

## **Demography can so easily become destiny**

A statement by Bishop Greg O’Kelly SJ, Bishop of Port Pirie  
and Chairman of the Australian Catholic Bishops Commission for Catholic Education

The report of the Gonski Funding Review will soon be made public, and there has been a lot of commentary in the media about the new funding “model”. These commentaries typically focus on the benefits this model will deliver for the future schooling of our young people.

The talk is often about equity. The Prime Minister had a good phrase: “demography is not destiny” – where you live should not have an untoward effect on your schooling outcomes.

I wonder what the Gonski Report will say about funding country schools, in particular, Catholic country schools.

Will it talk about the punishingly high costs of providing quality schooling in country Australia? Information technology, formation of staff, bus travel for students to get to school, provision for students with special needs, recruitment costs, school building construction and maintenance costs, teacher accommodation? Basically, there is a cost premium for every activity in a country Catholic school.

We do not begrudge the extra loadings allocated to Government schools. We agree with them. However, Catholic schools simply do not have the resources to match them, and this represents a failure in equity.

The Diocese of Port Pirie is my demography and it is an excellent example of less-than-reasonable funding equity. My diocese is the same size in area as France and Germany together and includes the lower part of the Northern Territory. We have 13 schools scattered across these distances.

What I say of my diocese pertains to all country dioceses in Australia, particularly the Outback ones.

Few city-dwelling Australians appreciate the challenges that the tyranny of distance brings in the country. City-based thinking is often blind to its impact in rural areas.

An Enterprise Agreement recently gave school staff an allowance of 74 cents per kilometre when travel was required for in-service purposes. Most in-service takes place in the cities.

Consider these examples from my diocese, which could be matched by every other Catholic rural diocese. A round trip to Adelaide at 74 cents a kilometre costs our school in Peterborough at least \$400, and often there are accommodation costs in the city as well. And then there is the cost of the replacement teacher, if one can be found.

Similar costs would apply at our schools in Port Augusta, Gladstone and Jamestown. At Roxby Downs it could cost up to \$1,400 to pay for the teacher's travel and overnight stay. There is also a significant personal toll on a teacher who has to drive a thirteen hour round trip.

It is a very different case to simply driving from one Adelaide suburb to a meeting in another.

The government bus may only take Catholic school children as far as the nearest government school. So eleven students at the Catholic school at Loxton are dropped off sixteen kilometres from school at Loxton North. We had to pay \$78,500 for a bus with seatbelts to ensure that small numbers of children can come to us. By contrast, to hire a bus to Adelaide and back costs \$1,800.

Staff recruitment is a constant and expensive challenge, flying or driving applicants and accommodating them for interviews from the city to the bush.

Building costs in the country are 25 per cent dearer than in the city, and numerous extra costs need to be factored in to any budget for construction. The standard BER project at Roxby Downs gives the school a building shell, not a functioning hall.

Students with special needs also suffer more injustice in country areas and their needs must be met. In some rural schools there is simply not the funding available to accommodate children who seek to enrol. We cannot afford to provide the services, and thus these parents are denied choice.

Government schools have all this paid for, and that is right and just. The Catholic schools in the bush struggle. They have dedicated staff and provide excellent teaching. The schools are in demand from parents, and they provide choice for those parents. But we need more government funding if we are to do the right thing by our children and our teachers.

All schools (not only the Catholic schools) need to be allocated the funding that gives them a chance of providing the same level of education city schools offer, on principle.

The people arguing for greater funding equity post-Gonski would do well to concentrate on how the young people in our regional and rural schools are faring, and how the balance can be re-set to give them and their teachers a better chance.

**ENDS**

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