

Catholic school education: 5 essentials

How do our Catholic schools continue to remain relevant in Singapore's rapidly changing educational landscape? How do we ensure that students in our Catholic schools receive that "something extra" which they cannot get from secular schools? Perhaps the best way to address these concerns is with reference to the Holy See's teaching on Catholic schools.

For many years, the presence of Religious in our Catholic schools has served as a built-in guarantee of the Catholic identity. The shift to lay leadership over time due to the scarcity of Religious is now presenting its own set of challenges. It is, therefore, important for all who are involved in Catholic education to be familiar with the following five essential marks of a Catholic School.

Inspired by a supernatural vision

The Church sees education as a process that forms the whole child – to be good citizens of this world, loving God and neighbour. An emphasis on the inalienable dignity of the human person especially the spiritual dimension, is especially necessary today. However, it is unfortunate that today many perceive education to be merely an instrument for the acquisition of information that will improve the chances of worldly success and a more comfortable standard of living. Such an impoverished vision of education is not Catholic.

Founded on a Christian anthropology

The educational philosophy of a Catholic school must be built on the correct understanding of who the human person is. This understanding attributes to the human person the dignity of a child of God. Thus the holistic education provides calls for the fullest development of all that is human, so that our students will flourish to be the unique individuals that God has created them to be. The Gospel of Christ must inspire every aspect of education, not just the academics. All too many Catholic schools fall into the trap of a secular academic success culture where Christ is "fitted in" rather than being the school's vital principle. The Gospel spirit should permeate all facets of the educational climate.

Animated by communion and community

The Holy See describes the school as a community in four areas: the teamwork amongst all those involved; the cooperation between educators and bishops; the interaction of students with teachers; and the school's physical environment. Educators, administrators, parents and bishops guide the school to make choices that promote overcoming individualistic self-promotion, solidarity instead of competition, assisting the weak instead of marginalisation, and responsible participation instead of indifference.

Close cooperation with the family is especially important when treating sensitive issues such as religious, moral, or sexuality education, and orientation toward a profession or a choice of one's vocation in life.

Catholic educators recognise that the bishop's pastoral leadership is pivotal in supporting the establishment and ensuring the catholicity of the schools in his pastoral care. The bishop must integrate schools into his diocese's pastoral programme and he must oversee the teaching within them.

The Catholic philosophy of education has always paid special attention to the quality of interpersonal relations in the school community, especially between teachers and students. Saint John Bosco said "education is a thing of the heart", so the authentic formation of young people requires the personal accompanying of a teacher.

Prayer should be a normal part of the school day, so that students learn to pray in times of sorrow and joy, of disappointment and celebration, of difficulty and success.

A Catholic worldview in the curriculum

A Catholic education must present a worldview that is constantly inspired by the Gospel. While Catholic schools conform to government-mandated curricula, they can implement all their programmes with a religious and spiritual dimension.

The Holy See's documents on schools insists that

education is about truth – in both its natural and supernatural dimensions. Unlike relativists, Catholic educators believe that to a limited but real extent, truth can be attained and communicated to others. And this pursuit of truth and reflection of one's purpose in life must include a strong sense of duty to God, self and neighbour.

In an age of information overload, Catholic schools must be especially attentive in their instruction to strike a delicate balance between human experience and understanding,

ensuring that with experience, students appreciate the human significance of what is learnt.

Sustained by Gospel witness

A final indicator of a school's authentic catholicity is the vital witness of its teachers and administrators. With them lies the primary responsibility for creating a Christian school climate, as individuals and as a community. Theirs is a supernatural calling and not simply the exercise of a

profession. The nobility of the task to which teachers are called, demands that in imitation of Christ, they reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by every gesture of their behaviour.

As we go forth into the future, with faith that the Church is eternal, we pray that she will go forth with her schools that are recognisably Catholic. □

The above is an extract from "The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools" by Archbishop J. Michael Miller.

Sec 1 posting

Merit-based admission policy

Admission into Secondary 1 is based on merit. As government-aided schools, Catholic schools follow this merit-based admission policy. In the Sec 1 posting exercise, posting decisions are based on objective and transparent measures of academic merit such as the PSLE score. Hence, the child of a Catholic parent can only gain admission into the Catholic secondary school of choice if he or she first qualifies for admission based on merit.

Direct School Admission (DSA)

Based on MOE's policy intent, DSA provides a pathway for students to gain direct entry to secondary schools based on their talents and achievements that may not be demonstrated at the PSLE.

Students seeking admission solely on the basis of other talents and achievements recognised by the DSA secondary school should only be admitted through the DSA-Sec exercise. These students are still required to take the PSLE. Students will be informed of the outcome of their DSA application, and if successful, they will need to decide whether to take up the offer before their PSLE results are released.

A student who takes up a DSA-Sec confirmed offer

is guaranteed a place in that secondary school provided his/her PSLE result meets the minimum requirement for a course [Express / Normal (Academic) / Normal (Technical)] offered by the school.

Affiliation policy in Sec 1 posting

Most of our Catholic primary schools are affiliated to a Catholic secondary school. Students from such schools enjoy affiliation priority. To enjoy this priority, they must exercise their affiliation by indicating their affiliated secondary school as their first choice.

This affiliation priority allows the student from an affiliated primary school to be admitted into the affiliated secondary school based on the affiliate cut-off point (COP) which is lower than the non-affiliate COP.

Affiliation helps a student from an affiliated primary school to continue his education in an affiliated secondary school that fosters the same strong school spirit and preserves the same valuable school traditions and ethos. At the same time, MOE's policy intent is also to achieve a balance in admission based on affiliation and continued, open access for students who are not from affiliated schools.

From the 2019 Sec 1 posting exercise, 20 percent of school places will be set aside in every affiliated

secondary school for students who do not benefit from affiliation priority. In other words, if demand by eligible affiliated students is lower than 80 percent of places for that course, all of them will secure a place in the school. However, if demand is higher than 80 percent, posting-in of affiliated students will stop at 80 percent and the remaining students will be considered together with non-affiliated students for posting into the school based on their PSLE scores.

When this happens, the affiliate COP for that course will move up.

It is important to note that the affiliate COP can move up and that indicating their affiliated secondary school as their first choice is no guarantee of admission into the affiliated secondary school.

Appeals for discretionary admission

Schools will only be allowed to admit a student on a discretionary place if he/she has met the non-affiliate COP of the school for that year's Sec 1 posting exercise. This is to ensure that discretionary admissions are aligned with the Sec 1 posting exercise, where posting is based on academic merit as demonstrated through the PSLE. □

Submitted by Archdiocese Commission for Catholic Schools