

Student Leadership in Catholic Schools

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Catholic schools have a fine reputation for preparing, promoting, developing and nurturing their elected senior student leaders. Fair and just elections, overnight leadership camps, leadership reflection days, mixed school leadership weekends, leadership seminars, even a three day street retreat, all form valid and valuable ways to prepare seniors for the challenges, responsibilities and joys of leadership.

And there is reason indeed for schools to invest money, time and personnel in such preparation. Wilding (1997) speaks of leadership in a school coming "largely from the spirit of the senior students" (p. 3). Moore (1999) suggests that when "leadership is strong and positive in a year group, success seems to follow automatically" (p. 18). **Hawkes (1999) points to the fact that schools need leadership by students because they "have the capacity to influence student values, attitudes and behaviours with an effectiveness that school principals can only dream about" (p. 21).**

What is the best form of student leadership for a Catholic school and what is the best way to prepare them? Is there a best way? These are some of the questions posed in this paper.

Yet what type of leadership do we want from our senior students? What of those students who put their name up for election and miss out? Indeed, what about the general body of Year 12 students in the school? Is leadership at Year 12 only for those who get the badge? Is student leadership, and I hesitate to use this word, solely for the chosen "elite"?

McLaughlin (1997), when reviewing leadership in Catholic schools, highlighted the communal aspect of such leadership. He noted, furthermore, that leadership in Catholic schools should strive to be both relational and participatory. That is, because the leader and 'followers' are in some relationship, the leadership dynamic is a function of the group and not merely the individual. Burn (1997) visualised the Catholic school leader as one who enables "**the unique gifts of others to flower**" (p. 79). Similarly, Ryan (1997) identified effective school leadership as essentially empowering and enabling individuals to grow through the work they are doing. She noted that it is a matter of "establishing a climate where people feel that they are valued and trusted, where the work they do is appreciated, and their achieve-

ments are recognised" (p. 207).

Where do such ideas lead us in our understanding of student leadership? Words like "relational", "participatory", "function of the group", "empowering", "valued and trusted" seem to point us away from notions of a solely exclusive or selective leadership exercised by the few. **In a series of recommendations regarding student leadership Gray (2002) emphasised the need for "unsuccessful candidates to be encouraged, not forgotten" (p. 12).** One Catholic college in Melbourne appoints such

senior students to the position of "officer" with clearly delineated leadership responsibilities within the school. Moreover, various schools make admirable use of student committees where Year 12 students are encouraged to participate and exercise leadership. Committees can focus on such diverse areas as publications, charities, the environment, or sporting activities at lunch time. A case in point is a Catholic high school in Hobart that offers up to eleven committees in any given year for its Year 11 and 12 students. Senior students who are not SRC

members run these committees.

What type of leadership do we want from our senior students? Service is a key facet of the vision of leadership within Catholic schools. For instance, Jolley (1997) identified a "theology of leadership" (p. 137) exemplified in the gospel text which records Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the last supper (In 13: 1-15). Such leadership is based on service, empowerment and inclusiveness. Bradley (1991), writing of the biblical model of leadership in Christian schools, observed that Jesus demonstrated the servant-leader model throughout his life. She noted, moreover: "**the authority by which the Christian leader leads is not power but love, not force but example, not coercion but reasoned persuasion**" (p. 35).

Certainly there is a strong sense that student leadership be centred on ministration, namely civic service (Chapman & Aspin, 2001), or servant leadership (East, 1994), or leadership as ministry (Willmet, 1997) whereby students develop a belief that their talents are to be used for others and the

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common good (Ryan, 1997). Wilding (2001) pointed to the need for student leadership to embody integrity and good values: "it has its cost in time, energy and emotion. **Essentially, it is for the service of others**" (p. 1). Similarly, Mohr (2001) discerned the proper exercise of leadership as eliminating institu-



tional injustice and barriers to student involvement. He commented that the role of leader in the school community was one of the servant leader: "**our identity, our sense of significance, and our self-worth, are not to be based on the roles we fill, the power we wield, or the numbers we lead. We should long to hear the words 'well done, good and faithful servant'**" (p. 3).

Traditionally senior student leadership has focused on those Year 12 students elected to positions of responsibility by their peers and, more often than not, the staff of their school. Yet, increasingly we are being asked to consider the notion of a more comprehensive leadership model. **Elected student leaders are still important.** However, the challenge is to embrace a model open to all rather than just the leadership group of college captains and prefects. Of course such a notion also poses new challenges for schools. **Do schools for instance, now have a responsibility to train all senior students for leadership?** If so, how can this be most effectively achieved? Moreover, what practicable roles can be given to a significantly increased number of Year 12 students that will give real experience in leadership?

Student leadership matters in a school. **Students have the ability and the power to really make a difference.** Moreover, a more inclusive notion certainly fits well with the servant model of leadership. Greenleaf (1977) described the "servant-first" leader as one who ensures "that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (p. 13). He suggested a test for this: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they,

while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived" (pp 13-14). It would seem important to involve as many Year 12 students as possible in a leadership role which shifts the focus from "I" to "the other".

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