

## **Cumming 5031P**

### **Catholic Educational Leadership in Small Rural Communities in Australia**

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My name is Bernard Cumming and the paper that Andrew Chinn and I will present today is looking at leadership in small rural communities.

Currently, I'm employed in the Mission Services department of the Catholic Schools Office Broken Bay Diocese having arrived in the diocese at the beginning of 2005. I am an Advisor in Religious Education in Primary Schools. Prior to this all my teaching was in rural dioceses in NSW, the last five as principal of a school in rural NSW. I possess a Masters Degree in School Management and am currently enrolled in a Master of Arts in Theological Studies, having previously completed a Graduate Diploma in Religious Studies through Edith Cowan University.

My good friend Andrew was a teacher in the Sydney Archdiocese from 1984-2002. Andrew has a Masters in Educational Leadership and has broad leadership experience in Catholic Schools. Since 2003 Andrew's music has become his fulltime vocation and he visits schools all over Australia and New Zealand sharing his gift of music. The last five years has seen him visit more than 450 Catholic Primary schools around Australia and New Zealand.

The paper will address the following leadership issues in Australian rural communities:

- Recruitment processes for beginning principals in rural communities
- Induction processes for beginning principals in rural communities
- Educational leadership issues: staffing; teaching roles; professional development
- Religious leadership in rural communities
- Moving on- career pathing for rural principals, inter-Diocesan issues.

### **Recruitment processes for beginning principals in rural communities**

Prior to becoming principal, I held the position of Assistant Principal in a primary school with an enrolment of more than 400 students in a fairly large regional centre. I had only

just considered applying for the position of principal at that stage but after an unsuccessful advertising and selection process, the position was re-advertised and I received the proverbial “tap on the shoulder” from the Catholic Education Office. Would I be interested in applying?

The recruitment process can be as short as a tap on the shoulder or as long and as sophisticated as the leadership succession programs run by some Dioceses around Australia, including the Catholic Education Office Sydney. Such programs target *prospective* principals: people who the system believes have the potential to hold such a position and/or teachers who see themselves as future principals. Over the various stages of the course, the varied aspects of principalship are presented; experienced principals share their perspectives; and mentor relationships are fostered.

Obviously a system as large as the Sydney CEO have larger budgets for professional development and can afford a greater diversity of leadership education. They also have the advantage of geographical proximity to ACU Sydney to access staff and resources. The irony is that rural principals, we would argue, face greater challenges when taking on first positions as principals. Not only do they face the challenges of educational leadership, but also the unique challenges of being a Catholic leader in a small country town, not to mention the issues of adjusting to community life in that same town.

“Taps on the shoulder” seem to be more prevalent these days. The position of principal is becoming an increasingly demanding one in an era of growing accountability. Attracting suitable applicants is becoming more and more difficult. A Director in one NSW Diocese informed me that in recent years advertisements for principal’s positions were attracting less than 1.5 applicants per advertisement, and that statistic includes multiple applicants, ie, people who apply for more than one position.

In such a climate one would think the identifying and nurturing of quality leaders would be a high priority.

Between the interview and being offered the position I was speaking with another experienced principal. He said before taking the position, drive out to this town, 200 kilometres away, with my wife and children, to see if the town and our family were a

“match”. Often in such situations panels assume that if the applicant is offered a position they will accept it. Relocating a family to a very different lifestyle is quite a decision. Applicants should look at the process as a two-way interaction. Not only is the panel assessing the suitability of the applicant, but the applicant should also be assessing the suitability of the school and community to their own family.

This same principal warned me not to be overly flattered by any offers and to look carefully into the conditions, including pay and housing. I took his advice. My wife and my children and I went out to look at the town so see if it was feasible. I also investigated the pay scale– not that I became a Catholic teacher for the money, but one has to weigh up the financial impact of such a move. At that time, the fact was that I was being paid more as an Assistant Principal in a school of over 400 than a Principal in a school of less than 100.

And where would we live? In many cases the principals in Catholic Primary schools in rural areas are offered the old convent as a residence. In some cases these are quite grand, even heritage listed, but more often than not, they are old, drafty and in need of substantial repair, and often not conducive to family life.

Some Dioceses invest in the future and purchase a decent family home in the hope of attracting principals of quality in the future. In our case the Diocesan Director realized that it was time to do something similar and a home was purchased, albeit a three-bedroom home- considerably smaller, in fact half the size, of the local presbytery housing one person. During our time in the house we paid a market rate rent of \$110.00 a week, while the town’s policeman lived in similar accommodation at a subsidized rate of \$10.00 a week. That additional available income makes it just that little easier to fund a trip home to visit friends and family, easing that sense of isolation.

My point here is that in rural dioceses, CEOs must make the position of Principal very attractive. Country towns have traditionally been very hard to staff. I stayed five years in the school I was in - the Principal before me lasted 18 months, and the one since me two years. The diocese must provide suitable and appropriate and attractive accommodation – in rural Australia a pool and air conditioning is a must. In February, the advertisement

for a principals position in Northern NSW included the statement “Housing accommodation is available for a discounted rate”.

What does this mean? “A discounted rate”. CEO/CSOs need to stipulate in their advertisements, or on the web, the real advantages of the position including accommodation, extra study leave, monetary incentives etc. Don’t leave this until people have to ring up or ask for an information package. This is too late. Some potential candidates won’t get this far.

Overcoming isolation is a major factor in adjusting to life in smaller rural communities. I remember a teacher in Queensland who had spent a few years living in the town of Monto. On the family’s first night back in Bundaberg they ordered pizza to be delivered. Why? Simply because they could.

One first year out teacher who worked at my school moved to the town from Newcastle, being Newcastle born and bred (some four hours drive away). To her surprise (but it brought a smile to my face) she went down to the local supermarket early on the first Sunday afternoon, but it was closed. I had to tell her that everything shuts at midday on Saturday. On another occasion, She spent time looking for an ATM – I said that when the local club opens, there’s one in the club (but they charge a \$1 fee).

These may seem like small issues but represent a significant change, even sacrifice, in lifestyle. In my visits around the country I was really struck by the teaching community at St Michael’s on Palm Island. The only way on and off the island are the daily flights to and from Townsville. Teachers who accept a position on the island are on the same salary package as the teachers in Townsville yet face far greater cost of living expenses on the island, as well as significant educational challenges. If we cannot compensate teachers and principals for such sacrifices there is a risk that the great goodwill, that really helps to “fund” such places, will dry up.

Following our investigation and all the usual selection procedures I was offered the position of principal. During the course of the conversation around the job offer, I was advised that in accepting this position the Diocese would look favourably on my application to return to a larger regional school principalship in the near future. This is an

important consideration as we knew that one day we would want to return to be nearer to family and to offer our younger sons the opportunity for a Catholic Education in secondary school.

### **Induction processes for beginning principals in rural communities**

And so the journey began. I stepped out of a school where I worked on an executive with the Principal, Religious Education Co-ordinator and co-ordinators. Our decisions were collaborative ones. I stepped into a school where I was the executive (which made for shorter meetings). Added to this was that as we had fewer than 100 students I was also the REC and had a teaching load of 2.5 days per week. A steep learning curve followed, a curve which has been known to overwhelm some beginning principals.

Principal mentoring is such a high priority area. In the diocese where I was a Principal, there were a number of 'small' schools with enrolments under 100. A number of these Principals prior position included classroom teacher or even part-time teacher. It would be interesting to see how many principals in small country towns are in their first principalship. I would dare to say that most are.

When I became a Principal, it was quite an isolating and lonely job, as it continued to be. There were calls of support from the Catholic Education Office - visits were few. Thankfully, my own connections in the Diocese allowed me to set up some informal, mentor-like connections that were perhaps the greatest support of all, along with the advice and support of my wife. As I faced difficult decisions for the first time it was reassuring to sound these off one or two experienced principals who had walked in my shoes a few years before.

But what if I hadn't had these connections and was an "outsider". Who would I have found to mentor me then? Some rural dioceses have quite formal principal mentoring programs. The Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn runs a "Principals Development and Support Program" with a particular focus on "First Appointment Principals". This includes a formal mentoring relationship between the First Appointment Principal and their Peer Principal, along with a Human Resources Officer. A significant part of the Archdiocese is rural with about ten schools having enrolments of less than 100 students.

David Eddy, from the University of Auckland, leads the “First-time Principals Programme” for New Zealand’s Ministry of Education. Under New Zealand’s integrated education system, the Catholic and government schools join together for all professional development, other than that which is specifically “Catholic”. So Catholic school principals take part in the program alongside their government school colleagues.

<http://www.firstprincipals.ac.nz/>

In 2004, Richard Nott was a first time principal having just taken on the principal’s position at St Peter Chanel, Motueka, on the South Island of New Zealand. The program involved two week-long conferences during the year, one during the Easter holidays and one in the September-October break.

An experienced principal was appointed to Richard and this mentor visited him in his school four times during the year, once each term. The mentor was someone Richard could ring or email to discuss all aspects of leadership but particularly to consult on those difficult issues. While Richard recommended all aspects of the program he indicated that it was the relationship with the mentor that was the most beneficial to him. He also noted that some other first time principals did not enjoy the same quality of relationship with their mentor as he had with his and so mentor selection and pairing becomes a key issue.

Richard noted that the Catholic Education Office provided some support that complemented this program, particularly looking at the “Catholic Character” of schools and the role of the principal in supporting this.

Our Catholic Education system in Australia allows us to integrate our faith into all aspects of education including leadership. Mentoring programs, such as that run by Canberra-Goulburn can provide an integrated approach to principal development, founded on the principles of true Christian leadership.

Parish priests can be a mentoring resource in rural situations. I was fortunate that the priest in our parish had an education background before entering the priesthood and I

valued his friendship and support. Yet priests in the bush are becoming an increasingly endangered species and often will have a big geographical area to cover, with a number of schools. If you do have access to a priest, or if their background is not in education then they can be of little assistance.

### **Educational leadership issues: staffing; teaching roles; professional development**

Being principal in a small rural school has several unique challenges. One of these is staffing. In rural Dioceses the “plum” jobs for beginning teachers are those located in the main regional centres. Young teachers can maintain connections with family and friends and continue a busy social and sporting life.

Once these prime teaching positions are appointed applicants are forced to look further afield to more remote centres. As a result they often land positions in small rural schools, which raises a number of issues.

Firstly, these beginning teachers, as they are in small schools, begin their teaching career on a multiage class, sometimes covering a wide range of ages and abilities. Secondly, they are often having to make a major life adjustment, from living in a city, with plenty of friends, family and support people, to living in the almost goldfish-like environment of the small country town. One young male teacher on staff would return to one of the large centres for a night out so as not to attract unwanted attention in town.

While this is stressful at a personal level, it provides quite a constant challenge for the principal. There is the demand of mentoring these young teachers and helping them to adjust to country life- more than a six hour a day commitment. The stress can be quite telling on the beginning teachers and in my experience many of them only stay for a short period, from one to three years. This compounds the problem as the principal is constantly mentoring a stream of beginning teachers. In some ways the school suffers from the turnover and from the fact that the staff is often more than 50 percent staffed by teachers with less than three years experience.

The Catholic Education Office of the Diocese of Rockhampton acknowledges this as an issue and has implemented a policy to counter it. The following quote comes from “Guidelines for Beginning Teachers”:

*“Beginning teachers are normally first appointed to the coastal areas, or to our schools in Biloela and Emerald. Following the first two years of successful employment it is usually the case that teachers accept appointment to another school as a part of their professional growth and development. Subject to family circumstances, such appointments for teachers who have begun their careers in coastal areas are to our western schools, and after another two years, every effort is made to satisfy requests for an appointment to the area of choice within the diocese.”*

<http://www.ceo.rok.catholic.edu.au/resources/ApplicationInformationKit2005to06.pdf>

Both St Joseph’s, Biloela, and St Patrick’s, Emerald, are large schools, and along with the coastal schools in Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Mackay, beginning teachers in these settings are mentored by a grade partner for two years. By the time they head west they are beginning to be in command of their teaching craft and have only then to face the challenges (and joys!) of country life. This, in turn, must ease the stress on the rural principals. While the schools in places like Monto and Blackall may still see a fairly high turnover in staff, the teachers that do arrive are usually all experienced educators.

Interestingly, the application package for beginning teachers in the Rockhampton Diocese clearly advertises other incentives in its “Western Service” package. Teachers in their first and second year receive a yearly bonus of \$1500 along with subsidized accommodation and relocation assistance.

Principals in small schools often maintain a class teaching role. While the 2.5 days a week teaching was something I never begrudged, in fact I enjoyed it, the dual role of educator and leader did place some stress on me. It certainly gave me the advantage of being able to be a role model for younger teachers and lended credibility to innovations that I offered in educational practice. However, the combined day-to-day activities of the teacher- planning, assessing, reporting- and that of the leader/administrator were quite burdensome at times. Without a full-time secretary I was often on reception duty as well.

In recent years the Maitland-Newcastle Diocese has acknowledged this as an issue and has created some changes to the role of the teaching principal in small schools. While they often maintain a teaching role, due to funding restrictions, this role has seen them take on not a class teacher role but rather a support teacher role. Some teach in the library two days a week, others might provide the release from face-to-face teaching time, and others take on the Special Education role. This has two advantages for the teaching principal. Firstly, those roles outlined ease the burden in terms of teaching paperwork. The greater advantage is that these roles often see the principal educationally involved with every child, K-6, in the school.

Another key issue for principals in rural areas to address is the general professional development of staff. While one component of the staff may be quite transient, there is another sector who are quite intransient. These are teachers who are embedded in the community, perhaps living on a farm or in the town, and who for family reasons, will see their teaching career out in that same school. Essentially, geography dictates that they stay in the one school.

This provides quite a spectrum of professional needs. Geography makes accessing resources and presenters quite difficult. The integrated system that exists in New Zealand largely overcomes this problem as clusters of regional schools band together for professional development projects. This is not so easy in Australia where government and Catholic schools operate in two fairly exclusive orbits.

While I was principal I made a conscious effort to attend relevant conferences during school and holiday periods to ensure that I was constantly exposed to emerging educational trends and could return to school with these and inform and educate the staff. Where financially possible, I encouraged the teachers to attend the regional centres to maintain their professional practice.

Again, finance becomes an issue. Rural dioceses often receive special funding to counteract the issues of distance but in practice it can't match the readily available opportunities in the city and regional centres.

One can't underestimate the impact of travel and the need to allow for it and adequately compensate for it. Up until recently, one rural diocese in the eastern states would have their Religious Education Co-ordinators attend a meeting in the Diocesan centre but would not fund any release time the following day for teachers to travel up to eight hours back to their school. The school either had to fund it or would expect their teachers to travel back the kangaroo infested highways at night. Not the strongest of pastoral messages.

An initiative I instigated while at the school was to look at cross-diocesan professional development. My school was located near the border of two other dioceses. When we held some form of major professional development I would invite neighbouring principals of Catholic schools within two hours drive to come along. While they would only occasionally attend due to distance, I often received warm thanks for even considering these remote schools.

### **Religious leadership in rural communities**

Just prior to the selection process for the school where I became principal I had applied for a principal's position at a smaller school, 40 minutes away from the regional centre where we lived. During the interview the parish priest asked me where I would live if I was successful. I explained honestly, that for family reasons, I would remain in the city and commute the 60 or so kilometers each day.

From that point in the interview I noted a shift in attitude and I wasn't surprised to be informed that I had been unsuccessful. The position eventually went to a classroom teacher on staff, with less teaching experience and no formal leadership experience. Apparently the key issue that separated us was that she lived and worshipped in the town and this was seen as being of paramount importance. And it was an issue that was to be clearly reinforced once I took up my new position.

I was and still am an active and practising Catholic. I have willingly embraced many ministries in a variety of parish settings. But upon assuming the role of principal it was soon clear to me that I was not only the principal but I was effectively one of two senior Catholic officials in the town.

I quickly learned that not only do you have to attend Mass but you are expected to be heavily involved. Besides being on the roster, if the reader is away, they ask the Catholic School Principal; if the extraordinary minister of the Eucharist is away, they ask the Catholic School Principal.

And if the priest is away, yes, you guessed it, they ask the Catholic School Principal. The two roles that I had not expected, but obviously others in the parish did, was to preside at 'Communion Service in the Absence of the Priest' and veneration on Good Friday. In your role, you cannot say no – besides they know you will know what you are doing and you will do it well. The reality of life is that with dwindling numbers of priests, parish priests find their parishes growing in size and having to cover a broad geographical area each weekend. There were many occasions when the priest was unable to return in time for Mass and so I presided at the Communion Service.

To further complicate matters, my wife was appointed to the position of principal at the nearest Catholic primary school, 40 minutes away. And yes, she was expected (not explicit, but implied) to attend Mass at her church each weekend, even though it was within the same parish. On weekends we would attend Mass in my wife's school's town on Saturday night and then at my school's town on Sunday morning. We were very holy!

While I didn't resent this role and it indeed broadened the dimensions of my leadership, it was unexpected and something which I was not formally prepared for. And it effectively added another day to the working week. In many places and parishes a pastoral associate is legitimately employed to take on the roles that were assumed as part of my duties. A more creative approach could see this formally added to the principal's package with suitable remuneration. This would ensure applicants were adequately informed of the fullness of the role and perhaps be attracted to the enhanced financial package.

With the decline of priests, the role of the school principal, in rural communities may soon look somewhat different. The American Bishops in 2005 put a paper together to look at this such thing. The paper was titled "Co workers in the vineyard" and looked at concept of 'lay ecclesial minister'.

<http://www.usccb.org/laity/laymin/co-workers.pdf>

People in leadership in Catholic Schools, particularly in rural dioceses are by our roles, by our baptism, and by our call to Catholic education, are what this paper titles 'Lay ecclesial ministers.' That is people who serve in many different ways in the parish. For principals in small Catholic parishes, where not many families attend weekend Mass, are seen as the people who know about "Catholicism".

It will be interesting in the next 20 years or so to see what will happen with our role as religious leaders in Catholic Schools. With the number of priests declining and less people attending Mass, schools are often the only 'face of God' that a number of parents and children see.

If we are to take on more of a role in the parish, we need to be equipped to do so. We may need more training so that we have the appropriate skills for the new work that might be required of us

Being the "face of the church" in rural communities contrasts sharply to the near anonymity of principals in urban settings. In a sense my rural experience was one of true Christian community. The people I worshipped with on Sunday were known to me and a part of my everyday life. This is not the city experience where more often that not principals do not live and worship in the parish where they work.

They can go to their home parish, hopefully are involved in a number of ministries, but on the most part, are relatively unknown. They can go to Mass unshaven or with their old daggy clothes on. They don't even have to wear your "Mass" clothes as my mother would say! And be assured I always wore mine in the country!

In 2004 and 2005 the Australian Catholic Primary Principals Association released a report on this issue and I recommend it to you. The ACPPA report had many findings but one was that rural principals were concerned that parish business would take their time away from the core business of the school, that is, to provide quality Catholic education. A further recommendation was that in consultation with the parish priest, clearer role

descriptions could be made. Similarly, principals need “to learn to say no”. This may be easy in a metropolitan school but is somewhat harder in a rural setting. All these recommendations need the support of the Diocese, both from the Bishop’s office and from the CEO/CSO. A blunt further recommendation on Page 48 of the report was to “move to the city and be more anonymous”.

<http://www.acppa.catholic.edu.au/projects/index.html>

Unless this aspect of the role is critically examined and solutions sought, the Dioceses and their CEO/CSOs could be seen as effectively encouraging leaders to be anonymous members of Catholic communities rather than prominent witnesses to their faith.

### **Moving on- career pathing for rural principals, inter-Diocesan issues**

And so after four years in the position I began to feel the need for further challenges. Our younger sons were progressing through school and our eldest was in boarding school. We wanted to relocate to a place where we could have our children attend a Catholic secondary school and live with us, as a family.

So I remembered the assurance given to me years before and began to apply for principal's positions in the larger regional centres. In the first year of application I was unsuccessful, with the positions going to experienced principals. Yet the following year I found I was being overlooked in favour of incumbent Assistant Principals who had never left the larger centres, and who, I felt, had not made the sacrifices expected of my family and me. Performance reviews had always gone well so I had no indication that my professional leadership was not up to standard.

Somewhat disillusioned and feeling undervalued we somewhat reluctantly decided to seek out positions near the coast. My wife was immediately successful in obtaining a position as REC and after one or two setbacks I decided to accept an REC position as well.

Many years ago, I applied for small school principalships. Before accepting an offer I rang my school's consultant to assess how this move would be viewed career-wise. I

was informed that a principal in a small country school was barely considered the equal experience of an Assistant Principal and I would need to re-enter at that level

This is a tale that I have often heard repeated in my travels around Australia. One principal of a large school in an urban Diocese led a school in a rural Diocese and during his tenure the school went from an enrolment of 70 students to 120 yet he could not have his achievements and educational leadership acknowledged in a city setting and had to return to the role of AP, which he had held in earlier years.

While rural dioceses are quite aware of the nature of educational issues in the city our observation would be that urban dioceses are not aware or appreciative of the demands of leadership in rural settings. In recent years the Wollongong Diocese agreed to release a principal to serve a two-year contract in the Wilcannia-Forbes Diocese. Such exchanges have value for both Dioceses. The interaction broadens the dimensions of educational leadership and my hope would be that the principal would return to the city Diocese and articulate the challenges and rewards of country principalship.

This is an issue which needs to be addressed at an inter-Diocesan, Catholic Education Commission level. We would suggest that a more systematic and integrated approach is needed to address this issue in terms of career-pathing for rural principals and resourcing leadership programs.

## **Summary**

As a faith we have always valued and encouraged the sense of “mission”- making sacrifices for the sake of others, as Christ taught us to. Those that decide to “head west” (or east as is the case in the west!) should be encouraged, nurtured and rewarded. In the spirit of Mary MacKillop they sacrifice for their belief that all Australians, regardless of where they live, are entitled to quality Catholic education. And if they are not encouraged, nurtured and rewarded we run the risk that we will not attract people of quality to this mission that the mission and our faith in rural settings will be diminished.

And yes, perhaps our reward will be great in heaven, but it would be nice if we didn't have to wait that long.

