

Catholic education director to move on

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 64 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 Friday - Ms Brown spoke to *The Courier* to reflect 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. "Principals that might have been struggling, because of the way we have networked, we have really made sure that Catholic schools in the Diocese have led the way."

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.

The change is one of the fundamental differences since she began the post.

"The environment for education has changed dramati-



STEPPING DOWN: Audrey Brown has been the director of Catholic Education in the diocese for eight years and will hand over the reins in July this year. **Picture:** Kate Healy.

cally," 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 diocese 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 there were now being heard - "and that we were ensuring that it was never going to happen our watch."

Survivors helped her to grow as a leader and understand how a healthy education community should work, she said.

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 hopes the time will

come for a permanent memorial 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 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 new Diocese of Ballarat Catholic Education Ltd will cover 56 of the schools.

"That's a very significant change for us in the diocese for Ballarat and for Catholic Education in Victoria."

"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 the school is done really effectively. 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."

Ms Brown points to the construction of Siena Catholic Primary School in Lucas - which opened in 2017 - and plans for other schools as a reflection on the diocese's education network.

"I think that's a sign 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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