MACS Guidelines for Enrolment Maximisation

Purpose

The purpose of the Guidelines for Enrolment Maximisation (GEM) is to guide the process of maximising enrolments at MACS primary schools where there has been a drop in enrolments in a school catchment of strong underlying demand. A school catchment is a defined area from which a school enrols students. It is usually a parish or parish part. In some locations it can include a number of parishes.

The GEM offers a process with a range of options and tools for principals to work in partnership with their school and parish community. The aim of the GEM is to:

- understand why enrolments are declining
- identify the changes needed for an increase in enrolments
- implement actions to achieve an identified enrolment target.

Scope

These guidelines are for use by all schools governed by Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools Ltd (MACS).

Background

The MACS Planning Unit uses a range of demographic data sources to calculate the underlying demand for Catholic education for each school catchment. This is available for every MACS school.

Underlying demand represents the number of students residing in a school catchment area who choose a Catholic education. Underlying demand fluctuates over time and the forecasts for a particular location are influenced by the changing demographic characteristics within a catchment. The forecasts provide MACS with a level of certainty that schools will be viable in the future.

In February 2018, the Catholic Education Melbourne (now MACS) planning manager and the regional general managers identified a number of schools that were not enrolling students commensurate with underlying demand from within the school catchment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Example of where actual enrolment does not meet underlying demand
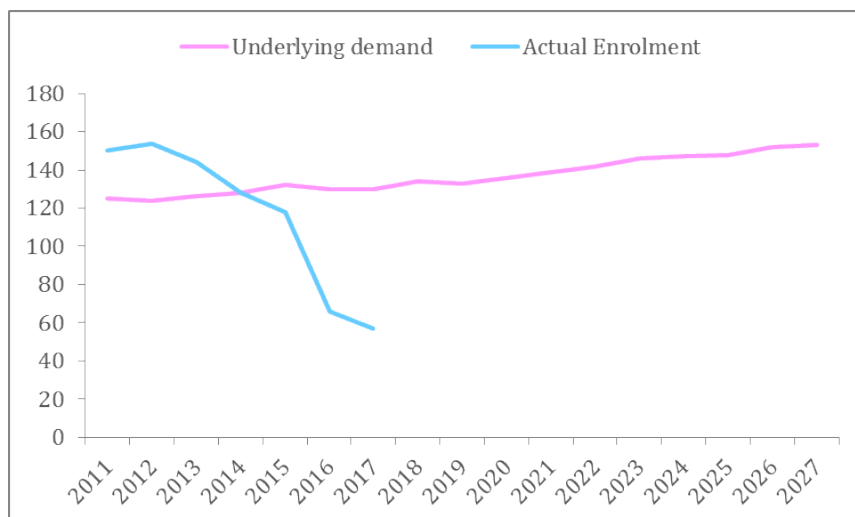
If underlying demand is historically strong and is predicted to remain so or become stronger, a school should not be losing enrolments. It is incumbent on MACS to support schools experiencing enrolment decline in a population growth context. This support will assist the school to provide an attractive education option to parents who would traditionally choose a Catholic education for their children.

The first step is for MACS to identify the requirement for schools to undertake the enrolment maximisation process.
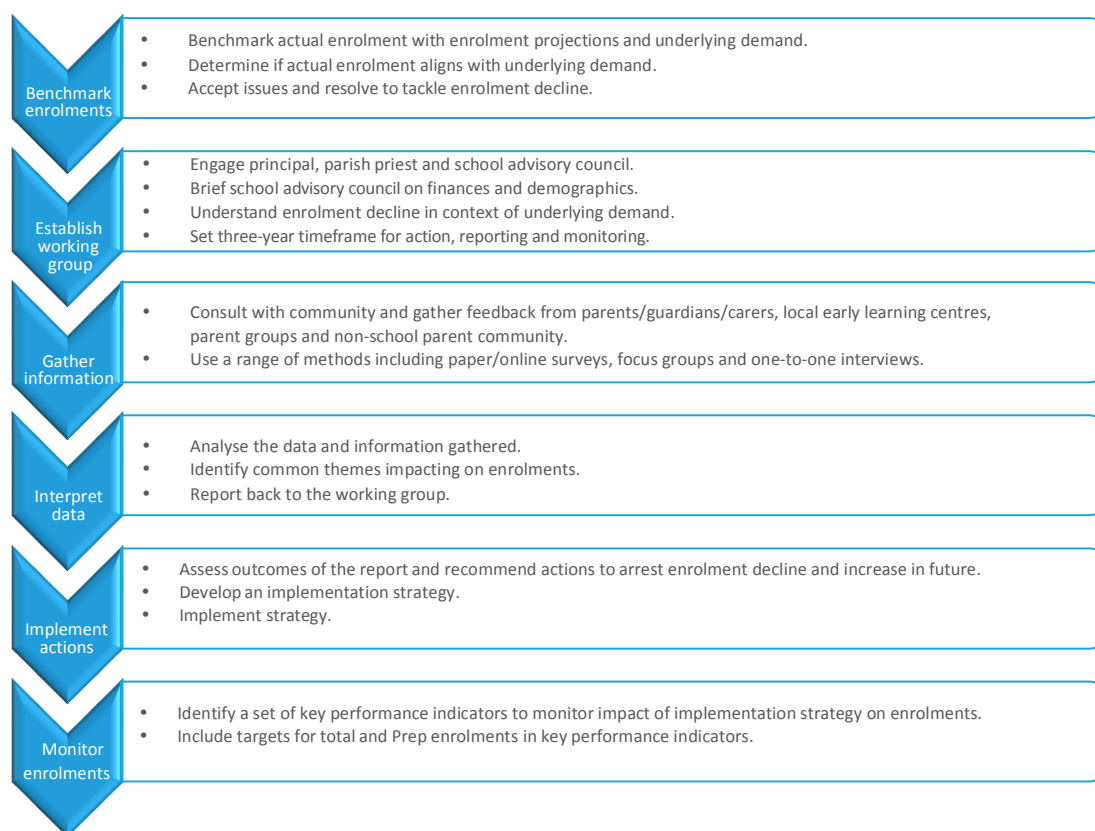
Enrolment Maximisation Process

The enrolment maximisation process is designed to analyse why enrolments are declining to below the underlying demand in a particular catchment, and why parents/guardians/carers who would traditionally choose a Catholic education are seeking alternative options.

There are six phases in the process (see Figure 2), but in broad terms it is designed to achieve two objectives:

1. appropriately engage with the community to identify factors that are likely to contribute to increased enrolments, that is, what parents/guardians/carers are seeking from a school

2. engender the positive change necessary to encourage the parent community back to the school.

To achieve these objectives, the principal, parish priest and school advisory council will work with the MACS regional general manager, with the support of MACS, to design a local process based on the process outlined in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 – Enrolment maximisation

Benchmark enrolments
- Benchmark actual enrolment with enrolment projections and underlying demand.
- Determine if actual enrolment aligns with underlying demand.
- Accept issues and resolve to tackle enrolment decline.

Establish working group
- Engage principal, parish priest and school advisory council.
- Brief school advisory council on finances and demographics.
- Understand enrolment decline in context of underlying demand.
- Set three-year timeframe for action, reporting and monitoring.

Gather information
- Consult with community and gather feedback from parents/guardians/carers, local early learning centres, parent groups and non-school parent community.
- Use a range of methods including paper/online surveys, focus groups and one-to-one interviews.

Interpret data
- Analyse the data and information gathered.
- Identify common themes impacting on enrolments.
- Report back to the working group.

Implement actions
- Assess outcomes of the report and recommend actions to arrest enrolment decline and increase in future.
- Develop an implementation strategy.
- Implement strategy.

Monitor enrolments
- Identify a set of key performance indicators to monitor impact of implementation strategy on enrolments.
- Include targets for total and Prep enrolments in key performance indicators.

The overall enrolment maximisation process illustrated above can be carried out as a three-stage operation that offers support to the school principal to address enrolment decline.

Stage 1

- Form a working group of key stakeholders (staff, parents/guardians/carers, members of the school advisory council) and begin the process of community engagement to identify the factors likely to contribute to increased enrolments.
- Identify key themes emerging from community feedback.
- Propose actions to meet community expectations and increase enrolments.
- Develop actions into an ongoing strategy with a set of achievable outcomes.
- Implement the strategy.

Stage 2

- Continue to implement the strategy.
- Monitor enrolments and ensure enrolment targets are achieved.

Stage 3

- Re-engage with the community to evaluate the impact of the project.
- Implement actions on an ongoing basis to maintain positive change.
- Monitor enrolments and ensure enrolment targets are achieved.

Benchmark Enrolments

The MACS Planning Unit monitors all school enrolments. Initial monitoring identifies two categories that include schools with enrolments of:

- 150 students or less
- greater than 150 students.

School enrolment of 150 or less

Schools are considered to be viable where enrolments are 150 or greater. Schools where enrolments fall below the 150-student benchmark are further analysed by MACS to determine if demand for Catholic education is above the 150-student enrolment benchmark.

If current and future enrolment demand is above the 150-student benchmark, the school is recommended to the MACS Planning Committee for enrolment maximisation implementation.

School enrolment greater than 150

While schools are considered viable with 150 enrolments or more, there are certain trends that indicate enrolments may soon begin to decline. All schools above 150 enrolments are analysed to understand if the following situations apply for the current school year:

- Prep enrolments at 20 or less
- total enrolment at 150 or less
- decrease in total enrolment of 20 or more
- decrease in Prep enrolments of 10 or more.

Schools that experience one or more of the above are reviewed by the MACS Planning Unit to determine historical patterns and may be recommended to the MACS Planning Committee for enrolment maximisation implementation.

Establish a Working Group

If a school is recommended for enrolment maximisation implementation and that recommendation is accepted by the MACS Planning Committee, the first step is for the school advisory committee and parish priest to establish a working group. The working group will be supported by the MACS regional general manager. Members can include a range of stakeholders including, but not limited to, parents/guardians/carers, parish representatives and individuals active in the school. However, the working group is ultimately the responsibility of the school advisory council.

The role of the working group is to consider the enrolment data and set the parameters for the scope and type of data-gathering processes. Part of this includes an initial conversation about what members of the working group understand to be some of the factors contributing to enrolment decline. The impact of these factors can be tested during the data-gathering process.

Gather Information

A range of methods and techniques is available to the working group to gather information. Schools function within different social and cultural contexts, and different engagement tools and techniques will be more effective for one school community than another.

An important role of the working group is to establish and provide evidence as to why the type of engagement technique selected is the most appropriate. Standard approaches to community engagement include the following:

- online/paper-based surveys and questionnaires
- feedback collected as part of a community gathering such as a 'town hall' meeting or school fete
- focus groups of six to eight people
- one-to-one stakeholder interviews
- requests for submissions.

It is vitally important that the information collected from the community accurately identifies the key factors impacting on enrolments. If it does not, then the strategy and actions employed to address enrolment decline are likely to fail.

Interpret Data

Data analysis is an important phase of the process. The themes that emerge from the information gathering provide key insight into the factors that contribute to parents/guardians/carers choosing alternatives to the parish school. These factors may be perceptions based on poor or false information or they may uncover a critical behaviour, teaching style or physical attribute of the built form of the school that deters parents from enrolling their children.

It is important to articulate the findings of this part of the project to the community or members of the community who can advocate on behalf of the school. Demonstrating that the school has listened to the community and is prepared to change to meet community needs will show the project is being undertaken in good faith.

While important, the emergence of key contributing factors are not the sole purpose of the process. They bring into clear focus the reasons why enrolments are declining and present an opportunity to address those issues to create the positive change necessary to bring the parent community back to the school.

Implement Actions

The critical phase of the process is to select and implement a strategic set of actions to effect positive change and sentiment from within the community.

The working group will select the actions considered to be most appropriate to meet the needs of the parent community. Once selected, these actions form the basis of the ongoing strategy to increase enrolments at the school. A strategy may include, but not be limited to, the following actions:

- addressing misinformation about the school that forms negative community perceptions
- changing senior leadership in the school or on the school board
- making changes in personnel in non-leadership roles or non-teaching roles
- introducing changes to teaching style or additions to the curriculum
- redeveloping or refurbishing parts of the school infrastructure
- constructing a new specialist teaching building
- introducing an early years program or before- and after-school care
- providing extracurricular activities important to the school community.

Monitor Enrolments

The key performance indicator for the success of the enrolment maximisation process is an increase in enrolments. This should be considered in the context of underlying demand, destination of Catholic students within the school catchment and Prep enrolments.

Underlying demand

Underlying demand indicates the proportion of children resident in a parish who attend a Catholic school. This is a strong indicator of demand for Catholic education. If the local parish school meets the needs of local parents, it will be the school of choice. It is accepted that parents will choose an alternative Catholic school for a number of reasons, some of which will not be related to the perception of the local school. It is therefore reasonable, from historical data analysis, to expect that a school should enrol to within 30% of the underlying demand figure.

If the underlying demand for a parish is below 150 students, then the viability of the school over time is likely to become problematic.

Destination of Catholic students within the catchment

Destination data is available as part of the February school census undertaken each year. This data indicates the number of students choosing MACS schools within a school/parish catchment and the school of choice.

This data is important in the following scenarios:

- a large number of students from within a parish choosing a school other than the local MACS primary school is a strong indicator that the school is unattractive to the local parent community
- a low number of students choosing Catholic education from within a school catchment questions the viability of a school.

Historical analysis indicates that Catholic schools with a good reputation in the community are capable of enrolling up to 70% of all students choosing a Catholic education in the school catchment.

Prep enrolment

To ensure an enrolment of more than 150 students, a school should enrol 22 Prep students or more. This number is significant for two reasons:

1. a constant Prep stream of 22 students with 100% transition through to Year 6 will provide for the ongoing enrolment of 154 students

2. a Prep stream of 22 students provides a manageable cohort for the grade.

Key Performance Indicators

Schools that choose to implement the GEM are aiming for enrolments to increase in the long term to achieve:

*   enrolment increases up to 70% of Catholic students within the catchment
*   enrolment to within 30% of parish underlying demand
*   Prep enrolments at 22 students or more for two consecutive years.

The performance indicators are targets for the school and working group to obtain. These are the benchmarks to achieve the ultimate outcome for the school. The enrolment maximisation process is considered to be successful if evidence of a transition from enrolment decline to enrolment increase is obtained in the short term.

The MACS Planning Unit will monitor enrolments for schools that implement enrolment maximisation to understand if enrolments are increasing and if they are meeting benchmarks.