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1839-1919

This period reflects the foundations of Lutheran schooling in Australia, where governance was informal, local and deeply embedded in congregational life, shaped by shared faith, proximity and necessity rather than external regulation.

When Lutherans first settled in Australia, two of their prime objectives were to construct places of worship and provide schooling for their children. At this time, there were no formal state-controlled schools.

The Lutheran community usually offered schooling in church buildings. In general, the schools were small, comprised entirely of Lutheran children from the congregation, and predominantly run by one male teacher who worked under the authority of the local pastor. The teacher was expected to support the pastor in the operational elements of church life.

Schools were regarded as nurseries of the church. The two key subjects were German and Christian Faith, and the main text books were the Bible and Luther's Catechism.

Lutheran schools flourished and, by the 1870's, there were 38 schools in South Australia, and other states began opening schools.

Church members were fiercely protective of their schools and refused government assistance. This gave them the freedom to teach in German, to teach the Christian faith in the Lutheran tradition, and to retain their cultural heritage. This approach would partially contribute to the later shutting down of many Lutheran schools.

The Commonwealth of Australia was constituted on 1 January, 1901. Due to the Australian Constitution's silence on education, education became a residual power, meaning states and territories were responsible for the legislation of schools.

Lutheran education came to an abrupt halt during World War I. Governments reacted strongly to the public's distrust of Germans, closing 49 schools in South Australia and three schools in Queensland, and banning the German language in Victorian schools. In 1919, only two colleges remained in South Australia, 11 primary schools in Victoria, and two primary schools in New South Wales.

Those Lutheran schools that did remain or recommence at various stages after the war, began to see evidence that running an independent school brought some responsibilities to the state government.

1960-1989

This era marked the beginning of formal government involvement in Lutheran schooling, introducing public funding and legal scrutiny that would gradually reshape assumptions about independence, accountability and governance responsibility.

Fast forward to the late 1960's and early 1970's, which saw the introduction of government funding for schools. This funding, whilst gratefully received, was to change forever the notion of total independence for Lutheran schools.

Despite education being a state and territory mandate, in 1964 the Australian Federal Government began funding non-government (independent and Catholic) schools. What began as the provision of financial support for capital projects, expanded into recurrent funding for the operational costs of non-government schools.

In the 1970's, non-government schools encountered one of their biggest challenges to continued government funding, when a group that went by the acronym DOGS (Defence of Government Schools) challenged the use of this funding, claiming that some of the money was being misappropriated by the church and congregations. ([Read more here.](#)) Non-government schools won this case in the High Court, in what is claimed to be one of the four high court cases that changed Australia. The High Court win changed the way independent schools are run. Schools needed to be scrupulous in their use of government funding, with each school having to demonstrate their own budget and financial statements, with monies in accounts separate to their congregations.

As a direct result of Federal Government funding, Lutheran schools grew rapidly in size and number.

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1990-2010

This period represents a decisive shift from congregational decision-making toward structured, skills-based governance, driven by growth, complexity and increasing regulatory and legal expectations.

Up until this period, schools had predominantly been governed in full connection with congregations. Early in the 1990s, it was identified that having separate statements and money separate from congregations was not enough to comply with government requirements, particularly those requirements that relate to the receipt of annual Federal funding for independent schools. It was determined that it would be more prudent for schools to be operated as clearly distinct and separate from congregations. Each Lutheran education region developed a constitutional structure that aligned with its church culture, as well as its State and Territory legislative obligations, and Federal Government requirements.

Strategies were developed to not diminish school-congregation links, and parishioners governed the schools. Now separate to church meetings, school meetings were held to discuss the business of the school, which included the election of school council and board members, the calling of teaching staff, and the adoption of budgets and audited financial statements, in addition to basic operational matters. Whilst the amount of business varied from school to school, it is fair to say that in the mid-to-late 1990's, parishioners took on the bulk of the decision-making on behalf of the schools.

The late 1990's saw more changes within the Lutheran education landscape. Lutheran schools saw a shift from predominantly Lutheran students, to non-Lutheran students. Budgets increased dramatically, government accountability increased, policies affecting the running of schools ballooned, a culture of litigation commenced, and the whole matter of governance took on a totally different perspective. No longer was it appropriate to ask well-intentioned but under-skilled parishioners to decide on an increasing range and breadth of elaborate and sometimes delicate matters. The complexity of decision-making and its potential ramifications became such that it was inevitable that boards and councils that had intimate knowledge of all the background factors, would become the group that would best exhibit due diligence in making such decisions.

Therefore, the need to have congregations directly involved in the process or influence of decision-making drastically reduced. This trend continued to the point that, in many schools and colleges, the only business conducted by parishioners was the adoption of audited financial statements and the appointment of new board/council members. Lutheran education regional offices developed a wide range of expertise on staff, becoming the first and foremost advisory group for schools. The regional offices developed a broad knowledge-base and speciality around the requirements for school governance, further reducing the need for schools and colleges to consult with parishioners and seek their advice about governance matters.

As governance expectations increased, so too did the demands placed on those who served. What had once relied primarily on goodwill and proximity now required greater time, expertise and responsibility. Across Lutheran education, this work continued to be carried largely by volunteers – people offering their professional skills, judgment and care in service of their school community and its future. This voluntary service became an increasingly significant contribution to the sustainability and credibility of Lutheran schools. Within Lutheran theology, such service is understood not as authority exercised over others, but as responsibility carried on behalf of the community and for the sake of those served.

2013-2018

By this time, governance reform had matured to the point where capability, expertise and clarity of role were recognised as essential to sustaining both mission and educational quality.

The Australian Education Act C'th (2013) was to become the first of many initiatives that would introduce unprecedented accountability for how schools receive and spend Federal Government funds. This act, together with broader government regulations, introduced compliance never before seen in independent schools. The compliance measures ranged from participation in the Non-Government Schools Census, adherence to specified curriculum, participation in national assessments, directives regarding reporting student achievement to parents, and making student performance information public; to requirements regarding the use of the Australian Flag.

In response to the ever-increasing complexity of school governance, in 2018 the LCA's General Synod emphasised the importance of school boards/councils being skills-based. It affirmed that flexibility be provided for local school governing bodies to allow for increased participation by non-Lutheran board/council members, whilst maintaining a majority of Lutheran members. Implicitly, it recognised that non-Lutheran board/council members are needed to provide the appropriate expertise for governance of schools. It was no longer reasonable to expect that members of congregations/parishes would have sufficient background knowledge, experience and expertise to make key decisions about schools.

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Whilst constitutional structures vary from region to region and, even within some regions, from school to school, most constitutional models now absent congregations/parishes from a direct role in the governance of the school. In the vein of achieving the highest possible governance, board/council members are primarily sought/chosen/elected according to the skills they offer, with deliberate constitutional clauses that support the Lutheran ethos of the school and with a majority of board/council members required to be communing members of the Lutheran church. Ongoing and intentional links with congregations/parishes, particularly in mission and ministry, are considered of paramount importance, although they look different today than they did when Lutheran schools were first established in Australia.

Today and Tomorrow

Today, Lutheran school governance operates at the intersection of faith, law, education and public trust. Governing bodies are required to navigate an environment of increasing complexity, where expectations of accountability, transparency and care are both higher and more visible than at any previous point in the history of Lutheran education in Australia.

The establishment of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) in 2012 introduced a national framework for charity governance, including clear standards relating to responsible management, accountability and organisational purpose. For Lutheran schools, this reinforced the importance of well-functioning governing bodies, clear constitutional arrangements and disciplined governance practices that serve both mission and public trust.

The introduction and ongoing expansion of the Privacy Act and the Australian Privacy Principles have further reshaped governance responsibilities. Governing bodies now carry obligations to ensure the lawful, ethical and secure handling of personal and sensitive information relating to students, families and staff, particularly in an era of digital systems, online platforms and increasing data reliance.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013–2017) marked a profound moment for all institutions working with children. Its findings reshaped expectations around safeguarding, reporting, culture and leadership. In response, state and territory governments significantly strengthened child safety legislation, mandatory reporting requirements and oversight regimes. Governing bodies now carry heightened responsibility for ensuring that child safety is embedded not only in policy, but in organisational culture, systems and leadership. For Lutheran education, this emphasis resonates deeply with the call to protect the vulnerable and to act decisively for the wellbeing of children entrusted to our care. Workforce governance has also become more complex. The work of the Fair Work Commission, evolving industrial instruments and increased scrutiny of workplace practices have placed greater obligations on schools as employers. In parallel, harmonised work, health and safety (WHS) legislation requires governing bodies to exercise due diligence to ensure the physical and psychological safety of workers, students and visitors. Together, these developments have broadened governance attention beyond financial and legal risk to include wellbeing, workload, psychosocial safety and organisational culture.

Alongside schools, a growing number of early childhood services within the Lutheran community now operate within one of the most highly regulated education environments in Australia. The Education and Care Services National Law, together with the National Quality Framework (NQF) and oversight by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), has significantly reshaped and expanded governance expectations for early learning. These frameworks place strong emphasis on quality, safety, workforce capability, continuous improvement and accountability. For governing bodies, this requires a deepened understanding of regulatory compliance, risk management and quality assurance, alongside a continued commitment to nurturing cultures of care, trust and professionalism.

At the same time, the educational landscape itself has changed markedly. The introduction of national compulsory standardised testing, evolving curriculum frameworks and increased public scrutiny of educational outcomes have placed new expectations on schools and their governance. There is greater emphasis on data, evidence and accountability, alongside growing recognition of the limits of narrow measures of success.

Schools and early childhood services are also responding to increasingly complex student needs. Greater understanding of learning differences, trauma, mental health and neurodiversity has led to more formalised processes around diagnosis, support and adjustment. Governing bodies now oversee systems that support inclusion, resourcing and care, while trusting professional staff to exercise their expertise responsibly in day-to-day practice.

The professionalisation of teaching and leadership has intensified during this period. National standards, including those developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), have shaped expectations around teacher formation, accreditation and leadership development. These

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developments have strengthened educational quality while also increasing the complexity of workforce and leadership governance.

Beyond education and regulation, governing bodies are also navigating broader societal pressures: increased regulatory oversight, rising community expectations around transparency and voice, greater awareness of legal and reputational risk, and the rapid pace of social, technological and cultural change. From a Lutheran perspective, these developments reflect a growing societal recognition of responsibility, care and accountability – values long held within Christian vocation, now expressed through contemporary legal and regulatory frameworks.

Looking ahead, Lutheran school governance will continue to be shaped by emerging risks and opportunities. Rapid technological change, including the use of artificial intelligence in education and administration, presents both promise and challenge. Governing bodies will be required to exercise careful judgement around ethics, privacy, data use, cyber security and the impact of technology on learning, work and human relationships.

Other emerging considerations include ongoing workforce pressures, changing patterns of enrolment, rising costs, climate-related risks, increasing mental health needs within school communities, and evolving expectations regarding inclusion, diversity and community engagement. Additionally, the media reports a resurgence of public dissent in relation to Commonwealth funding of non-government schools. These challenges bring opportunity: to strengthen governance maturity, deepen trust in leadership, and continue shaping schools that are safe, responsive, innovative and grounded in purpose.

In this context, governance has evolved in ways that serves the care, safety and flourishing of students and staff. Contemporary governance structures are not a departure from Lutheran values, but an expression of them – seeking to act responsibly, protect the vulnerable, steward resources wisely and sustain mission over time.

Lutheran Education Australia recognises the commitment, skill and generosity of those who serve on governing bodies today. Board and council members offer their time and expertise voluntarily, often alongside demanding professional and personal responsibilities. Their service strengthens not only the schools they govern, but the wider Lutheran education landscape across Australia.

Looking to the future, Lutheran education remains well placed to serve children, families and communities with integrity and hope. As governance continues to adapt to new challenges, it does so grounded in a long tradition of faith, service and care; confident that thoughtful, well-formed governance will continue to support the flourishing of Lutheran schools for generations to come.