

**The 12th Annual National Conference
of
The Australian Anglican Schools Network**

August 1st – 3rd 2003

*The Economics of Vision
Governing, Leading and Living the Values-Centred School*

A PAPER

ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

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IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE?

In a word - **NO!** This is an impossible ask.

However, more and more, that is exactly what is being asked of schools in general and of our schools in particular.

Governing Bodies and Heads struggle on a daily basis with the challenges of competing demands from all groups who comprise their school community and beyond.

Today's social and educational environment is highly competitive and becoming more so. With the increase of new schools and aggressive marketing of others, both independent and state, maintaining enrolments and ensuring financial viability for the future are constant issues at the forefront of School Boards' deliberations.

Changing social values over the past few decades, together with the exponential rate of change we have been exposed to and are continuing to experience, as we live in this Information Age, mean we live with paradox and ambiguity and are constantly pressured in an attempt to keep up. The increase in litigation across most areas, together with the need for compliance with increased regulatory legislation, which impacts on education, as well as business at large, bring with them additional dilemmas and challenges for Boards, Heads and Senior Management.

In this paper, I am not proposing to provide answers or solutions for the wide range of challenges, which face management in schools today. Schools, although similar in many ways, are unique environments, and need to reconcile their issues in their own manner. What I intend to do is simply to pose a series of statements, questions and propositions which either are the dilemmas themselves, or at least underpin some of the tensions which Heads, members of governing bodies, senior management etc, face on a daily basis.

DILEMMAS - PARADOXES – TENSIONS

The major tension is encapsulated in the theme of this conference. *The Economics of Vision - Governing, Leading and Living the Values-Centred School.*

We need firstly to understand and acknowledge that all institutions are limited by their access to funds. Although we in schools try to be all things to all people, the reality is that this is not possible.

Secondly, there is a need to accept and live with the tension of the financial realities which constrain us. Thirdly, we need to ensure that everyone in our school community understands what these are, why they are and how we try best to reconcile them in taking our schools forward.

Other tensions or dilemmas are closely related to the complexity of governing and leading an organisation whose basic foundation is one based on Christian values in a time of economic rationalism.

There are issues which emanate from and impact on different groups within the school community. These tensions certainly do not exist in all schools, but we can certainly appreciate that they could and do in some.

1. THE CHURCH

Our schools differ vastly from one to another in both governance and administrative models and structures. Some are very old, single sex with high fee levels, while others are very new, co-educational with low fees. Some schools are diocesan and owned by the Church, a few are order owned, while some are totally independent. However, all of our schools are Anglican. They acknowledge proudly their connection to the Anglican faith and their mission, their *raison d'être*, is underpinned by Christian beliefs and values.

All schools are moral institutions designed to promote social norms, with ours having a strong commitment to teaching and living Christian values. In this time of dwindling congregations in the parishes, we are the outreach arm of the Church, their main vehicle for recruitment if you like.

There are a number of competing tensions and ethical dilemmas which arise in this area, some of which are listed below.

- In today's world, there is a widely held view that the Church and religion in general are outdated and irrelevant which immediately conflicts with the fundamental purpose of our schools.
- The very nature of the Anglican Church philosophy, with which the Church itself has recently been trying to come to grips, tends to be all embracing and be all things to all people. This tends to give a sense of fuzziness, and a perception that all things are acceptable.
- The status of the Church and church schools, especially in Queensland, in the aftermath of the recent media coverage of child abuse puts questions in people's minds about our schools as safe places and our priests and teachers as models of Christian values.
- The dwindling numbers of the religious in order-owned schools, something we share with Catholic schools, provides a challenge for the long-term maintenance of the ethos of the school. As time passes, Heads will be appointed who have not had the privilege of experiencing the special climate often found in these schools and that culture will change and disappear.
- We live in a time of economic rationalism, a time where a sense of community is lacking and the emphasis on individual rights without the reciprocal responsibilities appears to have precedence. Instant gratification with self first seems to be a prevalent social attitude. This is vastly at odds with our school emphasis on placing "*others before self*".
- A lesser tension, but still an important one, can be evident in the relationships our schools have with the local parishes. For some parish priests the "territorial imperative" can be problematic. For many of our students their only connection with the church and with religion per se, is within the context of school and therefore school, not the parish, becomes the centre of Christian community for them.
- Our desire to be inclusive in line with Christ's sentiment "*Suffer the little Children to come unto me*" is put immediately in a tension with the fact that our existence relies on fees, at whatever level they may be. This gives an immediate message to some groups within our society which says; "*Sorry, this school is not available to you – you can't pay the fees.*"
- In the pastoral area, we find on occasions when we are faced with a discipline issue, which results in the expulsion of a student. This is a dilemma if we take on board Christ's message in the parable of the Lost Lamb.
- The time and resources allocated in our schools to Divinity/ Religious Studies in the curriculum in comparison with that to academic disciplines and often the attitudes of both staff and students to its importance can convey a very ambiguous message.
- In some schools the status and role of the Chaplain within the school can provide a further tension. At times the pastoral and spiritual leadership roles of the Chaplain and the Head can be confusing. There can be a lack of clarity as to where chaplains fit in the organisational structure charts and to whom they report.

2. PARENTS

The strongest demands on us come from our parents and these often reflect their children's wishes. Keeping our parents happy is critical in order to maintain our enrolments, for together with our students, they are the most potent advertising agents we have. However, they make so many competing demands that it is self-evident that no one solution or decision that we make will satisfy

every one of them. How do we get them to realise and accept we can't do everything - there are costs!

Trying to meet parent expectations can be the source of tensions and ethical dilemmas. Decision-making can be difficult when faced with alternatives, which are both desirable, legitimate and beneficial for students. Some of these are listed below.

- There is a general expectation today that our schools will provide the broadest possible curricula, which cater for their children as individuals. As schools seek to expand their curriculum offerings, to include vocational subjects, information technology subjects etc, the allocation of resources becomes an immediate issue. More often than not, new subjects are expensive to resource and, as most would agree, the costs associated with computing can be a "bottomless pit".

The introduction of new subjects has as its corollary. This is the loss of enrolments in older more traditional subject area, with the dilemmas which then arise as to the viability of continuing with it, the expense of running it with very small numbers or as a composite class, which could possibly have as a result, negative connotations and responses from students and parents.

- Schools today deal with problems which were in earlier times dealt with at home or by society at large. By the very nature of our schools pastoral care programmes are an important part of the school curriculum but they are provided at a substantial cost to the school. Additional training for teachers, time and other resources have financial implications.

There can also be some very difficult ethical dilemmas which arise when decisions have to be made regarding older students relating to privacy issues, confidentiality and legal matters.

- Parents want our schools to provide optimum opportunities for their child's education and for many this means entry to tertiary institutions as the final outcome. There are tensions and issues of equity inherent in the decisions we make as to which students will receive special programmes either for gifted and talented or in the remedial area. Encouraging parents and students to be realistic about expectations for their futures can also be at odds with their perceptions of individual ability.
- The provision of extensive sporting and cultural activities, operating at the highest level with best possible resources and facilities available, can be a major source of disenchantment, especially if the competing school down the road has something we don't. There is the basic issue of the financial impost of providing resources, both human and physical, and an additional tension which arises between trying to satisfy groups who want elite professional standards of training and performance of teams when the philosophy of the school might be an emphasis on broad participation by all. It can be difficult for schools to make this a "both/and" scenario rather than an "either/or" one.
- Parent attitudes to school have changed over the last two decades. Previously they were happy to see schools as professional arenas and teachers as experts in education. They stayed at a distance from school. Today there is a strong desire and expectation of involvement and participation not only as a partner in the education of their child but also in decision and policy making.

This can certainly be a source of tension for governing bodies, Heads, Senior Management and teachers. How can schools succeed in achieving balanced parent involvement - not too much nor too little?

- Many parents enrol their children in our schools because of their reputation for the provision of excellence in education, the commitment of staff and the perception that discipline is strong. It is not because the school is an Anglican one with its emphasis on the importance of living Christian values and the rites and symbols of our religion which are part of our schools' traditions.

This tension often becomes visible when matters of discipline or student complaint arise. Parents who are not prepared themselves to use "tough love", can often be the most vocal and lacking in support for the school when their child is demanding or in trouble.

- At times there is also in evidence the “We pay – you deliver!” stance, symptomatic of the “I want it and I want it now” attitude of today’s society, which is totally at odds with the values of the school and also perhaps with its financial ability to deliver.

3 BOARDS

Governing bodies particularly are faced with challenges as they work to fulfil their governance and stewardship roles effectively.

Boards are usually a group of disparate people, often selected because of their business acumen or specific expertise, who meet episodically for a few hours. Normally the agenda is tight and focussed on financial oversight and the Head’s report.

Often Board members have no concept of the daily demands and pressures on the Head and their understanding of schools and their REAL purpose is scant. They simply do not understand that schools, although they are businesses in a sense, usually with multi-million dollar annual turnover, are nevertheless different from businesses in the corporate sense and priorities for Heads, as the CEOs of these businesses, are vastly different from ensuring optimum profit margins for the shareholders.

There are a number of tensions and dilemmas facing Boards and affecting their effectiveness.

- How do you take this disparate group and engage them in a meaningful way, so that they are understanding of the Head’s task and are in harmony with the values of the school and what it is trying to achieve?
- What should the composition of governing bodies of Anglican Schools be to ensure a balance of religious with various business expertise?
- How should we construct agendas to ensure there is time for discussion of the BIG Questions and what are they?
- How can they be unified, thoughtful and responsible in their decision making to ensure decisions made and/or policies framed are based on the values of the school when this takes time, training, design, planning and a thorough understanding of and commitment to those values?
- The recent failures of major corporations in the past few years and the consequences for members of Boards for those failures in financial areas have highlighted the personal accountability of Board members and the need for ethical decision making. This has meant there has become a tendency for financial reasons to become the basis for decisions rather than compassionate or philosophical ones.

This heightened awareness of personal accountability, the need to get things right and the emphasis on compliance, in members of Boards coming from business backgrounds, can mean a desire to be too involved in the operational matters of the school rather than provide appropriate oversight of the management and performance of the organisation and its Head.

How do our schools ensure that Board members do have the wisdom to know the difference between strategic and operational issues and where their accountability and responsibility lie?

- The increase in litigation and regulatory legislation has affected all areas of management in both business and schools. The emphasis on having written policies as a matter of compliance and risk management and the policing of these can become so important in deliberations that the purpose of the school and the focus on the child can be overlooked.
- There are times, when families face financial hardships and requests are made to schools for support in the form of waiving or reducing fees. There is a tension here as such support, while

being in harmony with Christian values, could be perceived as an issue of social inequity for other families.

- A dilemma facing Boards in all sectors is the tension which arises between the desire to make short term responses to a demanding community and the long term interests of the organisation and its financial viability into the future. How do we ensure that our school Boards act proactively with the wisdom to implement change in response to community demands at the correct time for action, while retaining an appropriate degree of conservatism in planning strategically? How do we prevent them from operating reactively in crisis mode?
- The Board's relationship with the Head is a critical one and can be fraught with tensions and ethical dilemmas. Over time a Board, which has appointed a Head, will change its membership. This can prove unsettling, for new members bring different perspectives to the table and the tenor of the original relationship may change with implications for the tenure of the Head.

Tensions can also arise where a long standing relationship with the Head has become too comfortable, so that the Board allows the Head to dictate what will happen and the Board becomes a "rubber stamp" to his/her directions. The reverse is also true, where the relationship is not one based on mutual trust and confidence in the Head and the Board takes an overtly authoritarian stance in its dealing with him/her.

Some other tensions, which can arise, are dealt with in the next section dealing with the Head.

4. THE HEAD

The relationship of the Head with all groups is pivotal. The breadth and complexity of the role of the Head is enormous. He/She sets the tone, is champion of the values and has to be all things to all people. In every relationship, however, there are potential tensions and dilemmas to face.

(i) Relationship with the Board

As mentioned above, the relationship with the Board is a critical one. It is important that it is one based on mutual trust and confidence. If the Board does not have the understanding of, or commitment to, what the school is about or the Head's task in actualising the mission of the school, then there will be tensions to be addressed.

- The provision of information by the Head to the Board can be problematic. If there is too much, then Boards can become over involved in the operational management of the school. If there is too little, then the Board will not have adequate information for responsible decision making and their ability to monitor with diligence can be affected. What does the Board need to know? Does the Board know what it needs to know? Is this one of the BIG questions?
- For some Heads there can be an issue with bringing problems to the Board. This is closely related to the performance appraisal of the Head. If the appraisal is one which is formative and developmental, and the Board is supportive of the Head and constructive in its advice, then there should be no problem. Where the appraisal is summative, and the relationship is not an easy one, then some Heads fear that bringing problems to the Board might be misconstrued and he/she will be evaluated and found wanting with dismissal as a possible consequence.

(ii) Relationship with staff

I believe that in our schools we are fortunate to have the majority of staff who are caring, committed and professional. Nevertheless, at times, tensions and dilemmas emerge which need to be reconciled. Some examples of these are detailed below.

- Leading the change process with staff in schools, particularly those who have seen the rise and demise of a variety of “educational fads and trends”, can be the source of many challenges for Heads and Senior Management. Engaging staff, who are resistant to new ideas, pedagogy and the need to stay abreast of current educational trends, can be most difficult, while at the same time providing appropriate professional development, time for planning, implementing and monitoring change is costly in terms of time and money. There is a tension in the desire to move the staff and school forward quickly, while supporting them and making the change as easy as possible.
- There is a tension for staff members and the Head and Board at times of industrial negotiations. These times can be unsettling when staff costs escalate to such a level that rises in fees will not be sustainable in terms of the market. Where fees rise above market acceptance and there is a drop in enrolments then there will subsequently be losses in jobs for staff with the additional cost to the school in the form of redundancies.
- Our schools have high expectations that staff be exemplary role models through living Christian values. There are times, however, where staff may behave in ways or display attitudes which are acceptable within the current set of social norms and in accordance with legal interpretations but may not be in harmony with the values of the school. Conflict in addressing these issues can be difficult to resolve and divisive within the community.
- At times conflict between the demands and expectations of students, their parents and staff can be the source of tension for the Head. The need to resolve the conflict in an equitable manner, which balances the rights of each and with a win-win outcome, can be problematic.
- Tensions for staff members arise in the balancing of their personal and family life with the demands of their professional life.

(iii) Relationship with students

Our students are our reason for existence and the focus of the schools’ activities.

The responsibility Heads and their staff have for the academic, physical, mental, spiritual and emotional wellbeing of each student in their care is awesome and the source of many ethical dilemmas and tensions. Some of what was proposed in the section dealing with parents applies to students as well, especially with regard to pastoral issues, the provision of optimum educational opportunities for each individual and the care of the individual within a community group.

A major tension for schools is that they have no means of knowing to what degree they have been successful in moulding the lives of their students to be responsible, caring and compassionate citizens who are able to lead happy and fulfilled lives based on Christian values.

(iv) Head’s personal life

For the Head of an Anglican school, especially for those with young families, there is a huge tension in finding a balance between their personal and professional life.

The demands of the role and the relationships which they need to build and nurture with the different groups in their community, (and I have not even mentioned the community at large, the schools’ alumni groups and other professional organisations), can be all consuming, leaving little time for family and friends. The stresses and tensions inherent in leading a complex organisation founded on values, which at times appear at odds with those of society at large, can be enervating and debilitating and there is a need for Heads to work consciously at maintaining physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have touched on some of the tensions which impact on our schools, their Heads and Governing Bodies and the way they are managed.

It is impossible to be all things to all people. The critical factors in living with these tensions are:

- the ability of the Head to build positive and open relationships with the various groups in the school community
- the ability of the Board to govern effectively and wisely
- the model provided by both Head, Board members and staff in living the values of the school.

On the whole Anglican schools manage the tensions well.