

## Media Release

### Catholic schools support drought-affected families and communities

Catholic schools offices across NSW are supporting drought-affected families through a combination of fee relief, counselling and donations, Catholic Schools NSW (CSNSW) said today.

CSNSW Chief Executive Officer Dallas McInerney said Catholic schools offices in the Armidale, Bathurst, Canberra-Goulburn, Lismore, Maitland-Newcastle, Wagga Wagga and Wilcannia-Forbes dioceses have moved quickly to ease the financial strain on families by offering concessions on fees and other costs.

“Catholic school principals have always had the freedom to provide fee relief or exemptions to families who are doing it tough,” Mr McInerney said.

“Families feeling the strain because of the drought should approach their school principal to seek fee relief; all requests are always treated with absolute discretion, care and sensitivity.”

Mr McInerney said Catholic education has had a longstanding presence in regional NSW, with more than 88,000 students currently enrolled in 266 Catholic schools outside the Sydney metropolitan area.

“Catholic social teaching and the Gospel imperative of a ‘preferential option for the poor’ means that families who support the Catholic ethos and seek a Catholic education for their child are not denied a place at one of our schools because of a family’s genuine financial hardship.

“Our Catholic Schools Office in Armidale, for example, has set aside a \$200,000 Drought School Fee Relief Fund to help schools offering fee relief to parents affected directly and indirectly by the drought and to help students with excursions, retreats and sporting activities.”

Wilcannia-Forbes Bishop, Columba Macbeth-Green, who grew up on a farm near Forbes and experienced droughts first-hand, urged families in difficult financial circumstances to approach their school principal to arrange relief in regard to their school fees.

In a letter to his principals, Bishop Columba said that economic conditions across the diocese – which covers the western half of NSW - are difficult and families are struggling.

“My intent is that no student be excluded from school due to a genuine inability on the part of parents to pay full fees as a result of this drought,” Bishop Columba said.

The Bishop of Bathurst, Michael McKenna, also urged families in difficult financial circumstances - for any reason - to speak with their school principal.

“We certainly do not wish to add to the financial burden families are currently experiencing, as money should not be a barrier to children attending Catholic schools,” he said.

In Maitland-Newcastle, CatholicCare has been providing free mental health counselling to the region’s drought-affected farmers and their families since February while its schools have been raising thousands of dollars for drought projects coordinated by the St Vincent de Paul’s Society.

Catholic Schools NSW represents the state’s 595 Catholic schools and their 255,000 students.

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