressure on religious to remain in education. Religious men and women were able to move into other works, knowing that sufficient funds would be forthcoming from governments to employ additional lay teachers in Catholic schools.

During the 1960s, the Commonwealth provided some financial assistance for the building of high school libraries and laboratories. Since the mid-1970s, many Catholic schools have been built or refurbished with assistance

from the Commonwealth. Currently the Commonwealth Government is providing about 20% of total school building costs. The remaining 80% comes from parents and parishioners.

**Table 2**  
**Combined Commonwealth and State Annual Grants (A\$)**  
**for Students in Catholic Schools\* in New South Wales**  
**1967-1997**

	K-6 Student	7-12 Student
1967	\$0	\$0
1969	\$27	\$36
1979	\$479	\$745
1989	\$1,568	\$2,390
1997	\$2,678	\$3,970

\*Commonwealth Category 10

Source: Catholic Education Office, Sydney Archives

Note: A\$1=US\$.67 (April 4, 1998)

The advent of diocesan development funds and the NSW State government's interest subsidy scheme have facilitated a major building program for Catholic schools over recent years. Many parishes and diocesan schools have long-term loan commitments for up to 20 years, and most families are contributing to a building fund.

While these grants enable parents to exercise choice in education, that choice comes at considerable cost. School fees in NSW Catholic schools have continued to rise as Catholic parents maintain their effort. The tuition cost of sending a child to a Catholic parish elementary school in Sydney is generally about A\$600-A\$700 (US\$402-US\$469) per annum. The senior high school (Grades 11-12) costs are about A\$1,200-A\$1,500 (US\$804-US\$1,005) per annum. Family discounts apply, and it is archdiocesan policy that no child from a Catholic family should ever be excluded because of the inability of parents to pay tuition fees.

Government assistance to students in Catholic systemic schools in NSW is less than 70% of that expended on students in public schools. While this funding differential places considerable strain on Catholic school communities, there is a realization that the arrangements in Australia are better than those existing in most, if not all, other countries. To maintain widespread community support for non-government school funding, the leadership of Catholic education must skillfully manage the occasional debate in the press on the funding of non-government schools.

## CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICES

Other significant developments in Catholic schooling have been the emergence of strong Catholic Education Offices in each diocese as well as State and National Education Commissions. Catholic education is the responsibility of the 28 diocesan bishops and the religious institutes which own and operate independent or "non-systemic" schools. Each diocese has a Catholic Education Office which provides a variety of leadership and support services to Catholic schools.

Before 1965, Catholic schools in Sydney were relatively independent. Each school raised its own funds and paid its own lay teachers. In response to a financial crisis, a decision was made in 1965 to annually pool all financial resources and liabilities from parish elementary and diocesan high schools, and to pay teachers' salaries and stipends for religious from a common fund. The Catholic Education Office in Sydney was made responsible for the management of this new system of schools.

All 28 dioceses in Australia established systems along lines similar to those in Sydney. The resultant sharing of resources and liabilities has ensured the survival of many schools that would otherwise have closed. In the Archdiocese of Sydney, for example, there are currently 151 schools in the system with a shared budget of A\$260 million (US\$174.2 million). About 30% of these schools draw more from the budget (principally teacher salaries) than they contribute by way of tuition fees and government grants. Most of these schools would close without the support of the system.

The growth of the Catholic Education Offices was facilitated by the decision of governments to deal with system authorities rather than with individual schools. The disbursement of government funds to schools in accordance with government policy and program guidelines became the responsibility of the Catholic Education Offices. These offices were held accountable by the government for expenditure of the considerable funds flowing to Catholic systemic schools. (Independent or private Catholic schools dealt directly with government authorities.)

The Catholic Education Offices also filled the vacuum created by the withdrawal of religious, and most of the Offices assumed responsibility for the employment of lay staff in systemic schools. As a consequence of the NSW Education Reform Act (1990), the 11 Catholic Education Offices in NSW are now responsible for the quality assurance processes that lead to government registration and certification of Catholic parish elementary schools and diocesan high schools.

The Catholic Education Commission of NSW, which was established in 1974, communicates with the state and national governments on behalf of the 11 diocesan systems in the state and the independent Catholic schools which are operated by religious institutes. The Commission in each of the six states

and two territories plays a vital role in negotiating the funding of Catholic schools, and works closely with the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) in Canberra, which represents all Catholic schools at the national level. The Catholic Education Offices, Catholic Education Commissions, and the NCEC play vital roles in supporting and coordinating the work of Catholic schools.

A constant challenge for Catholic Education Offices and Commissions is to provide quality leadership and management without dominating local initiative and ownership. Catholic schools must remain embedded in their local parish and regional school communities.

## ENROLLMENTS

What effect did the change from religious to lay staff have on enrollments? The short answer is none or very little. Enrollments continued to rise as more parents sought places in Catholic schools. In 1965, 185,717 students were enrolled in NSW Catholic schools. By 1996 this number had increased to 218,691 (see Table 3).

**Table 3**  
**Enrollments in Catholic Schools as a Percentage of Total School**  
**Enrollments in New South Wales and Australia**  
**1961-1996**

	New South Wales		Australia	
1961	169,248	21.2%	429,522	19.6%
1965	185,717	21.4%	476,398	19.5%
1971	189,501	19.1%	494,684	17.6%
1981	195,773	19.0%	534,329	17.9%
1991	216,625	20.9%	598,210	19.5%
1995	217,642	20.6%	607,737	19.6%
1996	218,691	20.5%	615,572	19.6%

Source: Catholic Education Commission, New South Wales

Enrollments in Catholic schools at a national level have risen from a low of 17.6% in 1971 to a high of 19.6% in 1996. This figure would be higher if more funds were available for building new classrooms. Some Catholic schools in areas of population growth are unable to enroll all the students seeking places. The gradual increase in Catholic school enrollments has taken place in a period of declining Mass attendance by parents and their sons and daughters (Dixon, 1996; Flynn, 1993).

In 1996, non-Catholic students accounted for 13.6% of the total Catholic school enrollment in NSW. The 1973 non-Catholic enrollment in this state was just 1.3%.

In 1996, 27% of the Australian population was Catholic, a rise of 2.1% since 1961 (see Table 4). Catholics are strongest in Sydney, Melbourne, and Canberra, where they constitute approximately 30% of the population (Hughes, 1997).

**Table 4**  
**Catholics in Australia**

	% of total population
1961	24.9
1971	27.0
1981	26.0
1991	27.3
1996	27.0

Note: The 1996 Australian population was 17,892,423, of which 4,798,950 were Catholic. In 1996 more people identified with Catholicism than with any other religious tradition.

Source: Australian censuses

That Catholic schools in NSW and throughout Australia were able to maintain their enrollment levels while undergoing considerable change is a tribute both to the religious, who handed over their schools in good shape, and to the parents, who were quick to accept lay principals and teachers.

In some ways Catholic schools have come full circle. The early schools in the colony were staffed exclusively by lay teachers who were paid, at least in part, by the colonial government. Then, following the withdrawal of government financial assistance in the 1870s, the Catholic community turned increasingly to nuns and brothers, who provided most of the teaching for the next 80 years. More recently, lay teachers have again responded to the demands of the Catholic community for a comprehensive network of Catholic schools. Lay teachers have once again become the mainstay of Catholic education. These teachers enjoy similar salaries, benefits, and conditions to their colleagues in public schools, thanks to the reintroduction in the late 1960s of government financial assistance to students in all non-government schools.

Another significant aspect of Catholic schooling in the past 30 years has been the enrollment of students of families from non-English-speaking backgrounds. In Sydney systemic schools, about 50% of all students have at least one parent speaking a language other than English. Clearly the new generation of Australian Catholics—coming from countries and regions such as Lebanon, Poland, Korea, the Philippines, Hong Kong, South America, and more recently from Southeast Asia—is continuing the tradition of looking to Catholic

schools for the education of their young. This phenomenon, together with the fact that more non-Catholic families are seeking to enroll their children, would indicate that the strong demand for Catholic schooling will continue in the years ahead.

These four developments—the smooth transition from religious to lay, the reintroduction of government financial assistance, the development of Catholic Education Offices, and the steady increase in enrollments—are very clearly related. Taken together, they explain the robust state of Catholic schooling in Australia.

## REFERENCES

- Catholic Education Commission, New South Wales (1996), *Statistics 1996*. Sydney, AU: Author.
- Dixon, R. (1996). *The Catholics in Australia*. Canberra, AU: Australian Government Printing Service.
- Flynn, M. (1993). *The culture of Catholic schools*. Sydney, AU: St. Paul's.
- Hughes, P. J. (1997). *Religion in Australia facts and figures*. Fairfield, Victoria: Christian Research Association.
- Luttrell, J. (1996). *Worth the struggle: Sydney Catholic schools 1820-1995*, Sydney, AU: Catholic Education Office.
- National Catholic Education Commission. (1996). *School enrollments and trends 1983-1995*. Canberra, AU: Author.
- Walsh, T. (1997). From doubt to affirmation: Reflections on the recent history of Catholic parochial education. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 1(2), 120-129.

*Kelvin Canavan, fms, is the executive director of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Sydney, Australia, and has worked in the Sydney Catholic Education Office since 1968. He is a member of the Catholic Education Commission, NSW and the Schools Committee of the National Catholic Education Commission, and has had extensive involvement with the politics and funding of Catholic education. He is a graduate of both Cornell (M.S.) and the University of San Francisco (Ed.D.). Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Brother Kelvin Canavan, Catholic Education Office, Sydney, PO Box 217, Leichhardt, NSW, 2040, Australia.*

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.