

Transcript of Director Ross Fox's talk - Catalyst Day 28 January 2021

Can I just begin with a brief aside to say thank you to Genieive for MC-ing today and congratulations. Congratulations on your recent recognition for your service to Canberra; it's very well deserved, and we know how much – for those of us who know Genieive - know that she's been a great leader in the Canberra community and she continues to be so.

So I just want to say welcome to the catalyst system day. It's an exciting time to be part of the Catholic education system in the arch-diocese of Canberra and Goulburn. We're each part of a Catholic education system with 56 schools, more than 21,000 students and more than 3000 staff. Whether today you are in West Wyalong, Cootamundra, Adelong, Bombala, Pambula or Bega, Harrison, Gowrie, Campbell or Kaleen, or anywhere in between, we have much to be proud of in our schools and the education we provide.

Today marks an important milestone for the system; an opportunity for all staff to learn together with the focus squarely on what matters most for student learning. In other circumstances, we would be gathering together at the Canberra Convention Centre, or a similar venue to be together, but as we know COVID 19 has changed many things and for now it has changed the possibility of gathering en masse as an Arch-diocese. Despite the challenge of COVID 19, I thought it was so important that we gather as an Arch-diocesan Catholic Education community to reflect deeply on high-quality learning and teaching. The mode of delivery and the pedagogy today won't always be ideal, but I know with your involvement and the leadership of your school leadership team it will be a productive day of professional learning and dialogue to continue our journey of learning together.

Today's program is obviously about Catalyst. You may not know much about Catalyst as yet, you may have many questions. This is to be expected. Catalyst is our learning and teaching initiative in the arch-diocese, to realise our shared aspirations for the students in our care. The best learning and teaching possible. Catalyst is not a fad or a catch-phrase. It's a commitment to drawing on the great teachers and school leaders that we are privileged to have in our system to realise our aspirations. We can – and should – aspire to be among the great Education systems of the world. From my four years as director, I'm confident that we have all the ingredients to fulfill this aspiration in the coming years. Catalyst is about supporting teachers to be as effective as possible, supporting teachers to transform lives through learning.

Our Educational Vision

I can because of you

Now during the break, I happened to watch a movie called “The Professor and the Mad Man” starring Sean Penn and Mel Gibson. It’s an interesting story – a pleasant January diversion – but perhaps not their best movie. In the movie a young woman named Eliza Merrett (played by Natalie Dormer) meets Sean Penn’s character, Dr William Chester Minor. Eliza cannot read or write, and Dr. Minor encourages Eliza and helps her to read – to learn to read and write. As Eliza undergoes her personal transformation from illiterate to literate, she pens a short note to Dr Minor saying simply ‘I can because of you’. I think this encapsulates what every teacher hopes to hear from their students. A clear statement of their success. We know that children learn, develop and grow to some extent irrespective of attending school and irrespective of their teachers. The measure of a teachers success is a student genuinely being able to say “I can because of you.” That student can think, do, say and be things that are different because of your teaching. That student is a different person because of your teaching. It is truly amazing thing that lives are changed through good teaching. Students can think, do, say and be things because of their teachers, and what they have learnt at school. These are Catholic schools truly worthy of the name. I know that teachers may hear this phrase “I can because of you” all too infrequently, but I also know it is true for so many children. And we want it to be true for more and more children, because of the learning and teaching we provide in our schools. We want it to be true because of the support provided to every teacher and every member of staff through the professional learning that Catalyst will initiate. I think that the five simple words “I can because of you” succinctly and precisely express our educational vision and aspiration for our arch-diocese and particularly our teachers. That teachers in Catholic education in the arch-diocese transform the lives of their students through excellent learning and teaching in school because of who they are as teachers. Our systems journey in Catalyst begins today with Catalyst System Day. Our schools will only provide the education that our students and families deserve when we have a deeply shared understanding of quality learning and teaching and we live it out together.

That is the foundation of Catalyst.

Our Bold Goals

BOLD GOAL 1

Every student is
a competent
reader

BOLD GOAL 2

High Impact
Teaching Practice
is visible in every
classroom

I now want to reflect briefly on the bold goals that we've set through the Catalyst Program. After much discussion and reflection across the system, we're adopting 2 bold goals for the system with respect to learning. The first of these as you can see is every **student is a competent reader**. The ability to read competently opens up the world for each individual student. It is a path to personal transformation. Students as we know transition from learning to read, to reading to learn in our schools. And good readers are undoubtedly in a much better place to be life long learners. This goal won't be achieved with just foundational reading skills. At every age and stage our expectations for reading competence will and should differ, and it is a goal that is relevant to all students. Our second goal is **that high impact teaching practice is visible in every classroom**. Achieving this goal requires at least two things; that we all understand what practices are high impact and also that we do less teaching that is low impact. We'll continue to unpack these goals through the year, their implications and how we can reach these goals through Catalyst, working together.

Catalyst Assumptions

Catalyst

Our students
deserve the
best education
we can provide

The quality of
learning and
teaching should
be more
consistent

We have the
right teachers
and Principals



I now want to briefly reflect on the assumptions that underlie Catalyst. The evidence we have says that while there is much to celebrate in our academic achievement in our Catholic Education system today, it is not consistent. It is not reliable, and often the academic attainment of our students is below what we and they should rightly expect from a great Catholic education. Our students want and deserve a great Catholic education where every student is a competent reader, and they benefit from high impact teaching practice in every classroom. They deserve a great Catholic education reliably and consistently achieved with high expectations. We have exactly the right teachers and Principals to do this and achieve this. We have them today across our 1000 classrooms in the archdiocese. To be clear, our system can do better when it comes to academic achievement. The difference we need to make, however, is not working harder or doing more. The challenge is focus. We need to remove what is not essential to focus on what is essential. This year of the pandemic, or last year of the pandemic has certainly forced us to think about what is truly essential and genuinely valuable, and this is a lesson that we need to hold onto.

Catalyst Assumptions

Catalyst

Teachers are
the most
important
learners in the
system

Potential chasm
between “I
taught it” and
“I learnt it”

Teaching should
be no harder
than it needs to
be



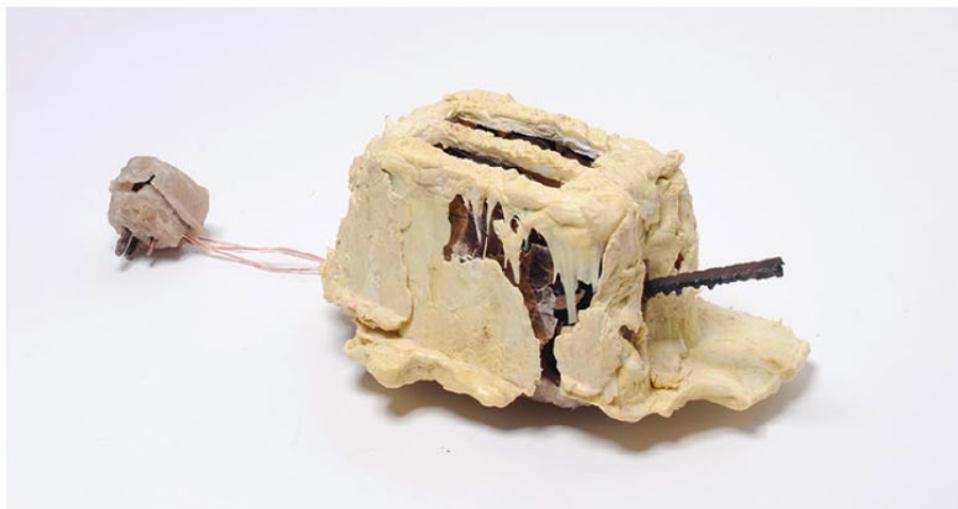
I acknowledge that we are seeking to do something quite difficult as we know personal change is hard, changing a habit is hard to do. Changing a teaching habit acquired and ingrained over years can be really difficult. But as professionals we know we're up for that challenge because the improvements we seek in our practice will provide great benefits to our students. Teaching and teachers are at the heart of Catalyst. We're choosing to place teachers as the most important learners in the arch-diocese. Your learning is vitally important to us, because we know it is vitally important to the learning and life chances of your students. Teaching will always be demanding, but it shouldn't be harder than it needs to be. All teachers must be supported, collaborating with colleagues within their school and across the system to allow them to focus on the difficult and essential work of the teacher in the classroom with students. Through Catalyst we hope to harness the collective knowledge, wisdom and efficacy of all teachers for the benefit of every teacher and student across the system. Why do we do somethings 3 thousand times each year, when they could be done only a few times well and used by everyone.

Catalyst



To describe this further I'm going to take the unusual path of talking about a toaster. This is a toaster. I think it is safe to assume that everyone is familiar with a toaster. To be more precise, this picture that you see on your screens shows a Brilliant Basics toaster, which is available today at Big W for \$9.00. The product description enthusiastically claims "make the morning rush that little bit easier with Brilliant Basics two slice toaster. This classic toaster features a handy slide out crumb tray for easy cleaning and a defrost, reheat or cancel toasting function at the touch of a button. With a variable browning control, you can make your toast just the way you like it." And you get all that for \$9.00. Just \$9.00. About two coffees worth, less than a glass of wine in many pubs or restaurants, for a lifetime – or some part of a lifetime – of toasting. It's truly a marvel of modern society.

Catalyst



Now this photo also shows a toaster. This is a toaster manufactured as part of what is referred to as “The Toaster Project” by an English man named Thomas Thwaites. Thomas was an industrial design student and set out to make a toaster from scratch, copying a toaster he bought for less than four pounds. Thomas has published a book called “The Toaster Project”, and he has a number of YouTube videos delivering TED talks on this project. To make this toaster took Thomas around 9 months. He spent more than 250 times the cost of the toaster he was attempting to replicate. On the video I watched, Thomas admitted that the toaster only worked for a very, very short time. Making the toaster involved a number of activities including smelting steel using a microwave. As you can agree I think it’s certainly not a pretty toaster. The lesson I draw is that even an item as simple as a toaster – something we can buy for as little as \$9.00 – is almost impossible to replicate working as an individual. Thomas Thwaites tried it and spent nine months and well over two thousand dollars to poorly replicate what he could easily buy in a few minutes for approximately nine dollars. Do we – aspiring to be a great, reliable, consistent, high expectations Catholic education system – have anything to learn from Thomas Twaites and his hideously expensive and largely ineffective toaster?

From next week, students will be learning in a thousand classrooms across the Archdiocese. Which toaster are our teachers using to support our students? And which toaster are the students getting? What can we learn from a simple toaster?

Catalyst

3 Key Elements of Learning & Teaching

Curriculum



What to teach

Pedagogy



How to teach

Assessment



Measuring student achievement

Following on from this, I believe that as a system we need to be more precise about 3 important elements of learning and teaching, and will achieve this through Catalyst. That’s Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment. What to teach, how to teach and how we know students have learnt it.

At the Catholic leaders day last year in October where our Principals all came together, we talked about how important it is that we worked together collaborating across the Archdiocese. That we cooperate on three key areas of teaching and learning; Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. We need precise expectations about what is taught, and confidence that what is taught builds on what students have learnt. We need precise expectations about teaching practice; what does the evidence say works and how can this done in an effective sustainable way in the classroom with students. We need precise expectations about assessment; not test to meet system compliance

requirements, but assessment that genuinely measures what students have learnt and that they've been taught and informs teachers about how they need to adapt their teaching to meet the learning needs of their students.

Today we can see amongst our students that we do transform lives through learning and teaching that we provide. I trust that we all have stories where we know we have been truly successful in nurturing students to grow in their knowledge understanding. And I believe that we can transform a student's life through the teaching you provide, so that the student can genuinely say "I can because of you"



Now this slide shows my three-and-a-half-year-old son Jed or Jedidiah and one of his early childhood educators. As a parent I'm beginning to fear the words "dress-up day", and actually this picture was taken during what his early learning centre declared was Superhero week, which was by the way promptly followed by Book Week. So, ten days of continuous dress-up! Currently Jed is equivocating between Batman and Spiderman as his favourite superhero. He was surprised recently when his mother observed that Batman doesn't have a superpower. Jed thought – and said this – that Batman's superpower was his nets. So, we disavowed him of that. But Batman solves crimes and captures bad guys, that part particularly Jed likes, and he does this through strategy; not some superpower. But the point I want to make is that Catalyst is definitely not a superhero strategy for teachers. If at any point you feel that you are being asked to be a superhero or need to be a superhero to fill your role, please seek support and help. Talk to your Principal, talk to your school leadership team. Catalyst is about high-quality learning and teaching, focused and practiced for the benefit of the children. We're not asking everyone to be Batwoman or Batman – at least outside of Book Week.



Now I'm sure or I hope that everyone recognizes that this is a picture of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, as Christians- if we're Christians – we're all called to be saints. According to the Catholic Church there are a number of ways to become a saint. One is to be martyred for the faith. Another is to perform miracles and most frequently these miracles happen after the person has died. As a Catholic Education system it may be slightly controversial to say that Catalyst is not asking anyone to pursue sainthood. Our Baptism is enough. We obviously don't want the learning of students to be dependent on Principals and teachers performing miracles, or being martyred. We have seen truly heroic efforts in the last year. We've seen saintly care extended to students, but Catalyst does not require Principals and teachers to perform miracles or be martyred. But I know that it won't be easy. It will be professionally challenging, but miracles and martyrs are not required, and we don't need Batwoman or Batman to be part of it either. The quality and consistency of learning in our thousand classrooms should not rely on the presence or availability of Superheroes or saints. Instead, through the Catalyst journey of professional learning, over the coming years we aim to support you, the teachers and leaders of our system, to lead us from being a good to being a great system. As a system we will support you all to transform the lives of our students through learning.

Today as we start this journey as two thousand educators working together to improve education in our Archdiocese there is much ahead of us, and for the next few hours you'll be working in your school groups. We will all be watching world class presenters on their respective areas. And these are truly world class presenters talking to us today, that we've assembled to begin the journey of Catalyst as a system. I believe we've brought together the three keynote presenters who are among the best in the world in their respective educational areas. Each of them has a rich contribution to make, and we'll just get a taste of that today, so there's much reflection, reading, investigation, enquiry to commence from the provocation that occurs today.

So it's the beginning of a learning journey; definitely not the end of one. I'm really looking forward to returning together in the latter part of the day and hearing about your experiences and reflections on the presenters and unpacking the learning with your colleagues. And I just want to say as Director of Catholic Education, thank you for your leadership in the last 12 months; thank you for your dedication and commitment to the students in our care, their families and our school communities. It has been so appreciated and it has been such a fantastic achievement and I've just been inundated by thanks from our parent communities and so many across the community. You should be so proud of what we've been able to achieve in the last 12 months, and I hope that you share my excitement about what we can achieve together as a system learning through Catalyst.

I wish you a very fantastic Catalyst System Day today.

Thank you.