

**External Review of
Catholic Special Character**

**REPORT ON
ST FRANCIS XAVIER SCHOOL
DUNEDIN**

October 2005

School Information

Name: St Francis Xavier School, Dunedin

Address: 27 Benhar Street, Mornington, Dunedin

School Type: Co-educational, contributing primary (Year 1 to 6)

Decile: 8

Staffing Roll for 2005: 107 **Actual Roll at Time of Review:** 101

Maximum Roll: 120

Non-preference Maximum: 5% **Actual Non-preference at Review:** 6

Teaching Staff:

Roll generated	6.57
Other	2.1 (ORRS) 0.3 (Reading Recovery)

Ethnic Composition:

NZ European/Pakeha	90.6%
Maori	4.7%
Pacific	4.7%
Other	0%

Board of Trustees Chairperson: Clare Lynch

Principal: Craig Ward

Director of Religious Studies: Pauline Kearsley

Parish Priest/Chaplain: Father Gerard Aynsley

Summary of Findings

St Francis Xavier School, Dunedin, is a very effective Catholic school which is strongly supported by its board of trustees, staff, families and parish. The school fully lives up to its aim to *“Maintain an ongoing link between home, school, parish and the wider school community to ensure the school is a place of quality learning with Catholic character.”*

Links between the school and the parish of St Francis Xavier are strong and are fostered by the Parish Priest who is very much involved in the life of the school.

The Family Group programme is a real strength of the school, giving responsibility to senior students and providing a peer support group for every child in the school.

Staff members at the school are professional in their approach and, under the capable leadership of the Principal and the Director of Religious Studies, deliver sound programmes of Religious Education. Communication with all members of the school community is open and extensive and is exemplified in the excellent weekly newsletter and in the parent information booklet provided to families new to the school.

St Francis Xavier School is authentically Catholic and is providing very competently for the faith formation of its students in collaboration with their families and the parish of the St Francis Xavier.

Recommendations from this review relate to reporting by and to the board of trustees, inclusion of Catholic Special Character as an agenda item for each board meeting and the continuation of initiatives developed from the self review of Special Character undertaken earlier this year.

Aims of the Review:

1. To enable St Francis Xavier School to demonstrate that it effectively maintains, develops and promotes its Catholic Special Character and that it achieves acceptable standards in terms of the three Catholic Special Character dimensions:
Catholic Community
Pastoral Care
Religious Education
2. To provide an assurance to the Proprietor that the school is authentically Catholic
3. To ensure that the school, which is essentially the parish community assisting its parents to provide for the faith formation of their children, is doing this in a collaborative relationship

Review Personnel:

Father Wayne Healey
John Dowling
Pam Robertson

Dates on Site: 17 to 21 October 2005

Review Process: The review started with the lead reviewer meeting members of the board of trustees and staff, the Principal and the Director of Religious Studies (DRS) on 22 September 2005. The purpose of this meeting was to explain the review process, provide information and answer any questions. Arrangements were set in place to schedule the required interviews for the review.

The formal process began on Monday 17 October with the reviewers joining the staff for a time of prayer together. Interviews and informal discussions with key school personnel followed during the week. These included the Chairperson, board of trustees members including the Proprietor's appointees, the Principal, the Director of Religious Studies (DRS), the Parish Priest, staff, parents and students of the school. The reviewers attended meetings of the board and of teaching staff. Documentation provided by the school was examined and the reviewers visited classrooms, observed Religious Education lessons and joined in prayer times with the children.

The reviewers were warmly welcomed into the school by all members of the school community. They would like to thank those who generously gave of their time to meet the team and who provided information relating to the aims of the review.

Catholic Special Character Dimensions

Catholic Community

Spirituality Prayer is an important part of each school day at St Francis Xavier School. During the review a range of prayer styles was observed. Children were able to draw on formal, spontaneous and structured prayers, along with a meditative approach used most successfully with even the youngest children.

The parish church is close by the school and is made freely available by the Parish Priest for school liturgical celebrations and the fortnightly Shared Prayer time. The parish centre is used for school assemblies.

School newsletters often include a prayer or reflection on the current liturgical season.

Evangelisation St Francis Xavier School proclaims its Catholicity in all its documentation. The parent information book in particular tells of the school's founding history and its special character focus.

Partnership Among the school's aims is to "*Maintain an ongoing link between home, school, parish and the wider school community to ensure the school is a place of quality learning with Catholic character.*" St Francis Xavier School lives up to this aspiration.

"Wee Kids Wednesdays" is a delightful transition to school programme for four year olds which provides an opportunity for local families to consider Catholic education for their children. Linkages with early childhood education centres are also fostered to ensure that Catholic parents are aware of the school when it is time for children's enrolment.

The school has a very involved parent community. Families help with many aspects of school life and the Parent Teacher Association is a small but very active group which works enthusiastically to support the school with social and fundraising activities.

It is noted that the board and the Proprietor's appointees have not established the practice of a cycle of reporting to the Proprietor. Board members have agreed to take action on this matter.

Values Values are specifically identified in the strategic plan. They focus first on the teaching and example of Jesus Christ and provide a sound basis for the school's operation.

School Culture St Francis Xavier School provides a welcoming environment, both in its physical setting and in the way that all members of the school community and visitors are treated. Catholic icons are made visible throughout the school.

Pupils are able to describe the school crest and the meaning of the symbols represented on it. They are proud of the crest which was designed many years ago by students.

Leadership The board of trustees has developed a clear and succinct statement of policy on Catholic Special Character. Its goal is based on the Integration Agreement and has a focus on learning and living the values of Jesus Christ in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

The Principal is a committed Catholic who provides a role model for staff and students. He and the DRS have a co-operative approach to ensuring that the school's Catholic Special Character is developed and maintained.

Stewardship The charism of the Sisters of Mercy is clearly identified in the school's information book. Staff members are developing plans to further promote this aspect.

In term 2 this year, the school conducted a self-review of special character. The process included a survey of parents and reflection about current practices and possible future directions. The findings of the review were positive and encouraging to the board and staff. Suggestions for the future included developing the area of social justice, particularly with work by students in the local community.

The school's strategic plan has a central focus on special character and identifies the target of being "... *an effective Catholic school in the midst of a Catholic community*". The detail includes specific goals to be achieved in relation to special character and strategies to support these.

The Proprietor's appointees and the wider board membership recognise the value of professional development on Catholic Special Character for boards of trustees. They have taken up opportunities offered to date and would welcome a regular cycle of in-service programmes.

The reviewers recommend the development of a closer linkage between the DRS and the Proprietor's appointees to the board of trustees. One means to achieve this would be a regular report from the DRS to the board, submitted through the Proprietor's appointees.

Worship Numerous liturgies are celebrated throughout the year. Examples are the opening school Mass to which every family receives a written invitation, feast day celebrations and liturgical season occasions. Fortnightly shared prayer sessions are led by each class in turn. These provide an opportunity for the school to come together in the parish church with parents for time of prayerful reflection and music. Children also take leadership roles for class prayers and school liturgies. Again, parents are welcomed to join in these events.

Service Children have many opportunities for service and outreach through the school. Recently these have included the Lenten programme, with donations collected for Caritas and for the missions in Chile through a local priest, as well as gifts for victims of the Beslan and tsunami tragedies. In addition the school sponsors a child in Uganda.

At the local level, students have been involved with visits to the elderly, foodbank

donations and a Christmas gift collection. The school formerly had an association with the Young Vinnies, though this group has been less active recently. This area of action for social justice has been identified by the school as one for further development and plans are in place to offer service to the elderly and others in the parish who may need assistance. Student representatives have spoken to the parish at a Sunday Mass about this.

Collaboration with the Parish St Francis Xavier School is identified by parishioners as a vital part of the parish. The Parish Priest is a frequent and welcome visitor to the school. He expresses a deep respect for all members of the staff in their work and they in turn greatly value the collaborative relationship that he encourages between school and parish. The sacramental programme is accepted as a parish responsibility and is delivered with full support from school personnel. The Parish Priest provides an occasional contribution to the school newsletter in terms of a prayer, a reflection or encouragement to participate in parish Masses.

Although most staff members belong to other parishes, their attendance at the monthly family Mass is appreciated as a means of encouraging the children and demonstrating the importance of Sunday Mass.

Pastoral Care

Relationships This school community is characterised by positive and friendly relationships. Staff members form a united, harmonious group who support and encourage one another and who celebrate the successes of children. This leads on to the warm and affirming atmosphere that prevails throughout the school. Parents, board members, students and staff see themselves as part of a vital and inclusive Catholic community.

Several people involved with the school commented on the care and support that is given to children with special education needs by other students.

Safety Children recognise the school as a safe place. In discussion, students stated that bullying is not tolerated and they were able to outline a procedure for any child who had concerns about playground conduct.

Behaviour Management Behaviour management is handled in a very positive way which seeks to identify and reward appropriate social skills and behaviours. An “Attitude of the Week” programme encourages children to notice and nominate for recognition others who are demonstrating the highlighted attitude.

There have been no stand-downs or suspensions at St Francis Xavier School for at least six years.

Cultural Awareness The several cultures within the school are respected and celebrated

as part of curriculum studies. Families are encouraged to share aspects of their culture within the school community.

Organisation A major strength of the pastoral care programme is the Family Group system. This involves every Year 6 student taking responsibility for a small group of younger children. The leaders plan fortnightly activities for their groups and also take a special interest in “their” children throughout the school week. This system builds a sense of responsibility, belonging and caring relationships among the children. The leaders each take a turn at attending a monthly board of trustees meeting and doing a presentation about Family Group activities. The reviewers were impressed by the demeanour of the children observed at the board meeting during the review.

Religious Education

Leadership The Religious Education curriculum statement provides a clear basis for Religious Education teaching, its directions and the values and attitudes to be engendered. It also includes helpful guidelines for teachers.

The Principal and the DRS have a positive and mutually supportive relationship and together provide sound leadership for the Religious Education programme. Teachers commented to the reviewers about the support given to them by the DRS in preparing to teach each strand of the programme.

St Francis Xavier School has a detailed arrangement for Principal and teacher appraisal. The process, which includes assessment in relation to Catholic Special Character, is endorsed by the review team and the school is encouraged to continue its regular appraisal cycle.

Religious Education Curriculum Religious Education is delivered using the national curriculum. Lessons observed in each classroom were of good quality, fully involving every child.

Student self-evaluation is part of each class programme, supplementing the individual assessments and records kept by the teachers and the summative assessments undertaken on completion of strands or topic studies.

Integrated Curriculum Catholic special character permeates all aspects of the school’s life and is integral to the whole curriculum of St Francis Xavier School.

Resources The school is well resourced for Religious Education. The DRS comments that the board provides generously for any materials needed to deliver the programme.

Advisory services and resources from the Dunedin Catholic Education Office are greatly appreciated. Teachers noted the approachability of and the superb assistance given by the

Catholic Schools Support Consultant (Primary).

Professional Development Professional development is fostered by the way that all of the teachers participate in Twilight Meetings and Cluster Meetings arranged by the Catholic Education Office. The Principal and the DRS have attended the conferences and workshop meetings arranged for their groups.

Of the five teachers at the school, two have Level 2 accreditation for Religious Education, one is due to be assessed for Level 2 and two are working towards Level 1 accreditation.

Communication The weekly newsletters are outstanding examples of quality communication with families and they include regular summaries of the current strand in Religious Education. These, along with separate syndicate newsletters, provide full and regular information about the Religious Education programme and how parents can assist children with their learning.

St Francis Xavier School has established an attractive web site which includes information about the school and on line access to the school newsletters.

Religious Education workbooks are sent home and parents are encouraged to provide comments on their children's work.

PROPOSALS FOR ACTION FROM THIS REVIEW

Compliance Requirements

- The board of trustees will need to submit an annual Special Character Compliance Report to the Proprietor. The format is provided in the *Catholic Special Character Review and Development* booklet.
- The Proprietor's appointees to the board should also prepare a written report for the Proprietor each year. Suggested content for this report can be found in the *Handbook for the Board of Trustees of New Zealand Catholic Integrated Schools*.

Key Recommendations

To enhance and develop the very strong Catholic Special Character demonstrated by St Francis Xavier School it is recommended that:

- Catholic Special Character is given prominence by having it as a separate agenda item for each board of trustees meeting.
- This item should include a statement from the Director of Religious Studies on Religious Education activities in the school, rather than having this, as currently provided, in the Principal's report to the board. A Proprietor's appointee could present the statement on behalf of the DRS. As well, this would be an appropriate placement for the student reports on Family Group activities.

Opportunities for Development

St Francis Xavier is a very well performing school. In the future a challenge for the board of trustees and staff will be to seek opportunities for continuous improvement to avoid any risk of becoming complacent about the current high standards that are achieved.

The school has identified two aspects for future development and has already started to take action to implement these. They are plans to promote the school's Mercy charism and further work on social justice at the local level. The review team endorses the initiatives already undertaken in these areas and encourages St Francis Xavier School to continue these directions.

Father Wayne Healey

John Dowling

Pam Robertson

Catholic Special Character Review Team - Dunedin Diocese