

Brisbane Catholic Education: responding to a new formation challenge

The BCE approach to spiritual formation seeks to join the meaning making of personal narrative and the mission shaping of the Christian meta-narrative in a way that maintains the integrity with both. The system-wide approach to spiritual formation is outlined in the Framework document (*Catching Fire*) Model and Matrix, underpinned by well researched design principles and implemented in a ‘whole community’ focus through formation programs, resources and strategies.



The staff formation programs undertaken by a cross section of staff in each school community which commits to *Catching Fire*, explore the BCE Spiritual Formation Framework’s three theological dimensions in a developmental and sequential way through distinct programs, each targeting different groupings of staff within the participating community. Thus, the participating schools committing as a *Catching Fire* community over three years are expected to engage in FOUR ways:

1. *The Formation Framework:*
Familiarising all staff with the approach and shared language.
2. *Planning and Goal Setting:*
Ensuring that planning and goal setting occur for individual staff members and the whole staff, linked to school and systemic annual goal setting and strategic renewal planning.
3. *General Systemic Initiatives and Resources:*
Using the range of systemic resources provided to all schools.
4. *Catching Fire Staff Formation Programs:*
Sponsoring particular staff to participate in the three staff formation programs.



The three distinct *Catching Fire* programs are each connected to vocation and context:

- Guiding Lights** (9 days over 3 years)
– for principals and school leadership
- Keepers of the Flame** (8 days over 3 years)
– for experienced teachers
- Spirit Fire** (10 days over 3 years)
– for ‘initiators’ within the school community

In addition, the **Facilitators Formation** program (4 days over one year) develops the skills and attitudes associated with being a facilitator of formation within one’s own school.

Strategic Intention in Building Capacity

The strategic purpose in engaging a number of staff from the same school in the three formation programs is to build a core of shared experiences, shared understanding and shared praxis in order to influence the wider culture in the school. Targeting a cross-section of staff that includes leadership, classroom teachers and support staff has the strategic intention of capitalising on the influence of leadership as well as generating broader staff ownership. In addition to this, on completing the three year program, particular staff are invited to complete a one year Facilitators’ Formation course to provide school-based animation of staff formation.

In this way, the strategic objective has been to grow capacity across the system among staff.

The Challenge for the System

While programs and very significant sustained impact on staff of the BCE approach is well documented, the strategic impact in influencing wider school culture has been uneven across the system. BCE has 12,000 staff and 139 schools. It is a system with many large projects and big strategy engagements with schools and has undergone a significant re-structure at the same time as the rollout of this system strategy. In this mix, the strategic traction within schools lost momentum. In smaller dioceses where the BCE whole community approach has been adopted, the impact has been deep because all school communities have been able to be engaged relatively quickly and monitored more easily.

The Response to the System

Dr Jill Gowdie, the Principal Education Officer outlines the response:

In responding to the challenge we find here in Brisbane, we are prototyping the animation of the staff formation strategy program in two schools. One is an ecumenical Prep to Year 12 college on the coast and the other a large inner city primary school. The principals of both these schools have been involved in the programs before and one now co-facilitates one of our leadership formation programs. They know the transformational impact of the programs and are keen to ensure a change of culture in their new schools. In conjunction with an external animator who is a former BCE team member we are tailoring the program to each school in order to sharpen the impact and better build on the skill, experience and energy of the participants. This is going very, very well. As we continue, we will use the strategy in these two schools as a prototype for the emerging graduates of the Facilitator Formation program as well as area supervisors to work with their school clusters, again seeking to widen ownership and continue to build capacity across the system.

