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Catholic schools integral to the mission of the Church

The former secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education has called Catholic schools “one of the primary engines bringing about the desired evangelisation – the missionary option – that Pope Francis has talked about”.

Archbishop J. Michael Miller, currently the Archbishop of Vancouver after his previous post at the Vatican, spoke to Catholic school principals, assistant principals and religious education coordinators from the Archdiocese of Sydney last week. He said Catholic schools are key partners with parishes in the Church’s evangelising mission.

“The Catholic school system is integral to the mission of the Church,” he told Catholic multimedia channel XT3.com.

Archbishop Miller outlined the four-part test he has devised to test how a Catholic school is responding to the evangelisation challenge issued by Pope Francis.

“First, is its educational philosophy grounded in a Christian understanding of the human person?,” he asked.

“Second, does the school community strive to imbue its pupils with a Catholic worldview? Third, does it integrate a vision of faith throughout its whole curriculum, regardless of the particular subject taught? Fourth, does the school foster a spirituality of communion among its stakeholders, namely among its staff and students, as well as the families and parishes it serves?

“I would suggest to you that if Catholic schools are to be effective in their mission of evangelising, then all those involved must understand what is central to the Gospel they are called to proclaim.

“Schools are not ‘Catholic’ because students wear uniforms, are – perhaps – more disciplined, or because religious symbols decorate the walls. They are Catholic because they profess a Name, that Name which is above every other name.”

Archbishop Miller said the historical situation, whereby students in Catholic schools usually came from families where the faith has been taught and passed on, doesn’t reflect the current reality.

“We have to be much more aware of the fact that parental participation in the life of the Church is less among the children attending Catholic schools than it would have been in 1965,” he reflected.

“Catholic schools are more important than they ever were, not less.”

Sydney Catholic Education Office director of religious education and evangelisation Anthony Cleary said Archbishop Miller shared his experience and made educators think deeply.

“He challenged us to reflect upon our own commitment to our identity and mission as Catholic schools and how we will continue to give an authentic witness to this in the years ahead,” Mr Cleary said.


Primary school curriculum getting back to basics

Federal Minister for Education and Training Christopher Pyne says plans to create a “laser-like focus” on literacy and numeracy in primary schools will help to address the recent trend of declining student performance relative to international students.

A revised curriculum, due to be discussed by state and territory education ministers in September, will streamline the content taught in primary schools. History, geography, civics and citizenship, and economics and business will be rolled into a humanities and social sciences subject, according to a report in The Australian.

Calling it “scandalous” that almost 20 per cent of Australian teenagers cannot read or write properly, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority chair Emeritus Professor Steven Schwartz said phonics-based teaching is a proven method.

“You wouldn’t put someone in front of a piano and say, ‘Figure out how to play it’, “ he told The Australian.

“Why sit a child in front of a book and say, ‘Learn to read’? It’s inefficient and silly — some kids will learn to read no matter what you do but for most kids, phonics is the way to go.

“We intend to strengthen the presence of phonics and phonemic awareness in the Australian curriculum for English.”

Mr Pyne told The Australian “This back-to-basics approach is designed to ensure all students across Australia have access to a high-quality curriculum which equips them with what they need to succeed in an increasingly competitive global economy”.