

Young & sturdy



An injection of early-career staff has helped principal Suzanne Fern build a solid foundation at St Aloysius primary.

By Madeleine Regan

‘We wonder’ is a phrase heard often around St Aloysius Catholic Primary school, Chisholm, where Suzanne Fern is foundation principal. The school is located in a new housing estate near Maitland, New South Wales. It opened in February 2015, with 223 students. Fern began her role in May 2014. At that time, the slab had been poured and there was an enormous scope of work. Fern declares: “The role of foundation principal ... has been both challenging and rewarding ... a constant, fast-paced, complex, thought-provoking problem-solving process.”

The emphasis on ‘wonder’ became a way of operating at St Aloysius from the beginning. “We could create new structures and processes not restricted by the way things had been done at our previous schools,” Fern says. “In the ‘we wonder’ approach, staff are encouraged to question the possibility of doing things differently,

without recrimination.” It has steered new directions for setting up and naming learning spaces, implementing new learning strategies and exploring student leadership opportunities. It reflects a co-operative approach that Fern says is already firmly in the culture: “Effective collaboration is a feature of our school,” she says. “Processes and structures established during our first weeks encouraged and supported teachers to work together.” Before the school year commenced, all foundation staff participated in professional learning days, attended a professional learning communities conference and learnt collectively by visiting other schools.

BACKGROUND IN LEADERSHIP

After completing her diploma and bachelor of education and working as a classroom teacher and school leader, Fern attained two master’s degrees in education: curriculum and educational leadership. Her leadership

experience has included: being a curriculum adviser with 23 schools in the Catholic Diocese of Lismore; five years as an assistant principal; a role as an acting principal; and six years as principal of a Catholic primary school in Armidale. Her career has mainly been in the Catholic education system in New South Wales country areas.

Her work as a curriculum adviser led to opportunities in which she developed expertise in professional learning and understanding of a broad vision of education, including curriculum. After a four-year involvement in trialling basic skills tests, she served for three years on the NSW Board of Studies Primary Curriculum Committee, and is an ongoing member of the Independent Education Union Education Issues Committee.

She has been committed to working with policy, curriculum and practices related to initial teacher education and accreditation over several years. From initial involvement as a panel member of the NSW Institute of Teachers Initial Teacher Education Panel, she has undergone training with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) as a panel member and panel chair for the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in primary education. She is also a member of the BOSTES

Moderating and Consistency Committee, reviewing applications for teacher accreditation at higher levels.

As a member of the Association of Catholic School Principals in NSW and Independent Education Union, she has served on various committees related to initial primary teacher education and curriculum.

Collaboration is important to Fern's practice as an educator. As a curriculum adviser, she developed networks of teachers, both in regions and interest groups. She established the Far North Coast Australian Council for Educational Leadership (ACEL) Affiliate group in Lismore. She has also been a regional committee member of Australian College of Educators and ACEL Affiliates in New England.

Fern describes her various roles and commitments: "It all connects. There are stepping stones to new directions and learning opportunities that continue as you move through your career. It's important to seek openings. I know my professional learning keeps widening."

Her influence on educational leadership and professional learning in Catholic education in New South Wales was recognised in 2015, when she was awarded a Principals Australia Institute John Laing Award for Professional Development. Fern was commended for her contribution to education, particularly in the state's country areas. She was cited as a leader who "encourages peers in their professional learning and promotes opportunities for building leadership capacity".

SETTING UP A NEW SCHOOL

Beginning her role at St Aloysius, Fern concentrated on three priorities: establishing the Catholic identity of the school; developing a learning culture; and setting up structures to build wellbeing across the school community. The list of actions in the first eight months included: appointing staff; finding ways to build the school's Catholic identity; undertaking enrolment processes; maintaining a media profile; developing processes for communicating with parents and carers; researching and ordering flexible classroom furniture; designing the uniform; organising bus routes; establishing care arrangements for before and after school; and setting up the canteen.

Not least of the strategic actions was overseeing the progress at building the innovative open learning spaces, which were completed in time to welcome

students in February 2015.

Part of the process for selecting teaching staff required applicants to give a presentation of their vision for implementing 21st-century learning. Fern had expected a balance of age groups and experience among the staff. Instead, a large proportion of younger teachers was appointed. "It helps when you have young teachers in a new school," she says. "They are open to change and implementing new strategies. They come with a good research base and understanding of Australian Teacher Standards. Their inquiry mind-frame and current knowledge supports our professional conversations around student achievement and progress."

After appointing executive and teaching staff, Fern embarked on a substantial professional learning program. Armed with the educational brief written for the school, she undertook reading, research and school visits in Australia and New Zealand to support the development of learning and teaching at St Aloysius. One of the foundational elements was the implementation of UNESCO's 'four pillars of learning', described as the fundamental principles for reshaping education. Two further models informing the learning approach are John Hattie's visible learning and Richard DuFour's work on professional learning communities.

With senior staff, Fern visited several schools to observe models of innovative teaching and learning. During 2015, foundation teaching staff participated in ongoing professional learning and conversations and another school visit to foster development of the culture.

With the completion of enrolments came the realisation that the newly formed student body originated from 31 different schools and 25 pre-schools. One of the priorities was to promote the explicit focus on developing a positive school community. KidsMatter Primary is the mental health and wellbeing framework for primary schools backed by the federal government, beyondblue, the Australian Psychological Society as well as PAI and Early Childhood Australia. It provided a valuable framework to assist wellbeing and the formation of an inclusive culture with students and their families.

"KidsMatter Primary is ideal for a new school," Fern states. "There are great materials, the common language to describe mental health and wellbeing is helpful, and

the resources available to support orientation for kindy students are invaluable."

Processes for developing the learning culture of a new school are intensive because of the imperative to provide diverse opportunities for teachers, parents and students to understand and respond to new expectations for teaching and learning. When Fern received feedback from the panel who conducted the school registration process in 2015, members who interviewed students were surprised by their ability to identify their learning experiences. Another example of successful teaching and learning strategies was evident in 2015, when student leaders articulated processes for, and expectations of, learning as they escorted visitors around St Aloysius.

THE SECOND YEAR

In 2016, enrolments have increased by more than 50 per cent, 340 students. New buildings were required to accommodate the additional students. The amount of energy involved in establishing a school has been enormous for everyone. Fern says it's a test to keep people motivated as weeks seven and eight roll around. Instituting a 'wellbeing week' has helped. During this time, no meetings are held and there is a focus on fun in classrooms. As a new school navigating its course, Aloysius continues to face insufficient time as one of its biggest challenges. It is not possible to find time for all the necessary conversations reflecting on the school's progress as well as ongoing planning.

Fern thinks the next decade will be an interesting time in Australian schools. "Baby boomers are retiring from leadership roles and early-career teachers are undertaking new challenges," she says. "At St Aloysius, younger teachers are accepting leadership and we know that these opportunities provide foundations for the future. When teachers share their expertise and knowledge about learning, students benefit and thrive.

"Our school is young but we've established deep structures to assist students to be their best and for teachers to bring out creativity in themselves and others." ■

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Principals Australia Institute has run the John Laing Awards since 2004. It delivers two wellbeing frameworks, KidsMatter Primary and MindMatters.