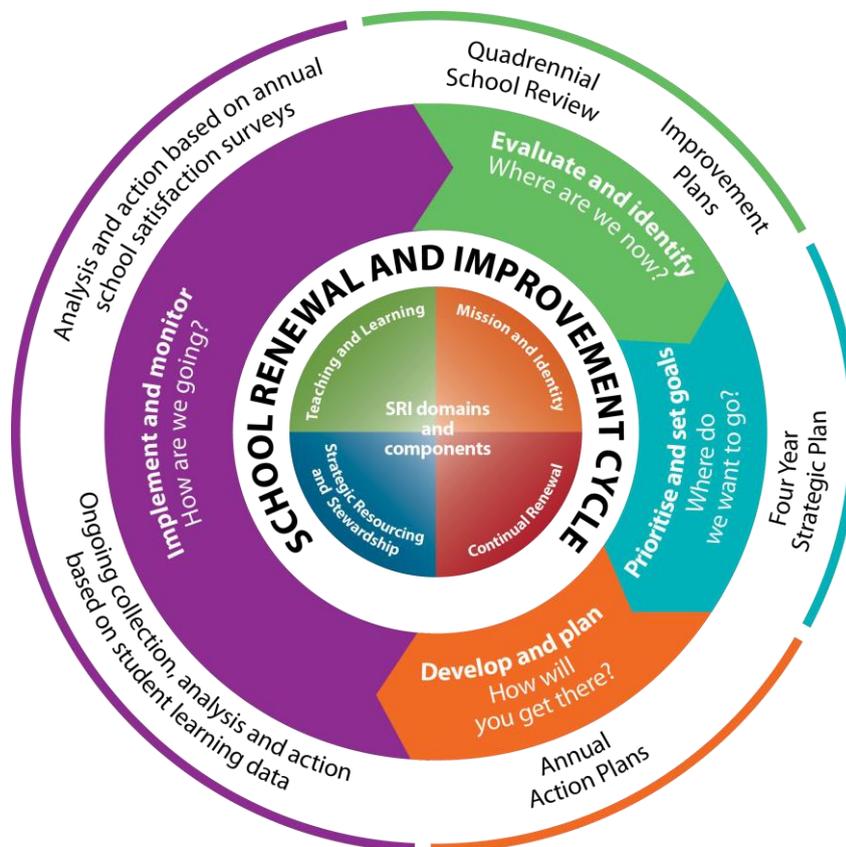




# Diocese of Toowoomba Catholic Schools

## TCS Quadrennial school review Full report

# St John's School Roma



15 March 2021



## Diocese of Toowoomba Catholic Schools

### Foreword

*Although much has been written about school reform in past decades — national reports, studies, descriptions of findings — insufficient attention has been given to the important relationships among the adults within the school, and to a consideration of how the abundant untapped energy, inventiveness and idealism within the school might be encouraged.*

Roland Barth, Harvard Graduate School of Education

The philosophical approach to the review is based on Appreciative Inquiry, a well-established approach used by organisations varying from international corporations to not-for-profit social organisations. Appreciative Inquiry begins with the assumption that there are good things happening in the organisation and identifying these. It then moves to what people see as areas needing attention, improvement or change. The key principle is that these are placed in the context of what the organisation does well, so it moves beyond a problem-solving agenda to an improvement agenda.

Appreciative Inquiry aims to bring ownership to the school. The review team hears ‘the story’ of the School through its stakeholders, and this informs the key findings and improvement strategies that the review team has recommended. Exactly how the School addresses the key findings and improvement strategies is left for the school to determine, but it is mandatory for the school to address them over the following four years.

## Methodology

The review was conducted from 16 to 18 March, 2021.

The review consisted of structured interviews of the following school community members:

- The School Principal and all members of the School Leadership Team
- Father Gerardo Parish Priest
- 36 teachers including senior and middle leaders
- 7 School Officers
- 18 parents and P and F members
- 24 students
- 6 Board members

## Reviewers

Paul Herbert: Acting Senior Education Leader, TCSO and Chairperson

Jim Midgley: Director, Teaching and Learning, TCSO

Peter Cuskelly: Principal, Our Lady of the Southern Cross School

Norm Hunter: Consultant, ex-Principal Hillbrook Anglican School

## School Renewal and Improvement (SRI) domains and components

The reference document for the review was the SRI domains and components from the Toowoomba Catholic Schools (TCS) School Renewal and Improvement Framework.



### Domain 1 Teaching and learning

#### Component 1.1 Students and their learning

#### Findings

St John's School, Roma, is an exemplary place of learning and spiritual development. The review team agrees that the mantra:- 'Growing people, building community in a distinctly Catholic environment', is alive and very evident in the actions, hearts and minds of the community. The Mercy values of *respect, compassion, justice* and *excellence* permeate the school and even visitors must be aware that something distinctly Catholic, with a strong intellectual tradition, exists in this school. This underpins the school's strategic direction and is well articulated by the Principal.

It is clear that the staff are united in their belief around learning and the focus on quality relationships with students.

*Teachers here are easy to get along with. If you need a friend, someone to talk to, there is always a teacher ready to listen* (Secondary student).

The School is known in Roma as the 'school of choice', enjoying a stellar reputation in the Roma and district community. Families come from a wide catchment area, including Roma, Mitchell (State and St Patrick's), Wallumbilla, Surat, and Injune.

Parents and students report that the school maintains a reputation for high academic standards, and at the same time is known for its inclusivity. There is widespread understanding that students of all abilities and multiple interests are catered for.

Staff are becoming more skilled in the Planning for Personalised Learning (PfPL) expectations. Staff now see this as critical in terms of knowing their students and assisting every student in achieving educational success, as well as the collection of Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) information and evidence. Financially this is critical to support School Officer funding and a variety of resourcing specific to student needs.

PfPL planning processes are different in Primary and Secondary.

Primary teachers plan in the Diocesan Learning Profile (DLP) grid which is transferred to Unit Plans held within the DLP. Secondary teachers plan units in SharePoint (PfPL is noted in individual teachers' Unit Plans), then copy units into the DLP and populate the DLP grid separately.

The Executive Leadership Team (ELT) believe the process has been successfully implemented and made more coherent by the creation of a new Middle Leader (Inclusion) position, along with attendance at Toowoomba Catholic Schools professional development. Some teachers still consider the workload expectations around evidence gathering to be excessive. Secondary teachers have not yet embraced the DLP as the system tool for recording differentiation and gathering evidence.

Differentiation using PfPL to meet individual student needs remains an ongoing focus and teachers are growing in their confidence to plan for and to make adjustments. At this stage the embedding of PfPL is in the early stages.

A review of Planning for Personalised Learning documentation and evidence indicates that 100% of teachers have identified the adjustments in the overview grid. Approximately half of the adjustments are linked to the Australian Curriculum and just under 50% of teachers indicate that curriculum content is adjusted in lessons.

The teachers have clearly nurtured an environment that is safe and inclusive. This is a multicultural environment where families new to Australia say they feel welcomed.

*We are new to the Australian culture and way of life. My sons feel welcome and so do we. We have never experienced anything but support and friendship. This is a safe place for us. My boys feel that they belong here. (Parent)*

### **Explicit improvement agenda**

The current leadership team has worked hard in recent years to build communities of teaching and learning to share knowledge and best pedagogical practice. This has been done in various ways.

There are weekly staff meetings, led by academic and curriculum leaders, with a specific focus, enabling staff to share best practice with their colleagues. A culture of open classrooms is being fostered with emerging interest in participating in selective observations and feedback. Collaborative year level (Primary) and subject (Secondary) planning and communication platforms are used in the Microsoft suite of products.

The new structure of meetings and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is supported by most teachers, who can see the benefits and positive impact on their work. Teachers agree that any whole school focus works its way down through these structures. Most agree that these structures nurture leadership development opportunities and foster collective teacher efficacy. Some teachers see greater efficiency in the single line of authority and communication channels. In general teachers say they would appreciate greater clarity in line management and communication structures.

The school Executive Leadership Team (ELT) has been focusing on the curriculum review of all P-10 units so that they align with year level standards. This alignment of standards and assessment is not yet evident in the DLP P-6 units. Years 11 and 12 continue the refinement of units and assessment to focus on building skills and techniques to unpack the learning.

Academically, the school is on a strong upward trajectory. The ELT report that National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) mean scale score data show significant improvement in Years 3 and 5 across all NAPLAN dimensions (literacy and numeracy) in 2019. Spelling was identified in 2019 as in need of a whole school focus.

Overall, the percentage of students reaching Toowoomba Catholic Schools reading targets is 71%. The review team acknowledges the trend in reading in P-4 with individual student reading levels doubling during the year from semester to semester. Cohort data for Years 3 -6 show gradual increase in target attainment, with the leadership team suggesting the rate needs to increase.

Early analysis of Primary Year 2 reading data (2020) is showing a significant slowing in the rate of growth on previous years and review is underway to determine the impact of COVID or other contextual factors. The general conclusion is that further functional testing is required to identify decoding and/or comprehension delays, requiring targeted intervention at specific junctions such as Years 2/3.

In the senior school there is a strong variety of pathways with General Subjects, Applied Subjects, School-based Apprenticeships/Traineeships, and Vocational Education, both at school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE).

Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) results in the first year in the new Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) system are exceptional, with 22% ATAR eligible between 95.00-99.95, 33% ATAR eligible between 90.00-94.95, and 67% ATAR eligible between 80.00-99.95.

The leadership team have been focusing on the percentage of students who concluded Year 12 with a Queensland Certificate in Education and examining the context that has led to only 80% of Year 12 students (36 out of 45) attaining a QCE. The ELT acknowledge the context and resulting disappointing percentage and are focusing on strategies to address this.

Seven students engaged in School-based Apprenticeships; five converted to full time post Year 12; Twenty-one students completed Certificate III in Business/Fitness; two students completed Certificate II at TAFE; forty-two of forty-five Year 12 students had direct pathways at the completion of Year 12.

The perception surveys (RADII) that are undertaken every two years show the following results:

- overall student satisfaction Primary students – 92%
- overall student satisfaction Secondary – 77%
- overall parent satisfaction – 91%
- overall staff satisfaction – 97%
- overall parent satisfaction with educational progress – 91%
- overall student satisfaction with educational progress, Primary – 85%
- overall student satisfaction with educational progress, Secondary – 79%
- overall staff satisfaction with educational progress, Staff – 94%

High impact strategies are part of an explicit improvement agenda to begin implementation from Term 2, 2021. Learning intentions and success criteria are already evident in practice in the Reading Improvement Strategy in Primary and in the majority of Secondary planning. Students interviewed have different experiences of high-impact teaching strategies. Some students, when made aware that it could be the use of exemplar posters, examples of quality work (what an 'A' level looks like, what a 'C' level looks like) recall this being used by some teachers.

### **Improvement strategies**

- Continue to refine teacher understanding of PfPL procedures so that teacher practice is modified to address the learning needs of all students.
- Ensure the review work undertaken in curriculum and planning is reflected in the overviews and units in the Diocesan Learning Profile (DLP), the system planning tool).
- Engage staff in professional learning to facilitate the implementation of high-impact teaching strategies that enhance teacher practice and maximise student learning.

### **Analysis and discussion of data**

Data analysis is an expected component of Professional Learning Community meetings and the aim is for this to impact on pedagogical practice. The leadership team believe teachers have become far more immersed in the NAPLAN process and are becoming more data-informed.

The school has collected a wide range of data in the Diocesan Learning Profile (DLP), Reading

Improvement Strategy (RIS), (PM, Probe, LSK) and PAT R, PAT M, PAT S. Many staff comment on the value of the new Sentral student management system and the accessibility of behavioural data, attendance data and parent communication.

Some teachers comment on the effort it takes to collect this formative and summative academic data and question the benefit.

*We don't act on the data enough. I wonder if we sometimes put the effort into the data collecting and not into the actions and interventions the data should generate. (Teacher)*

Teachers say that new meeting structures are leading to more discussions around what the data are telling them and how data analysis might influence planning. Data walls are in place and student progress is monitored on them. Parents say that teachers speak confidently with them about their children's learning needs and progress.

The leadership team use the Business Intelligence (BI) dashboard and school wide reporting data and assessment information.

### **Improvement strategies**

- Continue to engage staff in professional development in analysing and interpreting data.
- Investigate ways that the analysis of data by teachers can be further used to inform teacher practice and provide differentiated learning opportunities for students.
- Formalise ways year level or learning support meetings can focus on review and response to the implications of the data for adapting teaching strategies.

### **Learning culture**

Teachers acknowledge a significant emphasis is being placed on academic achievement and building a culture of high expectations with academic rigour. It is apparent that the focus on high impact teaching strategies in the Annual Action Plan (AAP) is reflected in deeper levels of understanding and application and the ability to transfer learning into other contexts. Some students indicate that they see this happening in their day to day classes, and it is apparent that it is in its early stages.

A focus on cognitive verbs and introducing these meanings and associated skills earlier in the secondary curriculum is occurring. Year 7 students speak of their experiences with feedback in a positive manner. They perceive that this is their first experience with this kind of targeted feedback, saying that they are appreciating their first opportunity to produce drafts that teachers review so that they can address these ideas and suggestions in order to produce improved pieces of work.

The review team heard concerns about the ability of students to adjust to the changes in requirements for the assessment load of Year 7 and 8. Students identify ATAR as the reason for the lower secondary classes having to "do more tests". Year 10 students believe that two weeks of assessments at the end of each term with assignments, and testing being "full on", means that sport or part-time jobs are impacted, or some school-work 'has to take a back seat'.

Secondary students suggest that opportunities for collaboration, communication and creativity in learning are provided by some teachers. They describe lecture style PowerPoints, with some teachers delivering content and them taking notes as the predominant style of pedagogical practice. The panel did not have the opportunity to interview Primary students.

*Primary Teaching staff are brilliant. Staff know students and are committed to their learning. Our staff interact brilliantly with students pastorally and academically, knowing their journey. The collaboration is tight and frequent. (Teacher)*

Teacher goal-setting occurs according to system expectations. A small number of teachers are unsure of the purpose of this process and are yet to be convinced of the advantages for them in terms of personal growth and development.

A number of parents comment on the rapid growth of the school and wonder about the impact on the school's community culture.

Some parents also have the perception that there is an emphasis on early years and senior years but between those grades, they say there is a void in support, student leadership and resource allocation.

*Year six students get no leadership opportunities... There is a gap between Years 4 and 11. Are there any simple things we can do to give Years 4 to 11 a sense of definition for both staff and students? Subtle changes in structure or staffing are needed, not a physical separation ... There is a lack of leadership opportunities for both staff and students in this area of the school. (Parent)*

The ELT and school board have acknowledged the gap identified above and are engaged in discussions on the development of leadership opportunities for the upper primary and lower secondary students.

The review team heard a disparity in comments about behaviour management. Many speak positively of the expectations, implementation and follow through. Some see inconsistencies in the way consequences are handled by different teachers, and others suggest that the whole-of-school approach needs adjustments for students who regularly require intervention. They suggest an early years approach should differ from the senior years approach in terms of sanctions and follow-up support.

*The inconsistencies in terms of consequences for bad behaviour are very apparent. (Parent)*

*Can we consider what works best for each phase of a child's development throughout their schooling? (Teacher)*

### **Improvement strategies**

- Continue the unpacking of high impact teaching strategies for maximizing learning from P-12 to enable greater student engagement with learning.
- Develop collective capacity in providing constructive feedback to students about their learning by establishing school wide practices, expectations and processes.
- Develop collective capacity in varying content delivery to ensure there are opportunities for greater collaboration and creativity.
- Further explore the teacher goal-setting procedures to foster a sense of ownership, purpose and benefit.
- Review behaviour management responsibilities and procedures in a collaborative way to ensure best practice in each phase of schooling in a P-12 School.

## **Component 1.2 Curriculum structure and provision**

### **Findings**

#### **Systematic curriculum delivery**

Under the new Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) system, significant work has been undertaken to ensure the endorsement and confirmation procedures run smoothly. The benefits of these efforts are evident in the results obtained.

Significant work has been occurring with teachers on assessment rigour, providing students with clarity on what is required to demonstrate high levels of achievement in a subject.

It is clear that the Reading Improvement Strategy (RIS) has had a significant impact on teacher self-efficacy. Teachers believe that their ability to teach reading has been enhanced and the impact on student achievement has been evident: a significant motivator and energiser for teacher self-belief and students' confidence in their ability. Professional development in the RIS is being extended to secondary teachers.

Other capacity building projects that the school has entered into - Planning for Personalised Learning, Phonics to Spelling, the Resilience Program and Illuminate - are also well received and seen as valuable. Many teachers speak of the busyness and the need for work/life balance in the profession. All concede the projects are having a positive impact in terms of capacity building and academic learning and achievement for students, and they are reluctant to comment on what to leave out.

Parent perception data suggest that parents feel informed about what their children are learning. Parents speak highly of the impact of the Reading Improvement Strategy on their children's reading, and some speak of how they use the strategies at home and in conversations with their children.

With different planning tools and learning management systems used in different learning areas of the school, it is difficult to ascertain the level of monitoring of learning across year levels. The Diocesan Learning Profile appears to be used inconsistently in Primary areas with a wide variance of competence and effectiveness evident in current planning and assessment in Primary.

While one person is appointed officially as Assistant Principal Curriculum P-10, there are a number of additional roles and supports involved. Curriculum leaders in Secondary turn the supplied overviews into units, and units are amended according to cohort needs and updated regularly with Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) changes.

Across the school there are a number of teachers involved in curriculum and planning support. Some teachers suggest that work is required to address perceptions of varying expectations in planning and assessment.

### **Improvement strategies**

- Seek to align and clarify planning expectations including year level collaborations and line manager expectations.
- Explore the mindsets of teachers around what constitutes new additional work and what should now be embedded practice to alleviate the sense of 'additional workload'.
- Update the Diocesan Learning Profile to ensure the work undertaken in aligning planning with curriculum and assessment is apparent.

## **Component 1.3 Pastoral care and student wellbeing**

### **Student social and emotional well-being**

The school promotes a safe and nurturing environment that supports the needs of its community by identifying, promptly responding to, and supporting the individual needs (spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, psychological, academic and medical) of students.

*Access to counselling and student support (learning as well as wellbeing) is excellent.*  
(Parent)

Building key qualities to assist in developing the whole student is a focus of the leadership team. Teachers refer positively to the school's response to an identified need to build student resilience emerging from a review undertaken in 2019.

*Kids seem to be a little more stressed. As a result, there is a need for students to have lessons focused on a range of personal development issues such as mindfulness, empathy, how to deal with stress, how to identify good things in your life: a 50 minute lesson to help students slow down a little and reflect on the busyness of their lives.* (Secondary Welfare Leader)

The school's Resilience Program is driven by Secondary Welfare Leaders and Primary Welfare Coordinators, and is taught in allocated Pastoral Care (PC) lessons.

Teachers, parents and staff praise the content and structure of Secondary PC in teaching students resilience and developing a collective and shared understanding of Mercy values as exemplified

through the respectful relationships amongst students. Primary students say they are excited by the success of the Resilience Program in the secondary years and await its implementation in the primary years.

*I am really excited by the Resilience Program. It fits in perfectly with our RE and Health curriculum. (Primary teacher)*

*The Resilience Program is what we need and I am glad that the whole school is using it. (Secondary teacher)*

Staff and parents commend the work of the School Counsellor in dealing professionally and effectively with both student and staff wellbeing matters. These stakeholders feel confident and secure in the provision of higher-level support services, and comment positively on the Counsellor's approachability and manner.

*The School Counsellor is excellent: so supportive and approachable. She will check with the child and with me as the teacher to see if I am OK with what I have heard. She is someone you can go to about anything". (Primary Teacher)*

*The School Counsellor is outstanding. My eldest daughter was supported extremely well when she experienced some mental health issues. (Parent)*

The academic support students receive draws particular praise from parents of Senior students. The work of the Careers Development Practitioner in supporting students with their subject selections and post school considerations is highly regarded by parents. The expansion of pathway options available to students in conjunction with a detailed Senior Education and Training (SET) planning process is also seen in a very positive light by parents.

*The pathways options for after school has been exceptional lately. The career development practitioner role is excellent, with kids getting prior University placements. (Parent)*

## **Relationships**

High quality relationships are evident in the everyday life of the school community, with positive, empathic and affirming interactions between students and staff, students with each other, and staff with staff.

Staff share many positive comments about their work together and say they enjoy working at St John's. The most recent RADII data indicate 100% of respondents agreeing with the statement 'I like working at the school'. (2019 RADII survey)

*There are positive staff relationships at the school: a real culture of collegiality, a culture of helpfulness and willingness to give of their time to the betterment of the students. (Teacher)*

*I feel very much a part of the school. I am always invited to professional learning opportunities and there is a lot of support available from teachers. I always feel comfortable and ready for a productive day. The personal support (IT for example) is very welcome. (Relief Teacher)*

Students make clear that they experience inclusivity and connection through participation, engagement and ownership, within the classroom and the broader school community.

Parents speak highly of this experience in reinforcing the message that students of all ages feel connected to one another and are proud to be members of the St John's community.

*The interaction between students of all ages is tremendous. As a parent of primary school students I can see the benefits of this interaction. I also see it outside of school. The students gravitate to each other when they see one another and as a parent I feel grateful knowing that my child is known. (Parent)*

Students themselves value the interaction opportunities afforded to them, and student leaders reflect positively on this engagement, particularly regarding the Year 12/Prep buddy reading program. Senior students say they would like further opportunities for engagement, and also argue strongly for the reintroduction of the Year 11/ Prep buddy program that was a feature of the school's life in the current Senior students' early years at St John's.

Students report a strong sense of engagement with the school's leadership team, and value the opportunity to provide a student voice about matters that they see as being important to them.

*The Principal and teachers listen to the voice of the students. We were all saying that the sports uniform didn't look good with the shirts tucked in. So now we can untuck them and this has been great. (Year 8 student)*

Parents comment positively on the communication provided by the school and share a feeling of connectedness to the school. Parents communicate excitement at once again engaging with the school post COVID. A small number of parents indicate that they would now like to see more parental assistance being sought by the school as well as some parent-friendly events.

*There is a feeling that fewer invitations are going out to parents to be involved in the school ... Open days are marketed towards new students and not the families of existing students whose parents are unaware of what happens in school. (Parent/ P and F member)*

The school leadership have made clear that they are very keen to return to pre-COVID protocols regarding parental engagement in the school once Queensland Health directives allow.

### **Effectiveness and system structures**

The Early Career Teacher and induction programs are seen as effectively building capacity of new staff and beginning teachers in aligning to the pastoral care and wellbeing of all students within the school. Teachers are clear in the purpose and structure of the well-documented pastoral care programs, and these are reviewed and revised to best meet the needs of the students at the school.

Students at St John's are connected to career development pathways which give students direction in their future pathways. The Career Development Practitioner consults with Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office staff to provide a wide variety of opportunities for students to engage in School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships or Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs where appropriate.

A number of parents and students suggest that assessment schedules in Years 7 and 8 are currently having a negative impact on the wellbeing of students. Parents and students refer to the impact of significant volumes of assessment at peak periods and ask whether all Year 7 and 8 assessment is necessary. Teachers have noted an increase in student absenteeism at these times.

### **Improvement strategies**

- Continue the roll out of the Resilience Program across the school, as planned.
- Continually monitor the workload of the School Counsellor and investigate realistic ratios of student to counsellor.
- Investigate ways to ease the pressure on students and staff through refinement of the school assessment schedule.



## Domain 2 Mission and identity

### Component 2.1 Religion curriculum

#### Findings

##### Systematic curriculum delivery

St John's School overtly promotes educational excellence in a distinctly Catholic environment. The school has a sequenced program for Religious Education (RE) interpreted in a recontextualised way across all Religious Education classes.

The unit plans of individual teachers of Religious Education are required to be available and are regularly reviewed by the Assistant Principal Religious Education (APRE). These plans cover specified curriculum content, general capabilities, mapping of cognitions, cross-curriculum Catholic Social Teachings, and also provision of adjustments to cater for the diverse needs of students.

Expectations of the teaching of RE align with the expectations of teaching and learning within other learning areas. These expectations outline planning, teaching, assessing and reporting requirements. Ownership is evident by year level teachers for planning and resource gathering. RE staff regularly review student results to enable modifications as needed.

The school has prioritised the implementation of the Illuminate Tier 1 project from Term 1, 2021. This project is designed to enhance teacher capacity and desire to deliver stimulating and engaging Religious Education lessons. It is intended to enable students to identify and align their classroom learning with the contemporary world.

Teachers speak positively about the Illuminate project and acknowledge the impact it is having on their own pedagogical practice as well as the teaching of Religion. They have engaged fully with the project and the comprehensive training given to them by TCS as part of Illuminate. The resulting outcome is that teachers feel more confident in the teaching of RE at St John's.

*There is a very positive vibe around the Illuminate RE strategy, and I am very keen to see if students are engaged as much as staff as a result. I am very appreciative of the training we received in RE at the start of the year and feel that this has prepared me well.*  
(Teacher)

The leadership team at the school speak highly of the Illuminate RE strategy and its subsequent enhancement of teacher engagement in the teaching of Religion.

*The Illuminate project has begun very well and already we are starting to see change in practice of teachers.* (School Leader)

##### Professional Learning Community (PLC)

The school greatly values its long history and its deep connection to Mercy traditions and charism. The importance and relevance of the Mercy charism and practices are clear such that students, staff and parents speak enthusiastically of the values that the school embraces. As a whole school, the Mercy charism is deliberately and thoughtfully woven through the cultural and religious life of the school.

*The school is very strong in practising and following through on its Mercy values. This is especially evident through their Religious Education program. As a parent, when you come to the school for an assembly or presentation or just a visit, you can see those values being upheld all the time. You know you are in a distinctly Catholic school.* (Parent)

The School has a strong program for developing the capacity of teachers to teach RE. In 2021, ten St John's teachers are undertaking the Religious Education Accreditation Program (REAP) and two teachers are beginning study for a Graduate Certificate of Religious Education. In 2020, four teachers completed their study of a Graduate Certificate of Religious Education.

There has been a recognised attempt by the School to enhance professional learning opportunities for all teachers, not just teachers of Religious Education.

*There have been great changes in our understanding of Religious Education over the three years I have been here. This has been a result of the professional learning we all have received over this time. (Teacher)*

*Having all staff attend the Illuminate project PD was a very wise decision, as this has resulted in a coherent and unified development of understanding. (School leader)*

Teachers are supported with ideas for liturgies. School leaders, particularly the APRE, frequently observe teachers' lessons and provide targeted feedback and guidance relating to relevant pedagogical practices as well as appropriate content.

*Initially I felt overwhelmed at the prospect of teaching religion, but the support I received from the APRE and other teachers was very reassuring. (Teacher)*

High impact teaching and assessment strategies are a recognised feature of the Illuminate professional learning staff have received. This approach has been very successful with staff linking these strategies to all teaching areas and finding a greater appreciation of the teaching of Religion.

*I have really enjoyed the more strategic inclusion of high impact strategies into RE. Being able to identify what those high impact strategies actually has been really positive. (Teacher)*

*It (professional learning) has been a great help for all teachers, especially the link between Illuminate and maximising learning (high impact strategies) into RE. I feel confident, not only implementing these strategies in my RE classes, but also in my other teaching areas. (Teacher)*

## **School context**

RADII data indicate very strong support from parents and staff in the teaching of RE and in the spiritual direction of the school. Students at St John's Roma generally engage in the religious life of the school including religious education and liturgies. They clearly identify that the school provides opportunities for prayer and Religious Education. The secondary students indicate very positive results for engagement in RE and with the religious life of the school – the highest in the Diocese.

The clear expectations the school has around the provision of quality learning experiences through effective teaching practices strongly links academic learning and the teaching of Religion. Staff support this link commenting on the consistency of teaching and learning experiences across all subject areas. This focus also allows for the incorporation of the school's Mercy values into teaching and learning practices across the curriculum.

*This has flowed through into my other subject (PE) by exploring strategies to enable us to talk about values and beliefs and the Catholic faith in my subject areas. It is not just an RE thing, it is a whole of school approach and this is great. (Teacher)*

This consistency of approach and attention to detail in the teaching of Religion results in clarity of understanding in staff as to what it means to teach in a Catholic school.

*The conversations we are having in the school have been beneficial for my understanding of what it is to work in a Catholic school. It helps me answer the question 'Why are we doing this?' It's about values and beliefs and how this links into the community and what it means to be a good person. It is not just a Catholic thing. (Beginning Teacher)*

## Improvement strategies

- Continue to provide support for teachers to increase their capacity to engage in the RE Curriculum and in their own spiritual development through the Illuminate Tier 1 project.
- Utilise classroom observations as a means of providing feedback to teachers regarding appropriate pedagogical practice in the teaching of RE.
- Celebrate the gains made in developing the capacity of teachers in RE.

## Component 2.2 Religious life of the school

### Findings

#### Religious identity and culture

The religious life of St John's is visible across the breadth of the school and discussed easily and openly by the students, staff and parents.

Father Gerardo, All Saints Parish Priest, is a welcome presence in the school, attending classes on a weekly basis. Sister Nora's continued involvement is a source of great pride within the school, given both her long association and link to the Mercy Sisters.

Father Gerardo describes the church/school relationship as very strong and Father is fully involved in the planning for each of his class and school visits. Facilitated by the School's APRE, Father's input into the life of the school affords opportunities for evangelisation and the enabling of teachers to fulfill their role as catechists, areas seen as of vital importance to Father Gerardo.

There is a recognition by both parents and staff that Father Gerardo at parish is different from Father Gerardo at school. Father is developing his understanding of the Catholic context of the Roma community and aligning his communications to that context.

*Father can be somewhat conservative in his messaging and there is always care around the content of his homily at school Mass to ensure it aligns with the context. (School leader)*

The presence of clergy in the school is enhanced by the work of Sister Nora, whose connection to both St John's and the Sisters of Mercy is long and significant. Sister Nora is described as a 'living treasure' and the school is fortunate to be able to access her wealth of knowledge. Sister Nora provides a tangible link to the direct involvement of the Sisters of Mercy in schooling, and her work in the classrooms is appreciated by all. It is clear that St John's School is unashamedly Catholic:

*Catholicism is central to what we do, and we do not shy away from it. (Principal)*

Staff and parents acknowledge the links with the parish and other Catholic agencies. Students from the school are welcome additions to parish events and celebrations. Staff and students regularly assist in maintenance and other duties in the parish, and have on occasion provided a choir for church events. This involvement is greatly appreciated by Father Gerardo.

St John's School is active in supporting initiatives that enhance strong connections between it and All Saints Parish. The school has introduced a fifth Sunday Mass, where staff and students take on the roles associated with Mass in an effort to engage students and their parents in Church. The level of success of these initiatives is difficult to measure, but two students have joined the Parish Council.

Staff, parents and students speak warmly and positively of the school commitment to the Mercy Charism. According to staff and students, the school liturgies are meaningful and enriching.

*The school Masses have a wonderful community feel. The work the APRE and her team puts into Mass and liturgy ensure participation is high and the variety of opportunities for students to engage with the process is tremendous. (Teacher)*

## Evangelisation and formation

There is a firmly established Liturgy/Ritual plan across the school, which includes regular assemblies, Mass and class prayer rituals.

There is a strong commitment by the school leadership to building a culture of shared understanding of faith through Religious Education, retreats, liturgies, masses, charism days, REAP and other professional learning opportunities for staff.

There is a strong commitment to an inclusive Catholic community, acknowledging and celebrating the cultural diversity of students. A key component of this commitment is the formulation and promotion of a religious life of the school theme. In 2021 this theme is 'Living the Spirit' – by living the Mercy and Gospel values every day, we are living the spirit of God. This theme is promoted widely throughout the school community, and students speak enthusiastically of the theme and its alignment with the Mercy values of the school.

Staff, parents and students speak positively of the way the school has enabled an inclusive faith culture where each person is cared for and known.

There are visual reminders of the school's central values and beliefs throughout the school as well as Mercy iconography.

### **Prayer and worship**

Many staff comment on the enhanced commitment to prayer in classrooms.

*We had quite a few years when we had no prayer, and it is nice to see this return, and you often hear prayer in our classes now. (Teacher)*

*The emphasis on saying prayers to start lessons, for example, has become part of the way we do things here. (Teacher)*

Masses are seen as engaging and relevant for all ages. Engagement is reflected in the opportunities for students to become involved in a range of age appropriate activities associated with Mass and its conduct.

*The kids really enjoy Mass. The music choices are student-friendly, the objects students place at the front are relevant to their lives, and there is a range of participatory engagement through dancing and acting and general student participation. This helps engage the students and I do not know of any student who does not look forward to the event. (Teacher)*

### **Social action and justice**

Student participation and leadership in addressing issues of social justice are a feature of St John's School. Parents and students speak very highly of the activities available to them to demonstrate support for the broader community.

Staff, students and parents place importance on community service activities, which include Pinaroo (assisting in the neighbouring nursing home), 'Big Brekkie' for men at the Vincentian Village (single unit accommodation), the recently implemented 'Tea and Talk' initiative, designed to provide companionship opportunities between older members of the parish, and students including providing assistance with technology, as well as social activities such as scavenger hunts and art appreciation conversations.

Younger members of the school community report positively on the involvement of their older peers and request opportunities for their own participation.

*I would like to see greater community service options for us, like the markets (Easter) or working at Vinnies. These should not just be for the older students. (Year 7 student)*

The school has introduced the Living Water Senior Praxis program into the Religious Education program in the Senior school. 28 Year 12 students are currently participating in the program and

service-learning placements have been sourced in the local community and through other in-school options.

Catholic Social Teachings are evident in the planning of RE, other areas of the curriculum and in the daily behavioural management practices of teachers. Teachers appreciate the emphasis the school places on social teaching as well as the emphasis on Mercy values.

*A lot of the discipline conversations you have with students in class come back to this (Catholic Social Teachings) and it really helps them understand the impact of their behaviour. (Teacher)*

### Improvement strategies

- Continue to nurture, strengthen and integrate the Mercy charism into the curriculum and religious life of St John's. In so doing, promote the clear connection to Catholic identity.



## Domain 3 Continual renewal

### Component 3.1 School improvement culture

#### Findings

It is very apparent that St John's School offers an excellent standard of education in the Catholic tradition. Staff are positive, proactive and dedicated to student wellbeing and academic achievement. They are also committed to the strategic direction of the school and the associated professional and personal development.

The school receives recognition for its engagement in the community as well as the quality of the students they develop. Staff, parents and students feel strongly supported through senior pathways, through both academic success and variable pathways such as School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships. This is further supported through the post-school success, employment and training of the 2020 graduates. The considerable, 48%, enrolment market share in the town highlights the esteem with which St John's is held.

*It is the attitude of the staff. It is their genuine involvement. It is their enthusiasm and commitment and going above and beyond to ensure that the kids of St John's have a safe and happy place where they can learn and enjoy coming to school. And it is not just the teaching staff – it's all staff, whether they're out chasing grants or just being involved and doing their best for the kids. And it goes all the way to the cleaning and grounds staff... everyone steps up. (Board Member and former parent)*

#### Collective Teacher Efficacy

There is a consistent perception that the Executive Leadership Team leads with synergy and is strategically enhancing the capability of the middle leadership team through recent restructures. The focus on middle leadership capability is widely appreciated by the community and staff alike.

Staff say they are enjoying the new staff meeting structure which alternates between whole school and subject/year level Professional Learning Communities (PLC). They believe that this has increased collective teacher efficacy. Staff feel as though their time is being used more effectively and these positive influences are having a considerable impact on pedagogy and learning in the classroom. These PLCs, along with the planning days for all primary teachers with their year level peers, foster greater teacher consistency, clarity and efficacy.

Staff value the response by the ELT to their feedback and the purposeful use of their allocated time toward improving their standard of teaching, learning and wellbeing.

The addition of a Middle Leader of Inclusion in 2021 is well received by all. Teachers and parents respect the role and see great advantage in creating consistent direction for staff and bringing expertise in this field to determine responses to students with diverse needs. School officers say that

they greatly appreciate the direction and leadership from the Middle Leader of Inclusion as well as the stable timetabling, which they see resulting in greater performance in their roles.

The school has a young staff and many Early Career Teachers (ECTs). The induction and support provided to the staff proves effective, and the secondary ECTs report feeling well supported and guided by the ECT Mentor and Executive Leadership Team. Primary ECTs feel that they would benefit from an instructional coaching and mentoring approach to enhance their confidence and capability as beginning teachers in the classroom. Experienced teachers at the school offer their capacity and willingness to assist in this. The dedication of a TCS funded ECT Mentor is a welcome addition to the staff, and this role is still developing.

A significant number of primary teachers point out that the primary component of the school has 433 students whilst secondary students constitute 331, yet they see the primary years (Prep-Year 6) as having little impact on decision-making in the life of the school. They perceive that there is an absence of advocacy for the needs of primary students and teachers in the school leadership team. They point out that a decision that is relevant and effective for secondary students may not be appropriate for primary students. These teachers offer numerous anecdotes to illustrate this difficulty. Of particular concern to primary teachers is the implementation of the school's behaviour management plan, which they see as having a secondary school focus rather than having the flexibility to address the specific needs of younger students.

### **Improvement strategies**

- Ensure that the Executive Leadership Team provides for an effective primary school perspective in decision-making.
- Consultatively revisit the schools' behaviour management plan with a view to deciding measures of flexibility that may be necessary to meet the various stages of development that students move through from Prep to Year 12.

### **School Culture**

There is a well-respected commitment to continuous improvement by staff at the school, as evidenced by the rapid development of Early Career Teachers (ECTs) and the general willingness of most staff to go above and beyond for student learning, wellbeing and extra-curricular opportunities.

The school is warm and inviting, as well as professional and organised, in its function. The standard of staff behaviour is high, and the community has a deep respect for the commitment to excellence and growth, despite having a transient and young staff.

The school generally utilises the leadership team and experienced teachers collectively and individually to lead professional learning as a whole school, PLC or through the induction process. A number of staff see a need for greater clarity, alignment and transparency regarding the roles and responsibilities of the whole school management structure.

It is clear that the school has a continuing culture of striving for excellence, and the behaviours of staff reflect this. Some staff members volunteer considerable time to the provision of extra-curricular opportunities for students. Some have communicated mixed feedback on the value of their extra-curricular roles with some suggestion that specific activities are valued more highly than others.

### **Improvement strategies**

- Consider the impact of extra-curricular activities on teachers and how staff can be consistently valued for their contribution.

## **Component 3.2 Community partnerships**

St John's School is strongly represented in the community, contributes to the community, and utilises

these partnerships to enhance student learning. This is evident in the strong relationships between the religious life of the school and All Saints parish, the Parish Council, Fr Gerardo and Sr Nora.

The school is beginning to support the parish through more engagement in the Parish Council. Fr Gerardo and Sr Nora are weekly visitors to the school, and Praxis activities are aligned to support the elderly in town, including some at the Vincentians village. These mutually beneficial partnerships provide service to community, teach students about the value of service, and engage the community in a common cause.

The school has a well-represented team of partners affiliated with the school that include, the School Board, P&F Committee, employers and training providers of School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships, work experience providers, Pinaroo, the Vincentian Village and a variety of volunteers and visitors to the school. These partnerships are mutually beneficial and draw from the community almost as much as the school contributes. All of the partnerships are purposeful and focused on community building, often involving the religious life of the school.

The partnerships that are evident are purposeful and meet determined needs such as service learning, sponsorship and promotion, as well as employment/recruitment pathways. Key personnel work with partners to ascertain feedback and determine new ways of working when required. In doing so, the school ensures successful and purposeful ongoing partnerships.

Unlike schools in metropolitan areas, these partnerships are often readily available and somewhat organic in nature. There is a suggestion that the school could expand its engagement with local businesses more formally, as well as with local business organisations, to ensure the school is making the most of the considerable opportunities available in the town.

The perception of families regarding communication protocols is varied. Many families report that communication from the school is excellent, timely and thorough, particularly through the use of email and the Schoolzine app. These families report that this is a common feeling amongst other families, who are also actively engaged in the communication methods.

*I enjoy reading the Principal's message each week. He is always optimistic and it gives me a lift. (Parent)*

A small number of parents say they would prefer more prompt communications from the school.

There is a perception that the school app may have replaced previously effective routines and procedures. This causes confusion and frustration for some staff and families.

### **Improvement strategies**

- Investigate ways to further develop relationships with a wider network of local businesses, business associations and service organisations to broaden opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships.
- Investigate ways that standard operational procedures can be acted upon consistently in agreed circumstances.



## **Domain 4 Strategic resourcing and stewardship**

### **Component 4.1 Staff development and wellbeing**

## School culture

When asked to describe the culture of St John's, staff, students and parents consistently refer to the school as a community. Words used to elaborate on this include 'belonging', 'compassion', 'inclusion', 'nurturing' and 'support'. Some see the sharing of humour as a distinctive element in the St John's culture, linking it to a sense of camaraderie among the staff.

*I love this school. It is just a great place to work. (Teacher)*

*This school is like a family. Older students care for younger students, parents get to know each other over the long period of time their children are here, and the teachers genuinely care about the kids. (Parent)*

It is clear that both teachers and School Officers have a deep understanding of the school's core values – *respect; excellence; justice; and compassion* – and are strongly committed to them. Parents speak similarly about the school's values, often likening them to their own family values. Some parents refer directly to the Catholic faith, seeing the four core values (above) as reflecting this.

Students speak highly of the Pastoral Care groups and the Prep Buddies initiative, both of which aim to encourage older students building relationships with younger students. Students see both these activities as beneficial to both older and younger students. Some students say that they regard their teachers as 'friends' as well as teachers: someone they can trust, who can help them with personal issues as well as their school work.

Decisions about professional development are based on a hierarchy of tiers. Tier 1 is the main priority of the school for the year. For 2021 it is the recontextualising of students' religious experiences in the life of the school. It includes teaching and learning in Religious Education classes, the way Masses and other religious events are framed, liturgies are composed, and school rituals are conducted. Tier 2 focuses on the diocesan Reading Improvement Strategy (RIS), and Planning for Personalised Learning (PfPL). Beyond the two tiers, staff can request professional development in an individual or group initiative that supports the school's Annual Action Plan or Strategic Plan.

### Caring for the individual

Staff see the Executive Leadership Team as being committed to staff wellbeing. Many refer to the consultative leadership style modelled by the Principal and senior leaders as giving them a sense of being valued and treated as professionals. A significant number of primary teachers say their wellbeing would be enhanced if there could be a stronger primary perspective in decision-making, and a greater recognition given to what they see as the nuances of primary teaching. Some say they would appreciate greater respect being given to the need to preserve their break times and non-contact time as much as is possible.

The school has an impressive variety of extra-curricular activities on offer for students. Some, such as the Mercy Shield and the production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' involve significant time, organisation and management by staff. A number of teachers perceive some inequity in the amount of time some staff contribute compared to others. They suggest that more of their colleagues should step up, or the school offer fewer extra-curricular activities, so those who are prepared to step up have a more manageable commitment.

Staff refer often to the caring, collegial relationships that range across the school, saying they draw strength and support from their colleagues both professionally and personally. School Officers and grounds staff say they are treated with respect by teachers and students, and that they feel their work is valued.

Many parents indicate that they appreciate the quality of the school's communication to families, particularly the newsletter. A number of parents refer to occasions when they had contacted teachers by email with a concern about one of their children. They say the teachers responded quickly to their email, and the issue was addressed in a helpful way. Other parents' express appreciation that

a teacher has been proactive in contacting them with advice or a request to discuss an issue with one of their children.

Most teachers see the school's internal communication as effective. The Monday morning briefing is seen as working well and efficiently run with the opportunity for staff to communicate information as well as the leadership team.

A small number of teachers suggest that internal communication from the leadership team, middle leaders and colleagues still needs some refining. They refer mainly to the need for timely communication about changes to normal routines or events conveyed to everyone who will be affected by the changes.

Teachers' skills and interests appear generally appreciated by the leadership team, and they indicate that they try to deploy these skills and interests in ways that benefit the students.

### **Attraction, selection and retention**

Teachers new to the school indicate that their induction was well organised and very welcoming by the school leadership and staff. The new teachers felt that they were given helpful information and met many of the staff who are in leadership roles.

*I received a welcome email from the Principal, then met him personally. It was a very nice way to be welcomed to my new school, and I knew then that it was a good decision to come to this school. (Teacher)*

Two teachers at St John's, who are in their first teaching positions, indicate that the Early Career Teacher program (ECT) has been very helpful to them, especially the amount and quality of the support they are receiving. One teacher suggests that a stronger primary dimension to the ECT program would be of benefit to primary teachers in their first years of teaching.

Every school in a regional area experiences difficulty in attracting and retaining talented leaders and staff, and in the case of Maths and Science, qualified staff. A number of teachers suggest that St John's has a reputation as a desirable school at which to work, and is attracting talented teachers and leaders, and retaining them for longer periods than might be expected. Some suggest that the school's strong community culture, including the valuing of staff, contributes to this.

### **Nurture and empowerment**

A formal peer observation program has been instigated, where teachers observe a colleague's lesson with a view to offering advice on one or two aspects of the lesson. Areas of focus might include the teacher's questioning technique or clarity of explanations. The Principal cites research which indicates that peer observation is one of the most effective ways for teachers to improve their work.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are particularly active in the school, both in year groups and in subjects, with time allocated for the meetings. Teachers speak about being energised by the opportunity to collaboratively plan, devise assessment, discuss comparability of standards, and engage in conversations with colleagues about students' progress.

All students have access to a device for use at school, and Years 7 to 12 are engaged in a one-to-one program. It is apparent that teachers are using information and communication technology (ICT) in their pedagogy in varying ways. The leadership team acknowledge that the development of an integrated schoolwide approach (P-12) to the use of ICTs by teachers is in its beginning stages and needs nurturing and strengthening.

### **Improvement strategies**

- Engage staff in seeking ways to ensure as equitable as possible commitment of time to extra-curricular activities.

- Build on the peer observation initiative so that teachers can continue to improve their pedagogy through learning from their colleagues.
- Establish a process to devise a coherent Prep to Year 12 approach to the use of information and communication technologies by teachers with their classes.

## Component 4.2 Use of resources facilities and the learning environment

### Resources

Teachers and School Officers who work in classes speak positively about the school's commitment to meeting the needs of students requiring additional or specialist support. The Principal sees growing confidence among staff in using data to inform them of differing student needs.

A range of elective offerings for students in Years 7 to 10 aims to cater for a variety of student interests. A diversity of pathways for students in Years 11 and 12 provides varying options for working towards a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). These include Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) courses and vocational certificate courses. The leadership team's aspiration is for every Year 12 student to work through one of the available pathways and finish the year with a QCE.

Initiatives such as the Diocesan Reading Improvement Strategy, the Illuminate Program and the Resilience Program are all seen to be embedded in the life of the school and appropriately resourced.

The Principal and leadership team prioritise student learning and achievement in a number of ways. The Principal expresses the overall aim of this through two key concepts: 'high standards' and 'positive relationships'. The review team notes that combining these two principles is in keeping with educational research, which shows strong correlation between high academic expectations, positive relationships across the school, and improved student learning and achievement.

### Facilities

The school has devised and utilised a Capital Works Program (2018 – 2023) for the planning of future facilities. The Capital Works Program is currently being incorporated into a comprehensive Master Plan which will match prioritised needs with projected enrolments and align with the school's Strategic Plan.

### Learning environment

The school has an attractive natural environment which is appreciated by the school community. The work of the grounds staff is acknowledged by many staff. A small number of teachers suggest that the attractive grounds could be developed further to encourage some learning to take place outside the classroom.

It is widely acknowledged that facilities are not adequate to meet the current and growing needs of the school. Of particular concern is the Administration building, which has reached its capacity. Staff areas are cramped, and there is a lack of meeting spaces, where confidential conversations with stakeholders can be facilitated. Some staff have to be accommodated away from colleagues.

To address this, a major building plan, to be incorporated in the Master Plan, has been devised. The main features include:

- A new two storey secondary building housing eight general classrooms and a Distance Education study area. The building will replace the four classrooms in the demountable beside the secondary oval.
- A land swap with Pinaroo to provide an undercover sports area and additional parking space (subject to successful Commonwealth Block Grant Authority (BGA) funding).
- Landscaping of the senior eating area including an astro-turf base.
- Extending the life of the current facilities through the implementation of a maintenance schedule in keeping with the Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office audit, to include turf

rehabilitation programs for the primary and secondary ovals.

- Extension of the administration building to accommodate staff under one roof and move staff offices out of the library (subject to successful BGA funding).

Structuring the funding of these facilities poses difficult issues for the planners. The aim is to maximise the amount that can be received through the Block Grant Authority. The criteria for funding of different kinds of facilities through the BGA are complex and intricate, requiring a balance of school funds and government funds. The school leadership is committed to taking the proposed building plan forward, and they indicate that more information will be provided to the school community as the process firms up.

### **Improvement strategies**

- Take the proposed Master Plan co-ordinating current and future facilities through to completion, ensuring it aligns with the school's Strategic Plan.

## **Conclusion**

The review team thanks the St John's community for their hospitality and openness in responding to the review. We found ourselves in an impressive school that is making a strong impact in Roma and surrounding districts. The review team wishes the school community well as it continues its journey into the next stages of its development.