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| APPLICABLE TO | All Catholic schools in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle |
| DOCUMENT OWNER | Head of Teaching and Learning Services |
| APPROVAL DATE | 2017 |
| APPROVED BY | CSO Leadership Team |
| SCHOOL ACTIONS | System policy: Schools are to ensure their practices are consistent with this policy. Schools are to develop specific procedures aligned to this policy. |
| LAST REVIEW DATE/S | New policy |
| NEXT REVIEW DATE | 2021 |
| RELATED DOCUMENTS | <p>Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Policy 2013</p> <p>Assessment K–12 Policy 2017</p> <p>Continuum of School Improvement (COSI) 2016</p> <p>Gifted Education K–12 Policy 2017</p> <p>Learning Support Policy 2017</p> <p>Learning Framework 2016</p> <p>MN Catholic Schools Learning Framework 2017</p> <p>Programming K–12 Policy CSO 2016</p> <p>Reporting Policy K–12 2017</p> <p>Sustainability Policy 2017</p> <p>Vision Statement for Catholic Schools 2016</p> <p>Wellbeing and Pastoral Care – Students Policy 2017</p> |

Purpose

The purpose of the Early Learning Policy is to articulate a system-wide commitment to Early Learning which supports diocesan schools to implement agreed philosophy and pedagogy. It acknowledges current research and best practice in the field, which respects the rights, capabilities and needs of the Early Learner to achieve success and build the successful foundations to flourish in their learning.

Policy Statement

The Catholic Schools Office is committed to implementing and resourcing a cohesive, system-wide approach to Early Learning that is based on agreed philosophy, pedagogy, best practice and current research in the field.

This policy aims to:

- raise school and system awareness of the importance of the early years to learning for all children
- build staff knowledge and understanding, skills and capabilities that enable best practice in Early Learning
- provide advice and guidelines to school and system personnel in the development and implementation of Early Learning initiatives.

Underpinning the Early Learning Policy is the Vision Statement for Catholic Schools which clearly articulates identity and purpose. [Vision & Values - Catholic Schools Office Maitland-Newcastle](#)

At the heart of everything there is always Jesus Christ.

Catholic schools educate from and for a community of faith; from and for excellence in learning; in a rigorous, creative and critical pursuit of truth (2016).

The approach to Early Learning fits within the diocesan Learning Framework under Personalised Learning. <https://lf.mn.catholic.edu.au/personalised-learning>

The school places a high priority on ensuring that, in their day to day teaching, teachers identify and address the learning needs of individual students, including high achieving students, and those students who require adjustments to their learning. Students should be engaged, challenged and extended in meeting their learning needs. (National School Improvement Tool, ACER, 2012).

Scope

This policy applies to all primary schools and system personnel in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle and is read in conjunction with the Procedure document.

Definitions

Early Childhood is defined as the period from birth to eight years. It is a time of remarkable growth with brain development at its peak. During this stage, children are highly influenced by the environment and the people that surround them. Early Childhood is more than just a preparatory stage assisting the child’s transition to formal schooling. It is a time of holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation of lifelong learning and wellbeing. (UNESCO, 2016).

The Early Learner is the child in the age span from birth to eight years old. For the purpose of this policy, the Early Learner is the child transitioning into Kindergarten and the child in the school years of Kindergarten, Year 1 and Year 2.

Guiding Principles

The Early Learning Policy comprises the following **Guiding Principles:**

The Six Declarations

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| <p>Declaration 1 The Early Learner is a spiritual being who already has a direct relationship with God.</p> | <p>Declaration 4 The Early Learner has a strong sense of wellbeing.</p> |
| <p>Declaration 2 The Early Learner has a strong sense of social and cultural identity.</p> | <p>Declaration 5 The Early Learner is a confident and involved learner and thinker.</p> |
| <p>Declaration 3 The Early Learner is connected with and contributes to the world.</p> | <p>Declaration 6 The Early Learner is an effective communicator.</p> |

The Key Elements

■ DATA ■ PLAY ■ ENVIRONMENTS ■ TRANSITIONS

Other Principles

which are critical to Early Learning

'Don't be discouraged by the difficulties that the educational challenge presents. Educating isn't a profession but an attitude, a way of being. In order to educate you must go out of yourselves and be amidst the young, accompanying them in the stages of their growth, standing beside them.' (Pope Francis, 2013)

1. THE SIX DECLARATIONS

This policy draws on a set of belief statements which make declarations about the Early Learner in Catholic schools in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

The Early Learning Policy is founded on the image of the child as described in the declarations and is integral to and underpins the meaning and context of this policy.

The Declarations declare that the Early Learner is a fully formed human and five of the six Declarations are adapted from the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

Declaration 1: The Early Learner is a spiritual being who already has a direct relationship with God

The Early Learner

- has an innate spirituality that each is born with; a 'knowing' akin to sensory or affective awareness
- demonstrates what it is to be open to God
- needs opportunities to further develop a personal relationship with God and creation, including time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world.

Declaration 2: The Early Learner has a strong sense of social and cultural identity

The Early Learner

- is able to experience the joy of childhood when in a safe, loving and supported environment that provides opportunities for growth, transition and change
- develops an understanding of self as a competent individual with innate capabilities, emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and a sense of agency
- interacts with others to develop positive relationships, trust and a sense of being and belonging.

Declaration 3: The Early Learner is *connected* with and *contributes* to the world

The Early Learner

- is shaped by experiences and relationships with families, social and cultural heritage, the wider community, the environment, country and the world
- interacts with, explores and responds to the world through participation in play and play spaces
- is a socially responsible and active citizen, demonstrating respect for others and the environment.

Declaration 4: The Early Learner has a strong sense of wellbeing

The Early Learner

- becomes strong in social and emotional wellbeing by building positive relationships, developing self-regulation and recognising emotions
- demonstrates increasing responsibility for his/her own health and wellbeing.

Declaration 5: The Early Learner is a confident and involved learner and thinker

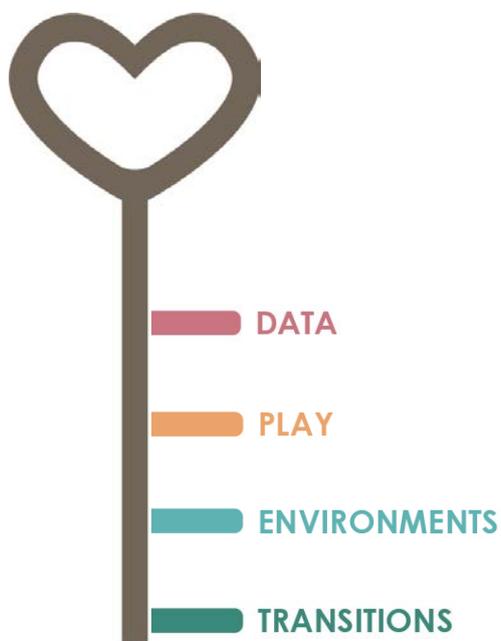
The Early Learner

- is an agentic learner and thinker who is competent from the moment of birth
- is an inquisitive inquirer who brings diverse experiences, perspectives and expectations to learning and thinking, and who has a deep capacity to problem solve and build knowledge, skills and understanding
- develops dispositions for learning such as creativity, imagination, cooperation, confidence and reflection.

Declaration 6: The Early Learner is an effective *communicator*

The Early Learner

- uses literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills to construct understandings and be actively involved in learning
- interacts verbally and non-verbally with others and the environment for a range of purposes
- engages with a range of texts to gain and create meaning
- uses a multitude of creative ways for self-expression
- uses information and communication technologies to access information, investigate ideas and represent thinking.



2. THE KEY ELEMENTS

Together with the Six Declarations, this policy draws on evidence-based research in relation to the following interdependent Key Elements of Early Learning. For implementation of the Key Elements, refer to the Early Learning Procedure.

Data that informs and builds rich learning opportunities and capacity to know the Early Learner.

The importance of **play** as a pedagogy and the importance of self-determined play.

Indoor and outdoor **environments** that invite, enable and enrich learning and support environmental sustainability.

Transitions from home and prior to school settings to school and transitions across the early years of school.

3. OTHER PRINCIPLES CRITICAL TO EARLY LEARNING

Priority is given to **literacy and numeracy development** because these are the foundations on which further learning is built

Priority is given to **motor skills development, physical activity and the development of safe and healthy personal practices**

Priority is given to the holistic **wellbeing** of the child, including social and emotional learning as well as early intervention and support

All children in the early years will have the opportunity to develop their **sensory, cognitive and affective appreciation** of the world around them through **exploratory and creative learning in the arts and technology**.

Responsibilities

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OFFICE

The Catholic Schools Office is responsible for providing support and guidance in the development and implementation of this policy including professional Early Learning opportunities and resources.

Relevant system personnel within a Catholic school context are responsible for:

- overseeing the implementation of this policy including advice, support, resourcing and budgetary considerations
- supporting schools within their own context to implement the Key Elements of Early Learning
- coordinating the collection of relevant data for system and school use from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and other data sources, to inform practice and decision making
- disseminating information and research
- facilitating professional learning opportunities, particularly in the areas of Data, Play, Environments and Transitions.

SCHOOLS

School leaders within a Catholic school context are responsible for:

- overseeing the implementation of this policy including advice, support, resourcing and budgetary considerations
- implementing the Key Elements of Early Learning by ensuring Data, Play, Environments and Transitions are an integral part of pedagogy and practice
- planning for and embedding a sustainable approach to Early Learning within the school's philosophy of learning
- using data and evidence based research to inform practice
- enabling a curriculum that meets and furthers individual student rights, needs and capabilities
- supporting well-planned and articulated educational and transition programs utilising a variety of approaches and best practice appropriate to the Early Learner
- providing students with access to supportive social, pastoral and educational environments to realise their holistic wellbeing
- communicating, consulting and collaborating with parents and the diocesan community to develop shared understanding about Early Learning.

Teachers of Early Learners within a Catholic school context are responsible for:

- implementing the Key Elements of Early Learning by ensuring data, play, environments and transitions are an integral part of pedagogy and practice
- using data and evidence based research to inform practice
- implementing a curriculum that meets and furthers individual student rights, needs and capabilities
- supporting well-planned and articulated educational and transition programs utilising a variety of approaches and best practice appropriate to the Early Learner
- meeting the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers including NESA requirements
- actively engaging in professional learning opportunities to educate themselves about contemporary understandings of the rights, needs and capabilities of Early Learners.

Budget

The Catholic Schools Office is committed to quality and meaningful teaching and learning through the provision of system support to implement this Early Learning Policy. Schools are encouraged to allocate a proportion of their budget to the implementation of this policy.

Schools are recommended to reflect, reimagine and recycle with purposeful intention and environmental sustainability when considering indoor and outdoor environments.

Glossary

Agentic Child

Children are considered social actors who participate in their education and lives and co-construct knowledge and understanding with adults. Children are co-learners who have a voice in their learning and who negotiate, challenge and guide decision making with adults. The concept of agency applies from birth: children are active contributors to their own experiences, interactions, learning and development.

Co-construct

Learning takes place as children interact in partnership with others.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

A human rights treaty that sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. It advances an image of children as subjects of rights and full members of society, capable of participating in their social worlds through their relationships with others.

Data

A collection of information at a given point in time which has been analysed to inform practice and build capacity to know the capabilities and needs of the child.

Environment

The location, building and grounds (built and natural) from which a school operates including all fixed structures, furniture, furnishings as well as equipment, materials and resources. It includes indoor and outdoor learning and living spaces for children as well as common areas for staff, families and children. Refer to the Key Elements in Procedure.

Environmental sustainability

A state in which the demands placed on the environment can be met without reducing its capacity, to allow all people to live well now and in the future. Creating environmental sustainability requires the development of approaches that address how to sustain life through the relational collective of healthy people, plants, air, water, animals and place.

Image of the Child

An understanding that the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and connected to adults and other children. The child is an active learner, seeking meaning from birth, a co-creator of knowledge, identity, culture and values; a true citizen. It is a contrast to some other common images of the child as lacking, passive, acted upon, or following a predetermined path set out by adults and/or development (UNESCO, 2010).

Pedagogy

As the art and science of teaching, pedagogy is evident both in the activity that takes place in classrooms or other educational settings and in the nature or quality of the tasks set by teachers to guide and develop student learning. Pedagogy focuses attention on the processes through which knowledge is constructed, produced and critiqued. Crucially, the term pedagogy recognises that how

one teaches is inseparable from what one teaches, from what and how one assesses and how one learns (Quality Teaching 2003).

Play

A context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations. Research and evidence point to the important role of play in children's development and learning across cultures. Refer to the Key Elements in Procedure.

Socio-emotional development

Social and emotional learning that occurs from birth through interactions, relationships and everyday experiences with others. As children's socio-emotional development advances they become increasingly able to form and sustain positive relationships, experience, manage and express emotions, and explore and engage with their environment.

Spirituality

Children's spirituality is separate and not dependent upon their cognitive and verbal development. They have the ability for consideration of deep questions of value and meaning (Cavaletti, 1992; Hart, 2006; Hyde 2008, Hay and Nye, 2006). The spiritual child experiences a sense of awe and wonder, a search for purpose and meaning and the exploration of being and knowing.

Transitions

The process of moving between environments or routines, including transitioning between home and early childhood settings to school and from one school year to the next. Refer to the Key Elements in Procedure.

Transition to School

Recognised as one of the most significant transitions individuals make, transition has been described as 'a major change for children and their families' (Research Institute for Professional Practice 2011), a 'landmark event' (Pianta & Cox 2002) and an event that 'sets the tone and direction of a child's school career' (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre 1999, cited by Dockett & Perry 2001). Refer to the Key Elements in the Early Learning Procedure.

Wellbeing

For our schools, and based on the literature, this policy adopts the following definition: Wellbeing is understood as a sustainable state characterised by positive relationships at school, positive attitudes, resilience, being able to maximise strengths and high levels of satisfaction with learning experiences. Wellbeing is best promoted in a safe and supportive school (Noble & Wyatt, 2008).

Legislative/Professional Guidelines

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers NSW Institute of Teachers 2015
 Belonging, Being and Becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, Australian Government 2009
 Convention on the Rights of the Child United Nations, 1989
 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians MCEETYA, 2008
 Nature and Purpose of the Catholic School Catholic School Council 2011

References

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (2016), *National School Improvement Tool*
 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2016), *Early Childhood Care and Education*