

Fullness of life

The aim of Catholic Education Ballarat is to transform opportunities for students, by breaking through rural disadvantage barriers



“We’re still pinching ourselves that he’s working with us,” says Tom Sexton, Director of Catholic Education Ballarat in Victoria, Australia. Sexton is referring to Professor Pasi Sahlberg, the renowned Finnish educationalist who works to improve school systems around the world. Sahlberg, a former Director General of the Finnish Ministry of Education, is working with the Ballarat diocese and its 63 schools over five years.

Located across a wide area that was once the centre of a 19th-century gold-mining boom, the diocese feels quite far from the international education glitterati. But Sexton had a bold and brave vision for Catholic Education Ballarat: to break through the entrenched rural disadvantage and to not be satisfied with the status quo. With the blessing of the diocese’s board, he contacted Sahlberg. “Pasi is working with us to try and transform what we think is a pretty good system of schools into a high-performing, exemplary system,” he says. “We’re there to teach everybody, not just the easy-to-teach. We need to give all the children the best chance of reaching fullness of life, and the staff, too.”

The smallest school has 15 students, the largest has 1,200; but the organisation wants to provide the same opportunities for every child. “If you live in rural Australia, you’re less likely to go to university and less likely to achieve good academic results than similar children in the cities. So for us, it’s important to do everything we can to start to remove some of those disadvantages,” says Sexton.

Sexton is not purely seeking academic and career success for the students. There will be a focus on widening horizons, and he wants the schools to turn out resilient, “ethical decision-makers”, with a deep understanding and appreciation of Australian history and Indigenous cultures. The aim is to be outward looking, rather than insular. It is important that they know they are part of the world, including the Commonwealth, and have a part to play.

The emphasis on a global outlook is clear from a number of other projects. These have included a pilgrimage for school principals to Ireland to mark 150 years of Catholic education in Ballarat and examine the history and charisms of the Irish orders who brought Catholic education to the region.

Staff have also been making connections with colleagues in Canada to learn from their approach, and Ballarat’s schools enjoy influences from a diverse teaching body, including staff from the UK and Kenya. Sexton believes it is crucial to visit school systems in other countries in order to learn what is possible in your own school system.

Sahlberg’s influence is crucial, too. Sexton says that he brings not only knowledge and wisdom, but also the connections that will help the schools become a high-performing system. His principle of “co-design”, where students, parents and staff are all consulted on change, ensures nobody is forgotten. The diocese knows it is already working from a very strong base rooted in local communities.

“Pasi has visited about 20 of our schools, he’s been really hands-on and has noticed that each school is doing really good things,” says Sexton. “There are great teachers in those schools, but we need to celebrate and learn from them more.” Looking inwards, as well as outwards, will be the key to success.

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