

Advisory Council Chair's Report 2020

As I commence the St Brigid's College Advisory Council Report for 2020, it is difficult to know where to start. At the beginning of this year my biggest challenge would have been the thought of stepping into the shoes of Sr Joan Buckham RSM! Sr Joan chaired the Advisory Council for many years and ran a tight ship, whilst always ensuring the voice of everyone present was heard. Meetings always finished on time, not an easy act to follow especially for an Irish woman who likes a chat! However, with the wonderful support of all members of the Advisory Council we have managed to get to the end of a very eventful year in one piece.

Before we get to the unique year that 2020 has turned out to be, I would like to sincerely thank Sr Joan for her unrelenting commitment, not only to St Brigid's College, but to Catholic Education in general over many years. Over the years, I have had the pleasure of being a member of the Advisory Council, I have enjoyed Sr Joan's stories of days past and hearing the history of many of the wonderful Sisters of Mercy without whom our beautiful school would not be in existence. I feel that it is especially important to have a Sister of Mercy on our Advisory Council to ensure that the connection between the Sisters and our school community is visible for all to see. I thank Sr Joan for her continuing membership of the Advisory Council and in particular, for her support of me in my role as Chair.

The Advisory Council welcomed four new members this year, Mrs Sharron Patrick, Ms Megan Ansell, Mr Peter Stewart and Mr Gerard Tonks. The new perspectives and contributions these members bring are vital in ensuring that the work of the Advisory Council remains focused and contextual.

Before we had to get our heads around the new world we were moving into, the school year commenced as always with a whole school Mass in our magnificent Cathedral of trees. In the seven years that I have been part of the St Brigid's community, this Mass has been a highlight. It is a sure sign that one does not have to be inside a building to be in God's presence.

And so, to 2020. Who would have thought at our first meeting in February this year, that we would end it in the midst of a worldwide pandemic? Although there is no doubt that the tyranny of distance has served us well here in Western Australia, many, if not all of us, have friends and family both interstate and overseas who have not been so lucky. Our thoughts and prayers are still with all those who have been impacted in any way by this terrible virus.

The West Australian government has done a phenomenal job in keeping COVID-19 at bay in comparison to other states, and we are so grateful to have been minimally affected from a health perspective, however we are cognizant of that fact that many of our families have been impacted in other ways through job loss, reduced working hours and the closing of many small businesses. In light of this, the St Brigid's College Leadership Team moved quickly to ensure that parents and families were aware that school fee relief was available should families find themselves in a situation where their financial capacity was compromised by COVID-19. Although there is no doubt that this assisted in easing the financial burden for many families, even more importantly, it ensured that parents/carers did not feel under

pressure to move their children to other schools and away from their support network of friends and teachers which became so important through these challenging times.

The early days of the pandemic here in WA saw learning move from school to home. This was a new experience for all concerned, teachers, students and families alike. Members of the St Brigid's community were very fortunate in that access to technology was second to none and although the time students were learning from home was minimal in comparison to other states, the experience seems to have been a positive one. Although for many reasons, face to face teaching is by far the most effective, it is warming to know that the College has the capacity and flexibility to move online as necessary. The Advisory Council sincerely acknowledge the immense effort by all the staff, teaching and non-teaching, who made this possible. We are all indebted to you. We would also like to thank all parents who stepped up to the mark to do their bit from home, not an easy task whilst juggling different age groups and in many cases, their own work as well. A great community effort by all concerned.

Term Two saw the return of most students to the school environment although for our boarding families it took a bit longer. While many were impacted by the delay in flights returning to normal, others by the regional borders installed to stem the spread of the virus, for other families it would have been a very anxious time, deciding when, or indeed if, to return their children to Perth. For many of our local families, the decision to send their children back to school was a difficult one to make, but for our boarding families it would have been exacerbated by the thoughts of additional restrictions which could have made it difficult for their children to get back home again. The Advisory Council extends their heartfelt gratitude to Annamaria Cream and her wonderful team for their continued support of our boarding students and their families. This year in addition to the moral support which they give in abundance, there was the additional work of deep and regular cleaning to ensure the health and safety of our boarders and to provide peace of mind to their parents/carers. Our boarders are such an integral part of the St Brigid's community, the College was not the same until they were all back with us.

Most if not all our College community are aware that St Brigid's College is a school founded in the Mercy tradition. The Sisters of Mercy were founded by a young Irish woman, Catherine McAuley in Dublin in 1831. It never ceases to amaze me that as an Irish woman who is very familiar with Baggot Street in Dublin, I chose to educate my daughter in a school founded by the Sisters of Mercy in turn founded by Catherine, albeit on the other side of the world. If only Catherine knew!! As members of the College community, the Advisory Council is a transient group with new members coming and going and on reflection of this, we identified the need for the Advisory Council to access some regular and ongoing spiritual formation particularly around the charism of Mercy. This helps us to keep connected to the values and charism that St Brigid's espouses and in turn to provide advice and make decisions that align with the Mercy charism of our College. To that end, we have been engaging in formation activities at the beginning of each meeting which help us to get to know Catherine (and each other!) better. Our first session saw us viewing a lovely video clip entitled 'In God Alone – the Story of Catherine McAuley'. It is a lovely story which really brings Catherine to life in today's climate. Although born to wealth and advantage herself, Catherine's own story is one of

compassion and strength. Unlike many other ministries, Catherine decided to found hers in a particularly affluent area of Dublin thus ensuring that those who lived there in luxury could see first hand the difference that compassion and mercy could make to those who were not born with the same advantages. It is a reminder to all of us who are part of the St Brigid's community, to ensure that we do not just provide an excellent education for our children and students, but that we also instill in them the importance of making a difference in their communities, seeing the dignity in all, as they move forward in life – Mercy in Action.

The Advisory Council agenda includes a permanent item regarding Child Safety. The safety of children and young people in our school is the responsibility of everyone in the community. It contributes directly to the outcomes for children, as it been identified through research that children are not likely to learn within an environment where they feel unsafe. Therefore, is it incumbent on us as a community to ensure that we are informed and aware of how we need to act to ensure the safety of all our children and young people. To that end the Advisory Council is kept up to date on a very regular basis regarding Child Safe practices and professional development.

We also received the very sad news in July this year of the passing of the Hon. Michael Murray AM QC. Michael was a highly active member of the Advisory Council from 2011 – 2019. Michael contributed authentically and passionately to the work of the Council, with a particular passion for the wellbeing and safety of young people. He and his wife gave willingly of their time at College events and celebrations. We give thanks for Michael, a true gentleman, one whose wise counsel, guidance, expertise and commitment to St Brigid's College will be remembered.

And so, as we draw to the end of a year like no other, it just remains for me to thank and acknowledge those with whom I have had the pleasure of working with this year. It is an enormous privilege to be asked to join the Advisory Council and even more so to Chair it. However, as is always the case on any Council or Board, the best work is done as a team. The St Brigid's College Advisory Council is a fantastic team, energetic, passionate and committed to ensuring all of our children and young people can reach their own God given potential. We are assisted most ably by Mrs Pauline Guerinoni whose organisational skills, patience and commitment are second to none and enormously appreciated. Mr Neil Grime, along with Mrs Carmen Cox and the Finance Committee, have the task of overseeing the financial management of the College (an unenviable task this particular year!). However, Neil handles this with transparency and compassion and together with the Finance Team, has the confidence and support of the Advisory Council.

Lastly, but definitely not least, I would like to say a huge 'thank you' to all of our children and young people who have endured, and indeed continue to do so, an extraordinary year. Whilst each has dealt with the turmoil in different ways, the present situation has certainly shone a light on the importance of health and wellbeing of our whole school community. Although it should always be a priority, this year has raised it to a new level and the Advisory Council will continue to support the College in its commitment to achieving positive health and wellbeing outcomes for staff and students alike. In particular I acknowledge our Year 12

students who, in their last year of schooling, have ridden somewhat of a rollercoaster not always knowing what was going to happen. Although we still have a way to go, and anxiety levels remain high, all students from Kindy to Year 12, you have come through with the additional skills of perseverance, flexibility and patience and hopefully a stronger understanding of what the more important things in life are, health, family and above all hope.

Siobhan Allen
Advisory Council Chair 2020