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**The Role of Research in Producing Evidence to Inform
Strategic and Policy Development**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the potential of research to produce evidence to inform strategic and policy development that is essential for continuous educational improvement and effectiveness. Three research studies commissioned by the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) to support the campaign for increasing State Government funding for Catholic schools are examined. It is argued that strategic research can make a significant contribution by providing a broad base of knowledge as basis for reflection and decision making.

The CECV has responsibility for 489 Catholic primary, secondary and special schools representing over 180,000 student enrolments in Victoria. It was established in 1973 as a principal advisory body to the Bishops for Catholic education in Victoria.

The CECV's interest in research is evident in the long-standing practice of forging partnerships with a wide range of research organisations in areas of Literacy, Numeracy and Science education, Student Services, Religious Education and Student Well Being (Catholic Education Office Melbourne 2004; 15-19). These partnerships have facilitated the development of innovative programs and practices that utilise the expertise of academics, practitioners and system authority personnel. The positive results achieved through such partnership arrangements support a professional culture that values the generation of evidence through research.

There is a broader context for the CECV's interest in research evidence. The CECV, like other social institutions, is influenced by the broader changes occurring in society. According to DEST (2003), with the emergence of the *knowledge based economy*, nations are becoming even more dependent on a strong research and development base. The key areas in which research is expected to play a critical role in meeting national aspirations include the economy, the environment and the society. Societies are expected to develop increasingly sophisticated health, commerce, communication, defence and education systems and to understand and address social issues arising from rapid economic change.

The evidence-based movement in education can therefore be seen to be related to the emergence of the knowledge-based economy. This movement is evident in a growing interest in the use of data for school improvement.

In the past many decisions made in schools were based on leaders own professional judgement and knowledge. In the 21st century educational culture, leaders are turning to data to provide context and evidence as they try to make objective decisions which will stand up to community and govt scrutiny (AISQ 2004).

Associated with an interest in data by education sectors is a growing interest in supporting educators in understanding and using data. For example Lyon and Chhabra (2004:12) advocate an understanding of the science of reading research as scientific evidence is seen to be essential for identifying effective educational practice. This interest is reflected in the content of current professional development programs for school leaders and teachers.

The growing interest in evidence is increasing the demand for educational research. As Gill (2004: 9) notes, the basis and the goal of educational research is now *scientific evidence*. Educational research has therefore “never been more important, more relevant to the sort of reform and development that a knowledge-based society would see”.

THE EVIDENCE-BASED CAMPAIGN

A new Executive Director of the CECV took office in January 2003 and met with her colleagues in other dioceses and with Principals and Parish Priests in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. There was a consistent message that resources were urgently needed. It was apparent that many Catholic schools were struggling with rising salary costs and other recurrent cost increases such as technology, copyright, public liability insurance, and facilities and resources for special needs' students. There was also a clear message that welfare needs were increasing and that anecdotally poor families were not presenting for enrolment.

A funding campaign was initiated in 2003 with the State Government to address historic levels of under-funding. Victorian Catholic schools have received the lowest level of State/Territory funding for a decade. They receive 16% of *the Average Government Schools Recurrent Costs (AGSRC)* while comparable states such as New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia receive 25%+ AGSRC. The difference in dollar terms per student is about \$300. The CECV requested for the 2005–2006 State Budget – that State Government grants be linked to increases in government schools (i.e. the AGSRC). Additional funds would be used to primarily to rectify the historically low funding of Victorian Catholic schools, address welfare and capital needs and improve services for students with disabilities.

There have been four elements to the CECV campaign: high level meetings with politicians senior government personnel and academics; a public information program to raise awareness in the Catholic school community about the funding needs and issues; a philosophical discussion on *Conceptions of Public and Private in School Education*¹; and the commissioning of three research projects.

The three research studies commissioned by the CECV can be best defined as *strategic (oriented) research*. According to DEST (2003), this type of research is carried out “to provide a broad base of knowledge likely to form the basis of a solution to a current or future problem”². The studies commissioned by the CECV were designed to provide evidence to support its case for increasing the level of funding from the State Government. A case for change could not be made on the

¹ The papers include: *Public Good and Public Education* by Professor Brian Caldwell; *Public Education – Systems and Equity* by Professor Jack Keating; and *Public and Private Education: The New Zealand Experience* by Patrick Lynch

² Other types of research include: *Applied Research* (focused on acquiring new knowledge but is directed primarily towards a specific practical aim or objective) and *Pure Research* (carried out for the advancement of knowledge for its own sake).

basis of perceptions and judgements of personnel working within the Catholic sector. There was a need for well grounded empirical evidence that would promote understanding and interpretation in the context of differing views about the reality of Catholic schools. Evidence was needed to inform decision making by the Victorian State Government, the CECV as a governing authority and Catholic schools communities.

The three research studies finalised in 2004 are outlined below.

Affordability of Catholic Schools in Victoria

This research was in response to a concern about the accessibility to a Catholic education by poor families as low resourcing levels have led to increases in fees making Catholic schools unaffordable for a number of families. The research was undertaken by the *Monash University – Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET)* in collaboration with the CECV. The researchers were Professor Gerald Burke and Dr Michael Long. The methodology involved an analysis of enrolment and fees data, income profiles of families and the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) levels of schools. It also surveyed a sample of principals and parents.

Welfare Needs of Victorian Catholic Schools

The need for the study was underpinned by a deep concern held by many in Catholic school communities about the escalating welfare needs of students and families. The CECV noted that funding for welfare support was only available in the government sector and recognised that in order to present a case to the Government for financial assistance empirical evidence was required. The research therefore inquired into the nature, range, scope and impact of the welfare issues that school principals are called upon to deal with in their role as leaders of Catholic school communities. It was undertaken by the *Australian Youth Research Centre at The University of Melbourne* in collaboration with the CECV. The researchers were Professor Johanna Wyn, Helen Cahill and Dr Graeme Smith. The research methodology includes the implementation of focus group meetings, surveys to all primary and secondary schools and case studies.

Contribution of Catholic Schools to the Victorian Economy & the Community

In the context of a discussion about the resourcing needs of Victorian Catholic schools the Victorian Treasurer, the Hon John Brumby suggested that Catholic education demonstrate the contribution it makes to the wellbeing of the community and the economy. A team of researchers at Victoria University, under the leadership of Professor Peter Sheehan, was commissioned to undertake an empirical analysis of the changing context of Catholic schools and the underlying issue of funding and sustainability. While retaining academic independence, the researchers analysed the funding, operation and performance of Catholic schools, while unravelling the religious, social and political environment in which they operate.

Given the centrality of the research evidence to funding campaign, the CECV ensured that the design and implementation of the research produced high quality results. The research projects can be seen to meet the criteria of good research outlined by Yates (2004:211), namely:

- technically good (methodological integrity or logic)
- making a contribution to knowledge (to be something distinct from public relations and propaganda)

- something that matters (to be framing questions that contribute to better and fairer education experiences, outcomes, social arrangements rather than punitive , deficit – oriented, anachronistic ones).

The commissioning of independent research studies undertaken by high profile and credible research units in universities served to ensure that the methodology had integrity. The collaborative partnership established to oversight the development and implementation of the research projects also contributed to the quality of the results. The new paradigm of partnership and collaboration is based on a growing consensus that quality outcomes are apparent when joint responsibility and involvement are valued. Moreover, research partnerships support efforts by academics to be responsive to the requirement of the end-users (DEST, 2003). The research projects are making an important contribution in the Victorian Catholic school sector as the findings are used to promote improvement and effectiveness.

THE EVIDENCE GENERATED

The three research studies provide findings that confirmed much of the anecdotal perceptions and opinions that informed the decision to start the funding campaign. The key themes from each study are outlined below.

The Affordability of Catholic Schools in Victoria

- Accessibility to Catholic schooling for low income families is low and declining.
- Fees and affordability are important considerations in school choice.
- The primary sector share of enrolments is declining.
- Fees have increased faster than average weekly earnings.
- The value of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) has declined.
- Fees concessions/ waivers have real consequences for the quality of educational provision.
- The system needs to manage the tensions between providing high quality educational services and providing access for all Catholic families.

The interviews with Principals showed that they are clearly trying to make schools affordable. However, they can only stretch their budgets so far and it is becoming increasingly difficult to match the government sector schools in a variety of areas, including class size, pupil–teacher ratios, teacher salaries and conditions, and the upgrade of educational and learning technologies.

The Welfare Needs of Victorian Catholic Schools

This is the first Australian study to document the impact of social change on the work of schools. As welfare issues are symptomatic of those faced by all schools, these findings have broad relevance to all families and school communities. The research shows that students and parents are seeking help from schools in a range of welfare areas as schools are becoming the point of care for the local community. As there are more demands on principals' and teachers' time and energy the staff workload is increasing and this is impacting on their wellbeing. Many principals report that they and their staff are under-resourced to deal with the range of needs encountered, in particular family welfare and student mental health.

Analysis of the survey data used a 'priority' rating, which identified those issues that rated high on frequency and impact and low on adequacy of resourcing. The five key areas of action stress the importance of:

- Ensuring success in learning for all students,
- Addressing student mental health
- Supporting families
- Supporting social health
- Promoting staff wellbeing

Those schools with high numbers of families in receipt of the EMA identified higher impacts in the areas of family break-up, violence, crime, incarceration of a family member, the presence of troublesome outsiders and higher parental involvement in student disputes. High EMA schools also indicated higher levels of impact of offending, truancy, racism, bullying of others, violence, defiant or negative classroom behaviour, running away, rudeness to staff and lack of pathways for less academic students.

Student wellbeing and pastoral care have always been central to the ethos and mission of Catholic schools. Yet even the most robust and system-wide efforts to provide for the pastoral care of students are proving insufficient in the face of current need.

Contribution of Catholic Schools to the Victorian Economy and Community

Catholic schools are community schools as they reflect in their mix of students the distribution of Australian society. In 2001 Victorian Catholic system enrolments were more evenly distributed across socio-economic deciles than enrolments in government and independent schools. But there are signs that this is changing, with a falling share of enrolments from poorer families and also from high-income families.

Catholic schools spend less as they use on average fewer resources than other schools. Recurrent expenditure per pupil in Victorian Catholic primary schools in 2002 was 21% lower than in the average government primary school and 31% lower than independent primary schools. Secondary schools are better resourced, but recurrent expenditure levels in Catholic systemic secondary schools was 6% and 33% lower than in government and independent secondary schools respectively.

Catholic schools achieve higher than average educational outcomes. They achieve better than average educational outcomes on a range of measures, with the increment over average outcomes being particularly pronounced for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The 2002 testing results of the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) show higher proportions of Catholic school students in the expected and better than expected performance levels when compared to all students in Victoria. At the VCE level, after taking account of SES background, Catholic schools achieve better than average outcomes, especially for lower socio-economic groups. In 2003, mean VCE scores, adjusted for GAT, gender and performance, are 4% higher than average in Catholic schools in the lowest decile, but slightly lower than average in the highest decile. Similarly, VCE students in Catholic schools have higher transition rates to university, especially in the less affluent half of the population.

Social capital is a factor in achieving higher than average educational outcomes at lower costs. Achieving higher than average outcomes for below-average costs is seen as evidence of educationally relevant social capital within the Catholic

community, which is especially beneficial in lifting the performance of lower socio-economic groups. Social capital refers to the resources embedded in social relations, which can be accessed and used by individuals, e.g. traditions and values, intellectual and cultural experiences shaped within social networks, and access to information sources and networks. Those who can access social capital relevant to learning will be in a much stronger position in education than those who cannot. Such social capital in Catholic schools is linked to a wide variety of networks – from the parish and the local community to religious, professional and sporting groups – as well as the presence of role models, religious traditions, beliefs and value systems.

Catholic schools are cost-effective. Better outcomes for lower than average costs mean that Catholic schools are highly cost-effective. Even without valuing the better than average outcomes, it is estimated that Victorian Catholic schools save the Australian community about \$440 million per annum, or \$2450 per annum per student enrolled. For the Victorian taxpayer, who would, under present arrangements, have to meet most of the costs of educating children currently in Catholic schools, the savings are considerably higher.

Future Directions. The study highlights the need for a new approach to achieving public goals. It is argued that there is a powerful case, and growing agreement, that the time is ripe for a new, coordinated program to achieve public goals of excellence and equity for all Victorian, and indeed Australian schools. The study makes a case for a new settlement for non-government schools. It is argued that funding to private schools from the Commonwealth Government has grown rapidly over the past decade, while the growth of Victorian Government funding has been much slower. These developments have taken place without any agreed national framework about how government funding will contribute to the national goals of excellence and equity. An integrated new approach will require a new agreement about the funding of non-government schools, based on a shared understanding of the role of that funding in achieving the public purposes of excellence and equity.

THE USE OF EVIDENCE

The evidence from all three research studies was used to support the funding campaign. At the completion of each study the following actions were taken in the areas of communication and strategic and policy development.

Dissemination / Communication

The importance of communication of findings is a key theme in education research literature. Gill (2004:12), for instance reminds us of the need to make research knowledge more available and accessible to the public in the interests of a better informed public. Communication of research findings also serves to promote educational research in the public arena.

- The research report was disseminated to politicians, senior public servants and academics involved in the high level discussions. All reports have been made available online. The Victorian government has been informed about findings that impact on all education sectors³.

³ For example, the Victorian government has been alerted about the need for an EMA review earlier in the year as a result of the study on the affordability of Catholic schools. The government has since increased the level of financial support available to low income families through this scheme.

- A seminar was held to provide researchers an opportunity to present findings and responses were invited. Seminar reports were developed and published in hard copy and online.
- The print media was invited to a briefing and provided with a media release statement and the full report. All projects received coverage.
- Catholic school communities were invited to regional briefings to respond to and discuss the research evidence.
- In communicating research findings in the public arena, the CECV has been able to more clearly articulate a discourse about Catholic schools ⁴.

Strategic and Policy Development

The research findings are currently informing strategic and policy development processes with a view to supporting the overall process of improvement and effectiveness. Following are some examples.

- The priorities underpinning the development and review of a number of the strategy plans⁵ are reflecting issues arising from the research studies⁶.
- The development of actions to support the strategy plans. This includes review of service delivery structure and processes or affirmation of particular approaches.⁷
- A new policy is being developed on schools fees (designed to encourage schools to keep fees at affordable levels) and a number of policies are being reviewed (i.e. the pastoral care policy and the needs-based formula⁸ used to allocate funding to schools).

CONCLUSION

This paper has illustrated how research can provide a broad base of knowledge to support strategic and policy development that is central to processes of continuous improvement and effectiveness. Strategic research can make a significant contribution to improving the operations of institutions that provide essential educational services. The quality of its contribution is related to the quality of its design, methodology and implementation process.

Research evidence has not only supported the CECV with its funding campaign and strategic and policy development processes, but has also assisted it to more clearly articulate how to shape the discourse about Catholic schools in the public arena.

⁴ The CECV currently describes Catholic schools as making a contribution to the public good through their role as “community providers of a public service”. Implicit in this role is the notion of Catholic schools as: having a public status, being significant service providers and being strong communities.

⁵ For example, the CECV strategy plan and for the Archdiocese of Melbourne the 2006 -10 plan, the communication strategy and the policy reform strategy.

⁶ For example, the centrality of pastoral care in Catholic schools, the sponsorship of credentialed training in welfare studies and the support for specific innovative practices.

⁷ For example, the centrality of pastoral care in Catholic schools, the sponsorship of credentialed training in welfare studies and the support for specific innovative practices (such as the project “Schools as Core Social Centres”).

⁸ The existing formula allocates recurrent government grants on a ‘needs-based’ formula that favours low socio-economic school communities. It is intended that the review process will result in a strengthened weighting of grants to lower socio-economic regions and schools.

While the research confirmed that Catholic schools in Victoria are under severe pressure, the evidence also suggests that they are also well placed to contribute strongly to new public initiatives to achieve excellence with equity in Victorian schooling.

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