

9-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

d'Arbon, T. (2006). Career Aspirations of Potential Applicants for Principals of Catholic Schools: An Australian Perspective. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 10 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1001052013>

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CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF POTENTIAL APPLICANTS FOR PRINCIPALS OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Recent surveys of leadership succession planning in Catholic schools in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory of Australia have confirmed the growing shortage of persons applying for positions of principal in Catholic schools in those states and territory and examined reasons for the decline in numbers. This paper focuses on a particular aspect of that research in which the career aspirations of those being surveyed, in the pool of potential applicants for principal positions, are analyzed and reported. Implications for the future of Catholic schools in Australia as well as for the future leadership of schools in general are examined.

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

For over a century, the leadership of Catholic schools in Australia, and indeed the staffing of the schools themselves, relied on an ongoing supply of qualified members of religious teaching congregations—sisters, brothers, and priests. These congregations had been invited to Australia, mainly from Europe and Ireland in the mid-19th century, at a time when government funding had been withdrawn from Church schools and there was a likelihood that the system of Catholic schools, that had been built up and was keeping the faith alive in the Catholic community, was likely to collapse and disappear. Catholic children would then have been obliged to attend the government schools, which with their secular curriculum, were looked upon with suspicion by the hierarchy of the time.

In these circumstances and contrary to expectations, the Catholic schools grew and thrived under the direction of vowed religious. For nearly 100 years, the country benefited from a strong Catholic and religious presence in education in every Australian town and city. The fact that Catholics represent 28% of the Australian population and that some 50% of Catholic

children attend Catholic schools is a great tribute to the tenacity of the Australian Catholic community and the pride they take in their schools.

Pope John Paul II, on his visit to Australia in 1986, said of the Australian Catholic school:

The parish primary school, where younger children receive their early lessons on the faith, remains the cornerstone of the pastoral care of Australia's Catholic people. Here the community of faith hands on the message of Jesus Christ to its youngest members. (1986, p. 126)

By the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, the situation of a stable Catholic school system had begun to change quite dramatically. Catholic schools were already under pressure with the population explosion caused by the baby boom and immigration following the end of the Second World War, resulting in large classes in schools with already limited facilities. The system was further stressed by the introduction of an additional year of secondary schooling in the 1960s, resulting in a rationing of resources and placing an increasing financial burden on the Catholic community. Into this mix, place the turmoil caused in the Church by Vatican II, resulting in the vowed religious leaving their congregations in large numbers, so that the staffing and leadership of schools in the traditional manner was no longer possible. New solutions needed to be found if the Catholic school system was to continue and prosper.

The closure of the schools was an unthinkable possibility in the minds of the Catholic community whose members had worked so hard to maintain them against great odds. It was only when government funding was restored during the 1960s and 1970s that there was a better sense of financial security and survival.

However, with the declining number of vowed religious available to staff the schools, the matter of finding an ongoing and adequate supply of personnel to continue to teach the increasing number of classes, as well as provide for the future leadership needs, became a matter of priority.

In the short term, the traditional religious scholasticates where the vowed religious received their initial teacher training were reorganized and lay students were recruited to be prepared to take the place of the declining numbers of religious men and women in the schools. This process has now been developed to the stage where many teachers for Catholic schools are formally prepared in a government-funded Catholic university.

As for leadership, initially, retired principals from government schools were recruited to replace vowed religious principals when positions became available. Later, former members of religious congregations who had been

prepared for and had a clear understanding of the Catholic school and who were still teaching in the schools were appointed to be principals. This number is now almost exhausted. Currently, many Catholic education offices have established in-house accredited professional development programs to prepare aspiring principals for their future roles, and leadership courses have been developed at the Catholic university.

However, as will be shown, currently the number of appointable persons who aspire to become principals is decreasing to a level where system administrators are becoming concerned and are seeking remedies to increase the numbers of persons eligible and willing to apply.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This project began in August 1999, with an invitation from the Catholic Education Commission, New South Wales (CECNSW), to conduct a study on the question, "Why were more persons not applying for leadership positions in Catholic schools in New South Wales?" Following an extensive survey, the final report in March 2001 identified and commented on a number of scales of disincentives and incentives relating to the perceptions of the applicants for the principalship in that state. In addition, the report provided a measure of the proportion of the group of potential applicants who would be willing or unwilling to apply for a principal position when an appropriate vacancy became available (d'Arbon, Duignan, & Duncan, 2002).

The phenomenon of declining numbers of applicants for principal positions is not restricted to Catholic schools in NSW and has been widely reported as a matter of international concern. The focus of this paper is on Catholic schools in Australia. However, the phenomenon of lack of numbers of applicants for vacant principal positions is not restricted to these schools only. There are reports of a similar lack of applicant numbers affecting the filling of principal appointments in schools in general, reflected in studies conducted in Victoria by Lacey (2001), in schools in New Zealand (Rowe, 2000), in the United States (Thompson, Blackmore, Sachs, & Tregenza, 2003), and in the United Kingdom (Pyke, 2002)—a situation that has been described as "a demographic time bomb ticking in many school jurisdictions" (Fink & Brayman, 2004, p. 431). As a result, system administrators at government and non-government schools as well as university researchers have been addressing the issue of succession planning and exploring ways of attracting an increasing number of well-qualified and highly motivated applicants to vacant principal positions (Carlin, d'Arbon, Dorman, Duignan, & Neidhart, 2003; Thompson et al., 2003). The situation in NSW reflects these concerns. Serious and strenuous efforts are being made to remedy this situation and reverse this trend by system administrators and planners for the

Catholic schools in that state (Canavan, 2001).

Contrary to some perceptions, Catholic education and school systems in Australia do not constitute a seamless group. There are state, diocesan, and congregational variations in the leadership preparation and selection procedures in the schools of each of these areas, so that in a survey of this kind, there are local and contextual factors to be taken into account when discussing the results, but the overall picture is a good starting point.

Taken as a whole, Catholic education in Australia is a significant contributor to the national educational enterprise with over 1,700 schools and 635,000 students, representing approximately 20% of the total school population of the country. The system employs over 39,000 teachers in 22 dioceses. Hence, a continuing supply of well-prepared teachers and future leaders for these schools is a matter of ongoing concern for planners in Catholic education.

Some of the special features of leaders in Catholic schools include not only for the principal to possess the normal knowledge base and administrative background and experience required for a principal in any school, but also to have the confidence of the Church community that the principal has the necessary motivation and commitment to ensure that the doctrine and values of the Church are faithfully transmitted (Stano, 1993) and that a supportive ethos is encouraged for all pupils and staff within the school (Rogus & Wildenhaus, 1993). A conference co-sponsored by the Institute for Catholic Educational Leadership at the University of San Francisco and the Education Department of the United States Catholic Conference brought together in conversation an international group to discuss the challenges faced by Catholic school leaders in the uniqueness of purpose of the Catholic school and the need to develop a core understanding of what it means to be a Catholic school leader, no matter location (*Catholic Education Leaders*, 2001). Many of these expectations for the Catholic school principal had already been set out through the U.S. Catholic Conference by Ciriello (1993).

With an understanding of the critical role of the leader in a Catholic school and the fact that there was a perception that the number of appointable applicants for the principal position was declining, the scene was set for a study to determine some of the factors affecting these career decisions.

METHODOLOGY

The project to research the leadership aspirations of the pool of potential leaders of Catholic schools for the future began with an extensive literature review.

The abundance of newspaper reports, under such headings as "No Takers

for the Hottest Seat in the Schoolhouse” (Australia; DiGirolamo, 2002); “Pressure on Catholic Principals” (Australia; Tomazin, 2003); “Promotion? No Thanks” (UK; Crace, 2004); “Fewer Bids for Primary Top Jobs” (UK; Thornton, 2003); “Shortage of School Principals Looming” (New Zealand; Rowe, 2000); “Nation’s Schools Struggling to Find Enough Principals” (US; Steinberg, 2000); and “Vacancies Predicted in Principal’s Office” (US; Artesinger, 2000), was indicative of the extent and widespread nature of the problem.

These reports, taken with benchmarking studies discussing the supply of future leaders and likely leadership strengths related to organizational outcomes (Berthnal, Rioux, & Wellins, 1999), as well as literature discussing the perceived shortage of principals (Jones, 2000), provided the basis for the development of a survey instrument that would explore the perceptions of potential school leaders about the incentives and disincentives that they would take into account when applying for a principal position. The instrument also provided the means of exploring the leadership aspirations of this group, using a methodology based on the research of James and Whiting (1998) in the UK. The responses to the aspiration question from each of the state projects are the subject of this paper.

The validation of the draft instrument used a series of telephone interviews with newly appointed principals and focus group interviews with potential applicants in Catholic dioceses not being surveyed. The final questionnaire was field tested with a group of senior leaders, not principals, in another state.

The development of the instrument was guided by four criteria. First, it was essential that the instrument provide a good coverage of the leadership succession literature and the concerns of potential principals. Second, the instrument’s structure should be consistent with general psychometric principles in that it should possess several internally consistent, mutually exclusive scales. Third, individual scale items should be sensitive to different levels of concerns of potential principals. That is, ceiling and basement effects should be avoided. Fourth, the instrument should be relatively economical to administer and score (Dorman & d’Arbon, 2003).

THE NEW SOUTH WALES STUDY

The project in New South Wales (NSW) arose from an initial concern that there were fewer persons applying for principal positions and of those applying, not all were appointable. This was highlighted by annual diocesan returns of applications for principal positions provided by the Conference of Diocesan Directors of Education NSW (2004). The figures for 2003 are shown in Table 1.

It should be noted that some of these dioceses are small and have few vacancies—Wilcannia-Forbes had one vacancy and there were two applicants—whereas the much larger dioceses such as Sydney (24 vacancies) and Parramatta (12 vacancies) should especially be noted. The overall ratio for NSW was 3.2 applicants for each advertised principal position.

Table 1

Principal Vacancies and Ratio of Applicants: Position, NSW Dioceses, 2003

Diocese	Principal vacancies	Ratio applicants: position
Armidale	5	3.0:1
Bathurst	2	1.0:1
Broken Bay	4	5.3:1
Canberra and Goulburn	7	2.29:1
Lismore	7	6.15:1
Maitland-Newcastle	2	4.5:1
Parramatta	12	3.25:1
Sydney	24	2.1:1
Wagga Wagga	4	3.50:1
Wilcannia-Forbes	1	2.0:1
Wollongong	3	5.34:1

Note. Source of data: Conference of Diocesan Directors, NSW (2004)

In addition to the data in Table 1, reports of teacher supply and demand show that there is a developing shortage of teachers in Australia and consequently the possibility of a diminishing supply of potential applicants for principal positions (Lacey, 2004a; Ministerial Council for Employment, Education and Training, 2004; Preston, 2000). In addition, there are reports from Australia and overseas of an increasing departure of qualified teachers and principals from the schools, thereby reducing the supply of potential applicants even further (Butt, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001; Richardson, 2002).

A number of dioceses have already begun to take steps to address the situation. The Catholic Education Office (CEO) Sydney has initiated a program of professional development activities as part of a succession planning process to increase leadership density in the system of schools operated by that archdiocese. The program consists

of a 12-phase management process designed to facilitate leadership succession in Catholic education. It is based on five major assumptions, namely:

- the need to enhance the long-term evangelization thrust of Catholic schools
- the need for all organizations to realize their goals
- the need to ensure leadership continuity at all levels
- the need to identify future leadership requirements
- the need to develop a pool of potential leaders. (Canavan, 2001, p. 75)

In order to obtain a measure of interest in the principalship and the factors and perceptions likely to discourage or encourage persons to apply for a principal position, the project surveyed the pool of persons most likely to apply for such a position (i.e., school executive members—deputy principals, coordinators, and religious education coordinators). The survey instrument was developed, piloted, and after amendment, administered in Catholic schools in NSW in mid-2000. Over 1,000 responses were received, a number that was very encouraging, from which to develop reasonable inferences. The broad results of the leadership aspiration question are given in Table 2.

Using a modified James and Whiting (1998) model, three groups of respondents were identified:

- Unwilling—Those who had applied for a principal position in the past and would not be doing so in the future (unavailable aspirants) together with those who had never applied and did not intend applying (settlers);
- Unsure—Those who had not yet applied and who were unsure whether they would apply in the future (unpredictable) and those who would only apply for a principal position if it was in a suitable location for them (uncertain);
- Willing—Those who had not yet applied but envisaged applying at some time in the future (potential aspirants) and those who were actively seeking a principal position (active aspirants)

The result that 53% of those who responded to the survey were unwilling to apply for a principal position (i.e., the unavailable and the settlers) was the first time that any reliable figure had been put onto a situation that many had felt was the case, but not to any detailed extent. There were diocesan variations and responses varied according to gender and position in the school hierarchy, but overall there were significant data to provide benchmarks for reflection and strategic planning.

Table 2

Career Aspirations of All Respondents

	Career aspirations	Frequency	Percent	Group
Unavailable aspirants	I have applied for a principalship in the past but will not do so in the future	35	3.5	Unwilling respondents
Settlers	I have never applied and do not intend applying	498	49.4	
Unpredictable	I have not yet applied but am unsure if I will in the future	51	5.1	Unsure respondents
Uncertain	I would only apply for a principalship if it was in a suitable location	116	11.5	
Potential aspirants	I have not yet applied but do envisage applying in the future	270	26.8	Willing respondents
Active aspirants	I am actively seeking a principalship	38	3.7	
	Total	1,008	100	

Approximately 300 assistant principals responded to the survey. Of these:

- 30.6% indicated they are not willing to apply for a principalship as compared with the 53% of the unwilling respondents in the total survey;
- 45.2% are planning to apply to be principals at some stage, compared with 31% of the total survey population.

Approximately 200 religious education coordinators responded to the survey. Of these:

- 54.6% were unwilling to apply compared to 53% in the total survey;
- 26.9% were willing to apply compared to 31% in the total survey.

Of the nearly 500 coordinators who responded:

- 65.4% were unwilling to apply compared to 53% in the total survey;
- 23.7% would be willing to apply at some stage compared to 31% in the total;
- 30.6% indicated they are not willing to apply for a principalship as compared with the 53% of the unwilling respondents in the total survey;

- 45.2% are planning to apply to be principals at some stage, compared with 31% of the total survey population.

These results provided the platform from which to launch further studies of leadership succession in Catholic schools in other parts of Australia.

THE VSAT STUDY

Following on from the NSW study, a similar project was initiated by the Victorian Catholic Education Commission to address similar questions for the Catholic Diocesan systems in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. The VSAT Project as it became known, expanded on the issues raised in NSW and as well as addressing the perceptions of senior leaders about disincentives and incentives for applicants seeking a principal position, sought data from principals and Catholic education offices.

A report of the project was prepared and delivered to the diocesan directors in each of the participating states in April 2003, and has been subsequently reported elsewhere (Carlin et al., 2003).

The results from the aspiration question for the VSAT Project are shown in Table 3 and the analysis by state is shown in Table 4.

Table 3

Senior Leaders' Career Aspirations Regarding Applications for Principalship—VSAT Project

	Career aspirations	Frequency	Percent	Group
Unavailable aspirants	I have applied for a principalship in the past but will not do so in the future	24	6.1	Unwilling respondents
Settlers	I have never applied and do not intend applying	141	35.6	
Unpredictable	I have not yet applied but am unsure if I will in the future	33	8.3	Unsure respondents
Uncertain	I would only apply for a principalship if it was in a suitable location	63	15.9	
Potential aspirants	I have not yet applied but do envisage applying in the future	109	27.5	Willing respondents
Active aspirants	I am actively seeking a principalship	26	6.6	
	Total	396	100	

The overall results from these three states showed a smaller proportion of unwilling respondents (41.7% VSAT, 53% NSW) although the proportion of willing respondents was roughly of the same order (34.1% VSAT, 30.6% NSW) and there was a small increase in the percentage of unsure respondents (24.2% VSAT, 16.6% NSW).

When the overall results from the VSAT project were examined on a state by state basis (see Table 4), South Australia showed a very healthy result for willing respondents (49.1% SA, 34.1% VSAT).

Table 4

Senior Leaders' Career Aspirations by State (percent) – VSAT Project

Career aspirations		Victoria	South Australia	Tasmania	Group
Unavailable aspirants	I have applied for a principalship in the past but will not do so in the future	7.2	1.8	5.6	Unwilling respondents
Settlers	I have never applied and do not intend applying	39.2	29.1	44.4	
Unpredictable	I have not yet applied but am unsure if I will in the future	8.7	9.1	5.6	Unsure respondents
Uncertain	I would only apply for a principalship if it was in a suitable location	13.0	10.9	19.4	
Potential aspirants	I have not yet applied but do envisage applying in the future	27.9	32.7	22.2	Willing respondents
Active aspirants	I am actively seeking a principalship	4.0	16.4	19.4	

The variations in these results provide the basis for evaluation and further investigation by the respective dioceses and by the research team to develop appropriate leadership formation programs for future leaders.

THE NORTHERN TERRITORY STUDY

A recent gathering of principals of Catholic schools in the Northern Territory provided the opportunity to gather further data for the project and to carry

out a survey of the leadership aspirations of school executive members in Catholic schools in the territory.

The survey instrument used in the NSW and VSAT studies had proved to be robust and reliable (Dorman & d'Arbon, 2003). While it was anticipated that the numbers of respondents would be small, the data could be used to help identify trends when making comparisons with results from the previous studies.

The Northern Territory provides a number of interesting differences to the other states of Australia, including a small number of Catholic schools ($n = 19$) and remoteness of location that have to be taken into account when discussing teacher supply and demand, the ongoing supply of principals for schools, and Catholic schools in particular (Preston, 2000, pp. 54-55). These differences are highlighted in the projections for the future needs of the territory for teachers, and hence principals.

Evidence would suggest that the recruitment of the majority of principals for Catholic schools in the Northern Territory will be met by sources outside the territory. Of the principals who met in the recent professional development exercise for principals of Catholic schools in the Northern Territory, the great majority of principals had been recruited from interstate locations. It comes as no surprise that returns from the school executive members showed that even though the number of respondents was small, only a very small percentage of persons were willing to consider applying for the principalship (See Table 5).

Table 5

Career Aspirations of Senior Leaders of Catholic Schools in the Northern Territory

	Career aspirations	Frequency	Percent	Group
Unavailable aspirants	I have applied for a principalship in the past but will not do so in the future	1	4.0	Unwilling respondents
Settlers	I have never applied and do not intend applying	15	60.0	
Unpredictable	I have not yet applied but am unsure if I will in the future	2	8.0	Unsure respondents
Uncertain	I would only apply for a principalship if it was in a suitable location	3	12.0	
Potential aspirants	I have not yet applied but do envisage applying in the future	0	0.0	Willing respondents
Active aspirants	I am actively seeking a principalship	4	16.0	
	Total	25	100	

These results will now be further analyzed in light of the special circumstances of the territory and assessed future needs.

OUTCOMES

The outcomes of the project to date have been somewhat encouraging. Diocesan authorities now have data about the leadership aspirations of the senior leaders in Catholic schools in five state and territory jurisdictions, and these results point to the need that unless steps are taken to address the situation, the looming crisis in the provision of principals for Catholic schools could deepen. A possible scenario was proposed in a recent article by Pyke (2002) when writing about a similar situation in the UK:

They [Catholic schools] may well have to move towards the American model of having a Catholic superintendent directing strategy for a group of schools, in which the day-to-day running of individual schools is in the hands of a Christian non-Catholic. (p. 20)

Despite Pyke's concerns, there are encouraging signs from diocesan education offices from around Australia, where they are developing leadership programs, financially supporting potential leaders in postgraduate courses in educational leadership, sponsoring research into new models of principalship, focusing energies and resources on school leadership issues, and developing a culture of leadership in their schools. A major focus to emerge following the recent review of the service provision of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (Duignan, 2003) was the attention to be given to leadership and governance issues in schools in that archdiocese, as a priority, in the Strategic Plan 2004-2006.

Other studies, including the investigation of leadership aspirations of government school teachers in Victoria, are also addressing succession planning issues and developing recommendations to increase the number of applicants for the principal position by better development and preparation programs (Lacey, 2004b).

The concern for a greater awareness for the development of leadership potential and aspirations in education is also being addressed by the leaders of the Church with respect to the leadership in the faith community. Recent pastoral letters, the first from the Bishops of Queensland and second from the Archbishop of Sydney to the youth of the archdiocese (Pell, 2003) have placed an emphasis on leadership and its necessary role in the Church and society and reflect a growing awareness of the need to develop a culture of leadership within the whole community, not just in Catholic education.

CONCLUSION

Through the surveys into leadership succession being conducted by the Flagship for Creative and Authentic Leadership at Australian Catholic University, the overall picture of the leadership aspirations of leaders in Catholic schools and the perceptions of incentives and disincentives of the persons applying for principal positions is being built up and evaluated.

Now that there are data from a number of sources to indicate the numbers and proportions of persons willing to apply—and these numbers appear to be low—the situation for the future leadership of Catholic schools in Australia remains challenging but hopeful. There is now a growing awareness in Australia of the urgent and special need for an ongoing supply of high quality leaders for these schools and the necessity for a strong formation program to ensure that the special nature of Catholic leadership is understood and fostered by appropriate formation and support programs. These future leaders will have to face not only the challenges of today's Catholic school, but be prepared to lead the school of the future in a period of rapid growth and change that will be characterized by e-education and all that the term connotes (d'Arbon, 2004).

The terms leadership succession and succession planning are now firmly embedded in the vocabulary and practices of the strategic planners in the Catholic education and schools offices in Australia. In this way, they will ensure that Catholic schools of the future will thrive under the direction of an ongoing supply of well-qualified and highly motivated Catholic teachers and educational leaders.

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