

St Finbarr's School, Quilpie



Diocese of Toowoomba
Catholic Schools

30 September - 2 October 2024



School renewal and improvement report
Informed by TCS Quadrennial School Review

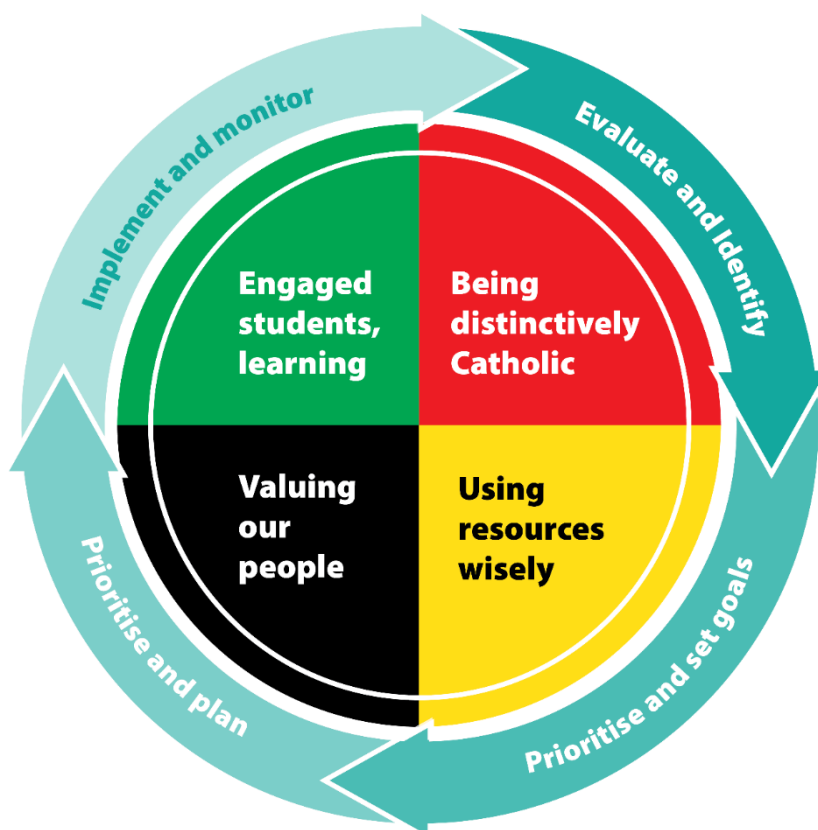


Diagram 1: School Renewal and Improvement Process

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Introduction

The School Renewal and Improvement Process Framework describes Toowoomba Catholic Schools' (TCS) commitment and approach to progressive, incremental improvement. The Framework describes a four-year cycle during which each school community examines its current achievements and performance, consults widely about its aspirations, establishes priorities for the foreseeable future and undertakes regular checks to monitor progress.

To assist the community in this cycle each school undertakes a quadrennial school review, based on the Catholic traditions of renewal and subsidiarity. This review is facilitated by the Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office and provides reliable, up-to-date and timely information to the community to inform strategic planning. The quadrennial school review is one source of data available to the school community to monitor progress and set goals for the future.

The strategic planning process rightly sits with each local school community, which operates within the broader system of Toowoomba Catholic Schools (TCS). Local school strategic planning is complementary to the TCS Strategic Plan. This connection ensures that each school contributes to, and benefits from, the larger system.

This four-year cycle has been the catalyst for significant growth and improvement in staff knowledge and expertise and student learning and achievement in all schools. It is another indicator of the mature and focused professional learning culture which is a feature of Toowoomba Catholic Schools.

Dr Pat Coughlan
Executive Director: Catholic Schools
Diocese of Toowoomba

Methodology

The quadrennial school review was conducted on 30 September – 2 October 2024 by the review team comprising

- Marty Savage, Senior Education Leader, Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office
- Janine Butlin, Principal St Stephen's School Pittsworth

The review consisted of structured interviews of the following school community members

- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- Learning Support Teacher
- all teaching staff
- most support staff
- students
- parents
- parish priest.

Purposes

The purpose of the Toowoomba Catholic Schools quadrennial school review is

- a. to provide a formal process to facilitate community reflection on the effectiveness of the school's current vision and mission
- b. to reinforce exemplary teaching and learning as the core business of the school
- c. to validate and update as required the school's current direction and priorities as outlined in the Strategic Plan
- d. to provide reliable up-to-date and timely information to inform strategic thinking and planning.

School Renewal and Improvement (SRI) domains and components

The reference document for the review is the Toowoomba Catholic Schools (TCS) School Renewal and Improvement Process Framework. The four SRI domains from the Framework provide the structure for the review and future planning.

The four domains

Domain 1: Engaged students, learning

Domain 2: Being distinctively Catholic

Domain 3: Using resources wisely

Domain 4: Valuing our people

Domain 1: Engaged students, learning

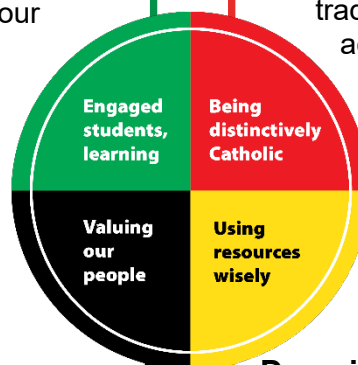
Focus areas

- assumptions about students' learning capabilities, ranging from those with additional needs or disabilities through to high achievers
- the nature and quality of relationships among the school leadership, staff, students and parents/guardians
- levels of safety, trust, tolerance, respect and inclusion in the school culture
- the level of collegiality (distinct from congeniality) that is at work in the school culture as it relates to teaching and learning
- the place of academic rigour in student learning and achievement
- the ways in which student and staff wellbeing are addressed
- the value placed on evidence-based practice in pedagogy and behaviour management

Domain 2: Being distinctively Catholic

Focus areas

- the ways the school identifies itself as distinctively Catholic
- how the staff, students and parents/guardians engage with the Catholic story and heritage, and with the school's particular charism
- the ways in which Christian teachings are made relevant to the lives of the students, staff and parents/guardians
- the way Religious Education engages students to think critically about their spiritual journey, and how it influences their values and beliefs more generally
- the ways in which Religious Education has comparable status with academic subjects in its pedagogy and assessment
- the place of the Catholic principles of hope and service in the culture of the school
- the ways the links between the Catholic tradition, intellectual curiosity, and academic learning are understood in the school



Domain 4: Valuing our people

Focus areas

- assumptions about the potential influence of staff on students' learning and achievement
- the extent to which staff are knowledgeable about school-wide approaches, programs and expectations
- ways in which staff are supported to develop and strengthen their professional capabilities in integrating high impact teaching strategies and personalised learning approaches which enhance student voice, choice and agency
- levels of confidence and purpose in the way people go about their work
- the extent of genuine commitment to the school's direction as outlined in the Strategic Plan

Domain 3: Using resources wisely

Focus areas

- the ways the school applies its resources (staff, time, expertise, funds, facilities, materials) in identifying and targeting the learning and wellbeing needs of students and staff
- the effectiveness of the policies and practices that are in place to implement the allocation of resources in ways that are responsive to the needs of individuals and groups of students
- the level of transparency that enables clarity about the rationale behind resourcing decisions
- the ways resourcing decisions reflect the schools stated strategic priorities

School context

Motto and crest



Peace, Faith and Wisdom - the motto encapsulates the values of the Christian life.

Mission

We the members of the St Finbarr's School community, aim to create a safe, inclusive and supportive learning environment in which Gospel values are lived daily.

Through excellence in teaching and learning and exposure to a wide range of educational and cultural experiences, we aim to instill in our students a love and enthusiasm for learning.

We aim to support each child's learning pathway and encourage self-knowledge and self-discipline to develop a positive attitude and a resilience of mind and heart.

Vision

Living in peace, guided by truth, growing in wisdom.



Inaugural class 1950

School context, history and Catholic identity

St Finbarr's School was originally named St Joseph's School when it started in 1950 and was run by the Sisters of St Joseph. Sr Macrina, Sr Carmel and Sr Magdalen arrived in Quilpie by train in January 1950 to teach in the school after it was constructed by Parish Priest Fr Michael Cronin under the direction of Bishop Roper, the then Bishop of Toowoomba.

By the end of the first year, there were more than 60 students enrolled. The convent and boarding facilities were completed in 1951, which enabled children from outlying areas to attend school. This service continued until 2008.

The year 2009 marked an important milestone in the history of St Finbarr's School as the responsibility for leadership of the school was handed to the Catholic Education Office, Toowoomba, under the principalship of Mr Aaron Wells.

The first full time 'lay teacher' Michael West began teaching at the school in 1983. Following which sisters and staff worked side-by-side until 2018.

In 2018, Sr Margaret Andersen responded to a call of the sisters of St Joseph to take up a leadership position at Nundah in Brisbane. Sr Marg had served in the school for 33 years as a teacher, principal and assistant principal religious education. This marked the end of 68 years of Josephite presence in the community.

The Spirit of Mary MacKillop and the traditions established by the Sisters of St Joseph remain strong in the school and community.

Findings and improvements strategies

Domain 1: Engaged students, learning

Findings

1.1 Know the students and develop expert learners

St Finbarr's currently has an enrolment of 32 students. It is widely recognised by parents that staff know all students well and create and provide a caring and safe environment. Staff take responsibility for every child's learning and wellbeing. There is unanimous understanding of the importance of a positive learning culture where everyone is committed to ongoing improvement. Families feel welcomed and included at St Finbarr's and are well known by all staff.

The school provides focused coaching and mentoring for staff. The school has successfully implemented the Australian Curriculum Version 9 and the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) spelling program, with support from the Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office (TCSO). This implementation has been strengthened by one-on-one teacher interactions through targeted Professional Learning Teams and Communities.

Staff acknowledge the need to consider reviewing the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) process to ensure it captures all students that meet the criteria. It is recognised that personalised learning (including support for high potential learners) should be prioritised, ensuring teachers are provided time for planning and adjustments.

She's not left behind. They already put in a plan before she was diagnosed. (Parent)

1.2 Know the curriculum and lead effective teaching

The Diocesan Learning Profile (DLP), a tool for planning, is utilised with moderate effectiveness. Personalised planning information is thorough, with evidence of its consideration at the unit plan level. There remains further need for improved alignment from whole school planning scope and sequence to actual class unit planning, and through visible learning intentions and success criteria to assessment.

When asked about the qualities of a good learner, students primarily associate it with good behaviour. The review team did not observe or hear the use of learning intentions and success criteria. The Principal has identified the priority of co-creating St Finbarr's learning dispositions to align with the school's charism.

When questioned about their learning processes or optimal learning methods, students exhibit less confidence in articulating what constitutes a good learner, how learning occurs, or strategies for when they encounter difficulties. The Principal notes that research, professional reading, and networking with other principals have led her to conclude that developing student learning dispositions is necessary.

The school's focus on reading is impressive, with a high priority placed on the teaching of reading, and learning to read. Staff have highlighted the importance of prioritising Mathematics planning strategies and implementing them across the school, including short cycle planning to

review the assessment approach in Mathematics. There is a recognised need to enhance the rigour in Mathematics planning, teaching, and assessment.

In recent times, St Finbarr's has developed programs in Arts, Science, Sports, and Technology, with a specialist teacher delivering lessons in Music, Dance, Drama, Spanish, and Technology. Student wellbeing remains a priority and is well supported within the school community.

The Music program at St Finbarr's has been very well received by both students and parents, and it is recognised as an excellent offering to students.

The school has introduced Arts and Music; there is a good balance between Sport and Music. (Parent)

1.3 Use high impact teaching strategies that personalise and connect learning

St Finbarr's has achieved National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results at or above the Australian average for the past two years, particularly in vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and writing.

Parents suggest that additional planning time be provided for teachers to reflect on and refine their teaching and learning practices. Additionally, it is noted by the school that there may be an opportunity for the school to communicate the current provisions for teachers regarding release time and planning time.

The class sizes and structure are well appreciated, and the school excels in differentiation, even with wide age ranges, due to the multiage structures. This constant priority on differentiation ensures that all students' needs are met.

1.4 An explicit improvement agenda

It is evident that the staff and parents are deeply invested in St Finbarr's, demonstrating a strong sense of pride in their work and support for the school. The community is committed to creating nurturing classroom environments that visibly support student growth and wellbeing across all classrooms. The recent and ongoing refreshing and refurbishing of classrooms including furniture continue to remain a priority.

Staff appreciate the opportunities to receive professional learning and support from TCSO staff to enhance their capacity and skills across their teaching and learning strategies. There is a clear commitment and desire to ongoing improvement in practice across all staff to establish and enhance a culture of learning at St Finbarr's.

1.5 Embedded practices

Staff and parents recognise the necessity to formulate a comprehensive vision for curriculum implementation throughout the school, which includes whole school planning (considering the use of hexagonal planning) that accommodates multiage class structures. Additionally, the school recognises that there is a need to establish an integrated whole school assessment plan, along with exploring the possibility of allocating additional planning time for teachers to reflect on and refine their teaching and learning practices.

Throughout classrooms there is a consistently high level of student engagement in their learning. Teachers are provided additional time to discuss student achievement, engagement and wellbeing data and reflect on the effectiveness of strategies for continuous improvement of students' learning and achievement. The school sees an opportunity to focus on establishing effective and expected practices for all staff at St Finbarr's to develop a shared and explicit culture of learning across the school.

1.6 Analysis and discussion of data

St Finbarr's emphasizes the value of personalised learning, utilising effective data-informed decision-making and adjustments for diverse learners.

The school's focus on reading improvement has yielded positive results. The literacy skills of students have developed, which is testament to the expertise of the teaching staff as noted by the parent community.

Students are able to demonstrate progress in reading, and staff recognise the efforts required to sustain the continued progress and support for all students. Staff identify numeracy as an emerging need. Data analysis has improved and continues to be a focus, enabling informed teaching practice particularly during student transitions.

Improvement strategies

- Review the current NCCD process to ensure all eligible students are captured.
- Enhance personalised learning support, ensuring teachers have allocated non-contact time for planning and adjustments.
- Sharpen the focus on Mathematics planning, teaching, and assessment.
- Develop a vision for curriculum implementation across the school that incorporates whole school planning and assessment, reflecting multiage class structures.
- Establish and reinforce effective and expected practices for all staff to further enhance an explicit culture of learning.
- Explore ways to provide maximum time for teachers for classroom planning.

Domain 2: Being distinctively Catholic

St Finbarr's School was established in 1950 by the Sisters of St Joseph under the guidance of Fr Michael Cronin. It was originally named St Joseph's School. The school values its long history and has a deep connection to the Sisters of St Joseph. There was a Josephite presence in the school up until 2018 when Sr Margaret Anderson relocated to Nundah. Today the Spirit and traditions of the Sisters of St Joseph, inspired by Mary MacKillop, continue to shape the school's ethos and community. The school was renamed in 1987, when it became St Finbarr's School, honouring the patron saint of the parish.

Findings

2.1 Religious Education and pedagogical practices

Religious Education is taught in every classroom for 2.5 hours per week. The Learning Area Programs are completed effectively ensuring that each year level is covering its year-level achievement standards and content descriptors. Teachers work closely with the Principal each term adapting Toowoomba Catholic Schools Religious Education Master Plans to adapt the plans to St Finbarr's three-year cycle. Furthermore, the Principal meets with all classroom teachers to ensure their alignment between the achievement standard and assessment.

Staff appreciate the support of the Education Officer: Mission and Identity and affirm the importance of this continuing into the future to build their capacity and confidence in the teaching of Religious Education.

2.2 Religious life of the school

The school liturgical calendar includes regular prayer assemblies and Masses. The Principal supports classroom teachers to plan and prepare celebrations every semester. Teachers value the liturgical planning meetings with the Principal and wish to continue this practice to further deepen their understanding of the importance of celebrating significant religious events on the liturgical calendar. Members of the parish are invited to all school celebrations and there is a healthy relationship between parish and school. The Principal coordinates the Parish Sacramental Program.

All the classroom and offices have sacred prayer spaces inclusive of significant iconography including Mary MacKillop icons and crucifixes. The school motto, vision and mission statements proudly welcome visitors to the school office. The Principal reinforces and promotes these statements by sending regular text messages to parents in the community.

2.3 The integration of faith, life and culture

St Finbarr's School is an integral member of the Quilpie community. Their involvement and support of community events such as Anzac Day, Remembrance Day, Quilpie Show and NAIDOC week activities are valued by community members. St Finbarr's leads a successful pre-prep program called 'Mini Finnies', which is well supported by both Education Queensland and Catholic school families alike.

The Principal works with staff and students to encourage involvement in events such as Socktober, Harmony Day and International Women's Day. The school engages with the Gyrica Gardens

Retirement Village and shares stories and provides entertainment for the residents. The school is working to strengthen the connection between the values of Mary MacKillop and daily activities in the school with GOTCHA awards, where staff acknowledge students who exemplify Mary MacKillop in their words and actions.

2.4 Catholic Identity

Formation sessions introducing staff to the importance of Mary MacKillop to St Finbarr's are held during pupil-free days at the commencement of the school year. The rich history of the school is shared incorporating Catholic values and traditions that underpin the teaching of Religious Education in units of work. The Principal regularly promotes and encourages teachers to further their understanding of the Catholic faith by participating in professional learning sessions offered by Toowoomba Catholic Schools including Religious Education Accreditation Program (REAP) and Cornerstones.

Improvement strategies

- Build staff capacity in planning and delivering a rigorous Religious Education program.
- Develop and deepen the understanding of the Josephite charism and St Finbarr.
- Develop learning dispositions that are underpinned by Mary MacKillop values with strategies for incorporating these into daily school life.
- Explore further opportunities to increase outreach in the community.

Domain 3: Using resources wisely

Findings

3.1 Human resources

There is a well-developed culture of care promoting the welfare of staff members with the implementation of a thorough staff induction programme including cultural awareness and local Indigenous and non-Indigenous history.

The Principal works with staff through goal-setting processes and provision of professional development and encourages staff to access professional development that will assist them in providing quality teaching and learning programs in their classes. Staff wellbeing is a priority. All staff are provided opportunities to build capacity within their role. Staff are provided professional learning opportunities. The Principal recognises the opportunity to monitor and enhance staff wellbeing through the goal setting process.

The culture is good, caring and supportive. (Staff Member)

3.2 Physical resources

Staff, students, community members and TCSO support staff have worked together to develop a Master Plan incorporating the perspectives of all parties. Staff have assessed the current and future needs of the school to ascertain deficiencies and future requirements of learning spaces, buildings and playground equipment. It was noted that the accessibility for all community members to the office and learning areas needs to be reviewed as part of this Master Plan. Staff and parents express a need for further reading resources to better cater for the diverse needs within the school. The school recognises an opportunity to review existing reading resources and ensure staff and parents are aware of what is currently available at the school.

The Master Plan incorporates sustainable design principles to create energy efficient and environmentally friendly learning spaces. Staff and students identify the need to consider upgrading and purchasing contemporary furniture and furnishings across the classrooms, library, staffroom, office and multipurpose room. A further area identified is the need to upgrade and improve marketing material and the signage throughout the school and community.

The school has audited the ICT Technology and eLearning Plan to develop a clearer understanding of the needs of the school, and purchased laptops, iPads, and new TV screens in classrooms to further enhance online learning and collaboration. The Principal is also in the process of engaging TCSO support to ensure the soundfield systems in classrooms are working and staff have the capacity to use these effectively and consistently.

3.3 Financial resources

The school has prioritised providing resources for students requiring additional support with staffing ratios that reflect the need to cater for individual student learning requirements. The Principal works closely with the school's Accountant and Senior Education Leader to monitor the school's financial sustainability and enable the school to keep pace with and plan for the future needs of the school.

Improvement strategies

- Collaborate with all stakeholders to finalise and publish a Master Plan inclusive of modern, adaptable furnishings.
- Audit existing reading resources to identify readers required to support the implementation of the Diocesan Approach to Reading (DAR) program.
- Install new playground equipment that complements and adds to the current playground.
- Regularly review and update the ICT and Technology and eLearning Plans to stay current with technological advancements.
- Review and enhance the staff goal-setting process.
- Develop a Marketing Plan including the upgrading of signage and marketing material around the school and community.

Domain 4: Valuing our people

Findings

4.1 Goal consensus

In recent years school improvement goals are collaboratively developed each year from the Strategic Plan. The Annual Action Plan (AAP) is revisited at various stages throughout the year to monitor progress. Staff regularly collaborate in staff meetings supported by Education Officers when requested. Staff report that their opinions are valued, and collaboration is a reality at St Finbarr's School. All interviewed speak of a strong collaborative culture at the school.

Staff work well as a team, everyone chips in. Good teamwork. (Staff Member)

4.2 Empowerment

The community of St Finbarr's School places great value on several key areas. The development of leadership and teaching capabilities is a priority, with the school providing opportunities for staff to attend training and leadership courses. The Principal also emphasises the support and induction of new staff. Importance is placed on building awareness of the local First Nation people of Quilpie. This initiative ensures that new staff members are well-integrated and culturally informed.

Collaboration with the community is another valued aspect, as the school enhances its profile through active engagement with students, staff, and parents. This collaboration is supported by regular surveys and the establishment of clear expectations.

Parent engagement and the school community are highly regarded, with parents expressing strong appreciation for the school.

We wouldn't stay and live here in Quilpie if it wasn't for St Finbarr's. (Parent)

The small size of the school fosters a familial atmosphere where everyone, including students and family members, is known and valued. Children feel comfortable, and staff are fully invested in the students, their families, and the broader community. The community is proud of its great teaching staff, who provide a high-quality education and foster a supportive and nurturing environment for all students.

Effective communication between the school and home is another area of importance. Parents acknowledge and appreciate the various means of communication used by the school, including emails and text messages, which keep them well-informed.

Parents are always informed. Parents are given a choice; asked for a view. Parents are given a say. (Parent)

Some parents have expressed concerns regarding the provision and use of devices for students during school hours. The school recognises the need to enhance parent education on the purpose and benefits of technology in schools, as well as to clarify how it is integrated across different year levels.

The collegial and supportive nature of the staff is highly valued, as they are willing to listen to feedback and support one another. The Principal is also very supportive and communicates effectively with the staff. St Finbarr's is known for its "people first" philosophy, which emphasises care for the whole person.

We enjoy the small school – it feels like family. (Parent)

Community engagement is another strength, with strong connections to key community stakeholders and experts who support the school's focus areas. The community's attendance at school events further strengthens these ties.

The Principal is recognised for creating and maintaining a safe and happy environment and is open to change, making innovative adjustments when necessary. The quality of teaching at St Finbarr's is excellent, and parents and staff appreciate the structure of having three classes across the school.

Parents have also expressed their appreciation for the specialist classes offered, as well as access to an instrumental program and participation in eisteddfods and district sporting events. Some parents express a need for clarity around the practice and training offered to students when preparing for school events (including sporting events and eisteddfods). The support provided to students, including pastoral and emotional, is highly valued by parents. Additionally, both parents and staff appreciate the empathy and understanding the Principal shows towards the many demands families face.

4.3 Supportive leadership

The Principal has identified a need to enhance goal setting and review processes for all staff to support their professional growth. To achieve this, the school is considering engaging further with TCSO staff and an external coach to provide additional support and guidance in these areas.

Furthermore, the school is committed to supporting student leaders in developing their leadership capabilities, particularly for final year students. Enhancing the preparation of Year 6 students for a smooth transition into secondary schooling remains a priority. This ongoing effort is seen as essential for equipping students with the skills and confidence needed to assume leadership roles and responsibilities.

Strengthening partnerships with community organisations and health services is another priority. These partnerships are also seen as essential for promoting student wellbeing and achievement, ensuring that students receive comprehensive support.

4.4 School and community partnerships

The school fosters and integrates a profound sense of community, as evidenced by the positive relationships among families, school staff, and the broader community. This sense of community encompasses both service to the community and drawing support from it. Intentional engagement with families, local businesses, and the kindergarten exemplifies this commitment. A locally created group called “Mini Finnies” has been very well received within the community. Minni Finnies is a play-based education program, aimed at developing essential skills for a successful transition into Prep run by the Principal and a teacher.

The Principal and classroom teachers have established strong connections with the kindergarten, significantly aiding students' transition to school. Both parents and staff acknowledge the importance and impact of this approach in promoting St Finbarr's and supporting students' needs, particularly for those transitioning into Prep.

Many parents and staff emphasise the welcoming atmosphere of the school and the positive relationships within the school community. Students, staff, and parents exhibit a strong affection for St Finbarr's School and express great pride in their school. It is widely recognised that the school grounds are well maintained, and the classrooms and office areas are consistently clean, with appreciation extended to the grounds person and cleaner for their contributions. The Principal prioritises collaboration with TCSO marketing experts to seek advice on developing a comprehensive Marketing Plan.

Enhancing community engagement is a key focus. The school is committed to engaging with the Parent Partnership Forum (PPF), formerly Parents & Friends, by ensuring continuous improvement through feedback and clear communication. This effort aims to foster a more connected and collaborative school community.

Improvement strategies

- Enhance parent awareness and education on the purpose and benefits of technology in schools and clarify how it is integrated across different year levels.
- Strengthen partnerships with community organisations and health services.
- Seek effective and considered approaches to prepare Year 6 students for a successful transition into high school.

Conclusion

The members of the review team express their appreciation to the St Finbarr's school community for their openness and enthusiastic involvement in the 2024 School Renewal and Improvement Process.

Staff, parents and students were well informed of the purpose of the process, and this was reflected in their preparedness and considered responses during the interviews with review team members.

The review team hope that the findings and improvement strategies in this report will assist the St Finbarr's community to consolidate its considerable achievements and its welcoming and valued community culture, while continuing to build a progressive vision for future directions and continued growth.