

Queensland Catholic Schools

A Guide to Building Relationships with your Government representatives



In 2017 more than 148,000 students attend
Over 300 Catholic schools throughout Queensland

The purpose of these guidelines is to set out approaches which Catholic school communities might adopt in their dealings with Members of State and Federal Parliament, Senators, Local Councillors in forming relationships with their school community. It also includes actions that might be taken in the period prior to elections.

Education – the key to our future

Education is the key to the future of our nation and it is essential that Catholic education is seen as a significant partner in the education of young Australians.

The most powerful argument for the support of Catholic schools is based on principles and values which include:

- That *“parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”* (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Clause 3, Article 26).
- *“Catholic schools, like state schools, fulfil a public role, for their presence guarantees cultural and educational pluralism”* (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium).
- That *“there must be the closest cooperation between parents and the teachers to whom they entrust their children to be educated and teachers are to collaborate closely with parents and willingly listen to them”.* (Code of Canon Law, Canon 796.)
- All children are entitled to an education which will enable them to attain their full potential.

Strengthening relationships in the long term

All school communities should strive to have a good, active relationship with their local Members of State and Federal Parliament, Senators and Local Councillors.

Many school communities already have a very good relationship with their local Members of Parliament and Local Councillors and ensure that they are involved with school events. These local members are our representatives and the lives of our Catholic school communities are very important to them.

It is also very important to include Senators in these relationships as they are usually also a great source of support and information and can provide a broader state-wide perspective on issues.

The development of an ongoing relationship with your representatives at all levels of government is immensely important for our Catholic schools. It enables the politicians to know at first hand the great work happening at your school and to form personal connections with parents (and voters). These established relationships mean that when there is an issue they are more likely to take a personal interest and advocate on your behalf with the government or local council.

Ideas to build the relationships

In order to develop a good relationship with your local members, (State, Federal Local Councillors and Senators) invite them to the school regularly and make the effort to keep them informed about the progress of the school and its community. Early in the school year write to each of them and provide invitations for any planned

events throughout the year so they can be placed in their diaries and increase the chances of their attendance.

When you are planning events you would like Politicians to attend it is a good idea to be aware of State and Federal Parliament and local council sitting dates so that you might plan for days these members are available and present in their electorate.

Events they might be invited to include:

- School assemblies - let them know the regular time of these and invite them to attend at any time but also advise of any special events occurring at these assemblies. Where possible and appropriate, involve them in the assembly eg presenting awards.
- P & F meetings – advise early in the year of dates and times and invite them to attend at any time during the meeting – a pro forma letter is available at www.pandf.org.au
- Beginning and end of year Masses and celebrations
- Awards nights
- Parent evenings/Guest speakers
- Social Events – e.g. Trivia nights, fetes, bush dances
- Sports Days

Hospitality is an essential component of any invitation so ensure that they are recognised in any welcome speeches, greeted by an appropriate person and 'looked after' during the event.

You could also ensure they are included on the mailing list for your school newsletter – this keeps them up to date with any achievements at your school, events they were unable to attend

and assists them in learning more about your school community generally.

Most of these politicians will also have regular newsletters and you should ask for the Principal, School Board Chair and P & F President and/or Secretary to be included on their newsletter list. These are a great source of information about not only parliamentary issues but also local community events and grants etc.

Many of our politicians also use social media. Schools who use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc should like or follow their local politicians and also ask them to like and follow the school social media connections also.

It is only through regular contact that the local member can come to understand and appreciate what the school needs and what it is achieving and how the school participates in the local community. Please be mindful that your invitation may not always attract an immediate response. Sometimes acceptance is impossible because of other commitments, but don't give up.

Principals, school board chairs and P & F Presidents should also take opportunities to meet and discuss any new education policy with their appropriate politicians and in an election year, including both the sitting member and the opposition candidates for their local electorate.

Meeting with a politician

If you have formed good relationships with your elected members then it is easier to have a discussion about key issues and policies as they arise.

It is important as political parties release new policy documents to discuss these with your local member particularly if it is their party who is releasing the policy. Seek clarification of any issues eg. How does this policy assist in improving learning for children and young people in your school? How will the policy be funded? What direct effect will it have on your school? Does it mean there will be any extra administrative burden on the school?

Probably the best way to communicate your message to politicians is through a 'face to face' meeting.

Some suggestions on how to approach meetings with local members and Senators

School communities could form a small delegation of three or four key people to meet with your local politicians to discuss government policy or some issue for your school.

Alternatively you could collaborate with other Catholic schools in the electorate and form a delegation that is representative of all the schools.

Members could include:

- School principal(s)
- Parent representative (president of P & F or another appropriate person)
- Parish priest(s)
- Chair of the school board (or member as appropriate)

Politicians, like you, are very busy. It is important that the time you meet with them is well planned and that a professional approach is maintained before, during and after each meeting.

Note: A teleconference could also be an option, particularly in larger electorates.

Prior to the meeting

- To gain the maximum benefit from the meeting, members of the delegation should meet prior to each meeting to plan, clarify issues and determine which questions individual members of the delegation will ask. A member of the delegation should also be appointed to act as the chair during the discussion.
- Contact the politician to arrange a mutually agreeable time and place to meet. They are likely to request advance notice of your agenda so this needs to be planned before the meeting is requested.
- Confirm the date, venue and duration of the meeting a few days prior to the scheduled meeting.
- Advise members of the school community of the meeting.

At a meeting or consultation

The following are some suggested guidelines and protocols to help with conducting a successful meeting.

- Confirm how much time the member has available.
- Be polite and introduce the members of the delegation including their role within the school community
- Express appreciation for the efforts of politicians on behalf of Catholic education. Make particular reference to any direct involvement the politician has already had with your school/s (eg attending the recent school fete).

- Perhaps open the discussion with comment about the significant contribution of Catholic schools in educating one in five students in Queensland. (Source: Queensland Catholic Education Commission statistics).
- Keep the consultation focused on the agenda items and avoid the discussion being side-tracked on to irrelevant matters. Be careful not to allow any personal political bias of any of the delegation to interfere with the focus of the meeting.
- Always be respectful and courteous in your discussion with your political representatives. (It is about winning friends and influencing people.)
- Take a positive, friendly approach. This will promote good relations and a more successful outcome. Hospitality should be part of the welcome if the meeting is being held at the school.
- In discussions, always be faithful to the ethos and values which underpin Catholic education.
- In your discussions be concerned with the wellbeing of all children and be mindful that advocacy on behalf of children in Catholic schools should not be at the expense of the wellbeing and effective education of those in other education sectors.
- Education issues are complex, particularly those around the funding of Catholic schools. Therefore, do not expect that your members will have answers to all your questions readily available to them.
- Leave any handout material that is brief and will inform the member.
- Arrange a follow-up meeting if required or ask when you might expect an answer to your questions.

- Focus on local issues relevant to your schools eg issues that impact on learning, buildings and grounds needs, transport, catering for students with special needs and ICT costs etc. and relate these to any policy questions you might be requesting responses to.
- Advise members to contact either the Queensland Catholic Education Commission or Parents and Friends Federation Secretariat if they require additional information.

After the meeting

- The delegation might allow time for a post-meeting discussion to clarify the issues raised and make a summary of the outcomes.
- After each meeting with a politician formally write to the person, thanking him/her for the time given and summarising any outcomes from the meeting.
- If you intend to provide a report of the meeting to your school community, you should provide a copy to the representative prior to publication. This allows the person an opportunity to discuss any amendments or to correct any information.

Preparing for an election

Identify all political candidates contesting the next election (including sitting members if they are recontesting) in your local electorate and either invite them to the school to meet with a delegation or make an appointment to visit them at their office.

The same meeting suggestions apply but more background information about Catholic Education may be necessary.

Provide the candidate with:

- The name and role of each person attending the meeting.
- An agenda of items or list of questions as well as material relevant to your local schools as they may have little knowledge of your school and its context as well as little knowledge of Catholic Education or Education in general.
- A contact name and number of a key representative of the delegation. This gives the candidate a contact point to clarify any agenda issues or meeting arrangements.
- Always be respectful and courteous in your discussion with political candidates. (It is about winning friends and influencing people.)
- At election time confirm that they have received the documents from QCEC/P & F Federation outlining key issues for Catholic education.

Consider forming an ongoing school political action committee

School communities could also consider forming an ongoing political action committee to further the process. This could be done either by individual schools or in collaboration with other Catholic schools in the electorate/s.

A convenor should be appointed to arrange the meetings and plan the action.

The meeting could then develop strategies to guide the actions that it will engage in for the longer term as well as in the lead-up to an election.

It is important and necessary that the committee works closely with the president of the P&F, the principal of the school, the parish priest and other key stakeholders.

Particularly in the lead-up to an election, but at other times if the issue is important, The QCEC and Parents and Friends Federation would appreciate your keeping them informed of any action taken, issues discussed and decisions coming out of the meeting.

Further information

Background information on QCEC and/or P & F policies can be found on their respective websites at: www.qcec.catholic.edu.au and/or www.pandf.org.au (under Political Action – State and Federal Elections).

Further information is available by contacting the Secretariat staff at the Queensland Catholic Education Commission or the Parents and Friends Federation of Queensland.

This resource was jointly developed by the Queensland Catholic Education Commission and The Federation of Parents and Friends Associations of Catholic Schools in Queensland.



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