



**EDMUND RICE EDUCATION
AUSTRALIA**

8 June 2010

Friends and Colleagues,

Warm greetings from National Office in Melbourne!

Our schools are purposefully called 'Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition'. Since EREA began, we've all been on a journey - a journey from belonging to Christian Brothers' schools, towards belonging to Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition. It is a subtle but important distinction that I draw. There are some significant areas of emphasis that may need to change if we are going to journey more fully into that sense of being Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition.

Let's first of all consider the great things that we have experienced and continue to experience as a result of our Christian Brothers' heritage and tradition. We've received our *charism*; our dominant emphasis in mission – inspiration towards the education of the poor and those at the margins. We've received the inspiration of generations of Brothers who have gone before us with their selfless service of emerging generations of young people, inspired by a heightened understanding of social justice. Truly, if we can see the future with clarity, it is because we stand on the shoulders of giants!

We have also received a magnificent infrastructure of schools. One only has to look at the map of Australia in the foyer of our National Office to look at the hundreds of different foundations that the Brothers have been involved in over the last one hundred and fifty years. We are the custodians of around forty now; but we've inherited that extraordinary heritage and vision from the Brothers. We have inherited extraordinary social capital and influence in the Australian educational landscape.

These things rightfully constitute our living tradition that is vital to our future. However, as is the case in all aspects of our lives, there are some things from the past that may not serve us well into the future and perhaps are best being let go of. For instance, it could be argued that historically, an inordinate sense of competition amongst our schools was promoted. This has resulted in some being winners and some being losers. In extreme cases, this exaggerated competition has probably led to the closure of some schools. I would also suggest that some have allowed society's drive towards socio-differentiation and elitism in education to influence their view of our schools' public standing and some have actively bought into a vision of a hierarchy of schools.

In our past we also have instances of lack of collaboration with local Church authorities, and, in some cases, a suspicion of systemic Catholic education in this country. Concern with the survival of Congregational schools is understandable and people acted according to their best sense of what the 'times' required. However, as we move towards this new identity as Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition, we have to be careful that we don't continue to emulate some of these ways of being, which are not conducive to us taking our rightful place in Catholic education in this country.

Bishops and the Catholic Education Commissions around the country are in a period of discernment on what the future means with the coming of new players such as EREA, to the Catholic education landscape of this country. Our engagement with the broader Church must be proactive, clearly articulated, transparent and orientated towards partnership. We have nothing to fear in this process. We are not giving away our autonomy but we are trying to act responsibly in a changing environment. If we don't reinvigorate our partnerships within the Church, we won't thrive, as we must. If we do, we can help redefine how order owned schools engage with their local Church partners and enhance Catholic education at all levels.

National Office
9 The Vaucluse
Richmond Victoria 3121 Australia
abn: 64 066 939 786
p: +61 3 9426 3200 f: +61 3 9426 3222
www.erea.edu.au

EREA will not survive and not thrive if we compete with one another instead of acting for the common good through our embracing of our responsibility for the 'other.' EREA will not survive and not thrive if we don't collaborate with and engage in partnership with local Church. This partnership will need to be based on mutual trust and clear memoranda of understanding with practical expression in areas such as: collaboration around appointment and formation of leaders, shared strategic planning, some shared governance and transparency of communication and information.

We will thrive if we make bold claims about humanity and the way in which human beings should engage in our world. We speak for the voiceless and those who are excluded. Bold statements must also be made about the future of our world, about justice, about the way in which we are expected to relate to one another, about the dignity of every human life. We don't pretend that it is possible to envisage a Christianity that is divorced from these issues. A middle class, non-engaged Christianity doesn't make sense; it's a contradiction in terms!

We have collectively interpreted the *charism* of Edmund Rice as being clearly with and for the poor and those at the margins. We have committed to co-responsibility, to an active and real option for the poor, to inclusion as a key element in our policies and priorities and to a growth strategy that will necessarily take us towards the margins and increase our collective capacity to make a difference in this country in our service of those young people who are marginalized. The Brothers continue to affirm us in this direction and we will do justice to their rich legacy by absolute fidelity to this path.

In Church and Catholic education circles around the country, we increasingly hear the question: 'What must we do to maintain our schools as authentically Catholic?' One response to this question has traditionally been to limit the numbers of non-Catholics who can gain entry to the schools so that a 'critical mass' of Catholics can be maintained and thus we can say that we have truly Catholic schools. Percentages vary but most systems around the country have guidelines in this area.

It strikes me as sad that we would have to focus on excluding people in order to maintain our authenticity, when our Gospel says with great clarity that authenticity demands inclusivity. Authenticity for Catholic schools will not be enhanced by excluding non-Catholics but rather by our inclusion of the poor and those at the margins. Our openness to inclusion and embracing responsibility for 'the other' determines our capacity to be authentically Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition.

Br Philip Pinto once said that we must be prepared to lead our young down new paths, since many of the old have become toxic. Prepare them to speak for the poor and excluded, lest the inhuman cycle continues for another generation. Teach our young to question and critique our world, not simply inhabit it. As Joan Chittister reminds us; 'It's not the answers we teach them to give; but rather it's the moral questions we teach them to ask, that are the measure of the spiritual leadership we give to the emerging generation'.

With best wishes for the ongoing journey and much appreciation,



Wayne Tinsey
Executive Director