



Vision for Engagement Launch

MACS Executive Director, Dr Edward Simons

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Good morning.

It is an honour to be here with you today. I believe we are at a pivotal moment for our society, both here in Melbourne and across our nation.

While economies are seemingly recovering, at least on paper, from the impacts of the global pandemic, put starkly – for many people, this is not the case.

Last year, I reflected in an ‘opinion piece’ on the reality of what I am calling ‘the unhappiness trend’, that we see emerging locally, nationally and globally.

And it’s no secret that many young people, today more than ever, are grappling with feelings of unhappiness and uncertainty about the future and their role in it, and although we have never been more connected, many young people have never felt more alone.

According to the 2024 World Happiness Report, young people in Australia today are, quote “the least happy age group” compared to older generations, despite the young previously being among the happiest age groups only 15 years.

And it should concern us all, that in the more recent report released this year, Australia has now lost its spot among the Top 10 happiest nations on Earth.

Yet, despite these declining circumstances, I have hope.

Not only do I believe that our schools already ensure, through the positive actions they take, that the data has not slipped even further – but, into the future, and supported with the right support, I believe schools have a critical opportunity to reverse this trend - not by doing more, but by focusing on what will have the greatest positive impact.



And the research is clear. A big part of this, relates to us creating learning environments where children feel safe and secure, nurtured and nourished - so that each and every student has the ability to explore their full potential, and so that our teachers can truly focus on teaching.

So today, I am going to speak to how Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools or MACS, which collectively comprises around 300 Catholic primary and secondary schools across Melbourne, is taking a big step in doing just that.

But before I do, we must confront reality, and set out the current context more fully. Key issues top of mind for so many educators and parents include the impacts of social media, cyber bullying, disrupted families, less contact with nature, and the continued fallout of a global pandemic here in the world's most locked down city.

Across Australia, student attendance is yet to return to pre-COVID levels, and remain lodged several percentage points lower.

We know that when it comes to attendance in schools, especially for the most disadvantaged students, every day matters.

Australia ranks 69th out of 76 OECD countries in terms of discipline in the classroom. This means our classrooms are among the most disorderly in the developed world. Newspapers continually report on the ever-increasing incidents of both verbal and physical abuse on students and staff - students and parents are fearful, school leaders are stretched, staff are tired.

We are seeing rising concerns about child mental health, wellbeing and resilience. The ever-increasing use of technology and social media is reshaping how young people relate to one another, how they learn, and how they see themselves.

And whilst international research is still emerging, evidence from countries including Singapore, England and the US, as well as here in Australia, point to troubling signs. Students arrive at the school gate, but rather than being ready to learn, are preoccupied, and in some cases haunted, by issues that are far beyond their control.

Often holding digital devices as they arrive, (and we now hear of students as young as Foundation level bringing smartphones to schools) these personal devices may have exposed them, at times without any filters, to complex issues including the horrors of global conflict, poverty and famine; climate change and images of some of the darkest and most disturbing elements of our society.

Attendance levels; mental health and wellbeing; unfettered access to technology; rising levels of fear and anger; students lashing out and lashing in – teachers and principals know that these issues are real, they are constant, and they are shaping the lives of the young people we serve. And they demand for us to act.

But it is in this troubling context, that I feel we can collectively make a real difference - and that's why MACS is proud to be launching its Vision for Engagement.

Not as a silver bullet. Not as a quick fix. But as a system-wide, faith-driven response to some of the challenges.

The MACS Vision for Engagement is an evidence-informed commitment to nurturing calm, respectful, and inclusive classrooms where every student can thrive - academically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Put simply, it is our collective answer to a simple but important question: What kind of learning environments do our students need, to flourish?

And for us, the answer is clear.

They need classrooms where calm is the norm. Where respectful behaviour is not assumed, but taught. Where routines are consistent, expectations are shared, and every student feels safe, seen, and supported.

They need schools where excellence is not reserved for the privileged few - but expected for all.



Where our Catholic commitment to equity for everyone is not an aspiration, but a lived reality.

And where the dignity of every child is upheld, not just in words, but in practice. Students need teachers who are focused on teaching. Who are supported with the best possible professional learning, resources, and policies that enable them to focus on what they do best.

And crucially, they need education systems that are willing to back them in, and to lead. To take a stand. To say, clearly, that there are fundamental nonnegotiables that matter. That respectful behaviour matters.

That turning up to school every-day matters.

That paying attention in class, playing by the rules, and persisting through challenges – that all these things matter.

And importantly, the Vision for Engagement does not stand alone. It is a companion document to our MACS Vision for Instruction, which we launched just over 12 months ago.

Both are united by shared twin goals of excellence and equity, and help secure the foundations of our MACS 2030 strategy 'Forming lives to Enrich the World'.

Where our Vision for Instruction focuses on what we teach and how we teach it, the Vision for Engagement focuses on the conditions essential for learning.

It is also grounded in our Catholic faith and reflects our belief that every child and young person is made in the image and likeness of God, and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, whilst given the best opportunity to flourish.

It is also grounded in world-class evidence. We know that when students feel safe and supported, they are more likely to attend school, to participate in class, and to achieve their potential.



We know that clear expectations and consistent routines reduce anxiety and increase focus. When teachers across whole schools are aligned in their approach, students benefit.

And with our 17,000 staff reinforcing the same high standards and expectations, all students are able to receive the care, attention, and support they need.

And this translates into our six key engagement practices, within the Vision statement.

First, teaching respectful behaviour.

We are moving to treat this as a core developmental priority across all MACS schools. Respectful behaviour will be explicitly taught, consistently reinforced, and embedded into the daily life of our classrooms and schools.

This includes how to listen attentively, how to respond, and how to contribute to a calm, safe and inclusive classrooms, where students understand behavioural expectations.

Next, we are intent on fostering belonging.

Without a sense of belonging, students can languish. But when students feel accepted, respected, and connected to their peers, to their teachers, and to their whole school community, they are more likely to engage, to persist, and to thrive.

Our schools must be places where every student is known and valued and where relationships are nurtured. And on this, we are determined to work harder in partnership with families and parishes to ensure that every child feels that they belong.

Third, we are adopting a vigilant focus on attendance.

Because learning starts with showing up. Every day missed is a missed opportunity to grow, to connect, to be formed. So we take a proactive approach to attendance, including monitoring patterns, intervening early, and working with families to remove barriers to attendance.

Fourth, we will promote mental health and wellbeing for all.



We know that wellbeing and learning go hand in hand. That's why we are embedding social and emotional learning into our curriculum, and creating environments where students feel safe, supported, and empowered. We are teaching students how to regulate their emotions, how to seek help, and how to care for themselves and others. This is not a bonus or an add-on, it is essential.

Fifth we will enable motivation.

Motivation is not something students either have or don't have, it is something we can all actively cultivate. We do this by creating a culture of high expectations, where effort is recognised, progress is visible, and mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn and grow.

We help students set goals, reflect on their growth, and take responsibility for their learning.

And finally, but by no means less important than any of the others, we target individual learning needs.

Each and every student is unique. Some need more time, some need more challenge, and all need care and respect. Through a multi-tiered system of supports, we can ensure that every student receives the level of support they need to grow.

These six practices are, primarily, how we are bringing our Vision for Engagement to life. But I'm also clear that the practices listed and contextual challenges shared earlier, interlock into the topic of digital devices and technology in classrooms.

Technology can deliver extraordinary benefits for student learning and classroom teaching – however, when not used with careful planning and clear intentions, tech in classrooms can also do more harm than good.



Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools

So we are setting out some clear expectations, and parents are backing us hard: technology should only be used when there is absolute clarity of purpose and an understanding of the trade-offs.

So our schools will be re-assessing the use of technology and devices in our classrooms, and front of mind will be the opportunity to reclaim focus, reduce anxiety and restore the human connection that is essential for learning.

In the early primary years, I am especially pleased to see that screens are going down and eyes are going up.

So while our Vision for Engagement is aspirational, in that it sets a high bar, it is also supported by a clear implementation plan, that includes professional learning, expanded resources, relevant policy change, and enhanced monitoring.

And we are doing this all together, as a single system of 300 schools.

We are saying to our students: You matter. Your learning matters. Your behaviour matters. And we believe in your potential, not just at school, but out there in the rest of the world.

We are saying to our teachers: We value you, and we are here to support you with the tools, professional development and policy change that will allow you to reclaim the classroom and with it, the joy of teaching.

We are saying to our families: We are your partners. We share your hopes for your children and we are committed to working with you to help them thrive.

And we are saying to all: Catholic education is not standing still. We will continue to innovate, and work as hard as we can, to provide Catholic schools for parents and students that reflect the best of who we are, and the best of what we can be

And on this, I am proud that over 120,000 students are enrolled in MACS schools across Melbourne today – a number growing each year, and larger than at any point in time before.

And so I'd like to end my words today by sincerely thanking every teacher, every school colleague and every principal, who has contributed so passionately to the development of our Vision for Engagement – this is a Statement document designed with you, for you. I also wish to thank colleagues from other schooling systems, higher-education, government and policy experts for the support and expertise offered in the process to research, design and develop the Vision.

The work has been led and stewarded by a small but very dedicated team of colleagues in the MACS office –and to them, especially Bern Cronin, I say thank you.

And I also want to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to our families and our Catholic parishes across Melbourne for walking with us on this journey.

Of course, we know that this is just the beginning, as we launch this document, as we did the Vision for Instruction a year ago.

The real work starts now. But I have no doubt that we are ready.

Thank you for this opportunity to address this important Education Summit – my thanks go to The Age, the event organisers, and fellow presenters - especially those who join today's event from the classroom coalface, who confront the issues highlighted day in day out, and continue to strive for better outcomes for all of our young people.

Thank you.