



STEPPING DOWN



There are many challenges facing the Catholic Church as an institution - but demand for its schools in this Diocese does not appear to be one of them. Around Ballarat, waiting lists for schools like St Patrick's College, Damascus College and Loreto College remain long. Since 2012, Audrey Brown has overseen those schools - among sixty-four on her watch - as the Director of Catholic Education in the Ballarat Diocese.

By July this year, she will have stepped down from her post, which covers the largest area of any diocese in the state. With the search for her successor now underway - job adverts went out on February 28 - Ms Brown reflected on her eight years in the post.

She mentioned the successful implementation of new child safe standards - introduced by the state government as a result of the 2013 parliamentary inquiry - as one of her proudest achievements. "Clearly that's work that the schools have done themselves, but we have had a lovely way of partnering with Principals who have done that work well," she said. "Because of the way we have networked, we have really made sure that Catholic schools in the Diocese have led the way on that."

She highlighted the work of John Crowley, who recently left St Patrick's College for St Kevin's College in Melbourne, as someone at the forefront of the change. "John is one of the leaders in our education community who has shown us the way and he has done that with great courage and dignity and determination. In some ways that has made it easier for other leaders who are at his side."

The continuing demand for those schools is perhaps one upshot of how the introduction of those standards has been perceived. By Ms Brown's reckoning, around 18,000 students attend Catholic-run schools in the diocese, a sign that many parents want their children to go to the schools despite past failings.

Since taking up the role, she said she had seen Catholic schools in the diocese undergo fundamental changes. "The environment for education has changed dramatically," Ms Brown said. "We are in a much more regulated environment, there are way more expectations on us as a system of schools."

Acutely aware of the catastrophic failings within some diocesan schools in the past, she said she was determined to address concerns directly during the parliamentary inquiry and the Royal Commission into institutional abuse. "It was a very challenging time. I knew when the Royal Commission commenced there were many survivors of abuse in our community who felt they hadn't been listened to." She said she went to as many days of the Royal Commission hearing in Ballarat as possible to let survivors of sexual abuse know they were now being heard – "and that we were ensuring that it was never going to happen our watch."

She said she remained in touch with several survivors, some of whom she said helped her to grow as a leader and understand how a healthy education community should work. As with Mr Crowley, she has supported the Loud Fence movement and tied ribbons with survivors. "It's so important we have a reminder so this doesn't happen again," she said. She hopes the time would come for a permanent memorial that would arrive and allow the debate over the presence of the ribbons to fade away.

After stepping down in July, she hopes to work as an education consultant and has no plans to leave an area she says it has been a privilege to work in. "There's only so long that one should stay in the role. Eight years is probably about right," she said.

Looking ahead, she believes one of the main challenges for her successor will be working with the introduction of a new company formed to oversee the majority of the schools in the diocese. It already has a board and in January next year, the Diocese of Ballarat Catholic Education Ltd will cover fifty-six of the schools in the Diocese. "We had made the decision to form that company before the regulatory environment had definitely changed," Ms Brown said. "That's a very significant change for us in the Diocese of Ballarat and for Catholic Education in Victoria."

"It will be a different role to the one that I am stepping out of because those .. schools will be part of a company. The new director will be the chief executive officer of the company and so will work with the board to make sure the governance of schools is effective."

She said that ensuring checks and balances were in place without taking the personality out of the schools would be key to the role. "We want the schools to maintain their distinctive characteristics under this new governance but we also want them to be well governed and for the community to trust us as the governing authorities. We actually find that regulation is a way to raise the quality and ensure transparency. However it's an interesting thing to negotiate when you are also working with young people and children and wanting them to have the opportunity to be creative and flourish. So you don't want them to be over-regulated."

Despite challenges in more rural parts of the region - the Diocese includes schools in tiny country towns where congregations and populations have dwindled - student numbers have remained steady. Ms Brown points to the construction of Siena Catholic Primary School out at Lucas and plans to build other schools as a symbol of a strong network. "I think that's a sign that.. we are really creating an environment that families and parents want for their children, and that's really nice to look back on from my time here."

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