

The Search for Success in a Charismatic Environment:

*Senior Teacher's Responses to high stakes testing in Academically Successful
Christian Brothers' Schools*

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ABSTRACT

In Australia, traditionally a wide range of measures have been used to identify academically successful schools. The mix of these measures has varied from state to state. But recently, added to this mix, and perhaps becoming the most influential factor, has been the examination results of senior students. These have become far more available to the prospective parents and governing bodies. They are used to gauge the ranking of the school, and to whether parents can expect their children to gain entry into the more prestigious tertiary programs available. But these scores are also being used to rank staff, and in turn, the 'quality' of staff becomes yet another factor in identifying an academically successful school. In other words, the notion of high stakes testing is gaining wide spread use across all forms of schooling in Australia, including State, Independent and Catholic schools.

This thesis is about teachers in academically successful Christian Brothers' schools. It is an interpretive study that seeks to understand how these teachers respond to this form of assessment: high stakes testing. Their responses include emotional responses, how they change their teaching style and how they feel about teaching in Christian Brothers' schools striving for academic success. In this research I interviewed teachers and administrators at three academically successful Christian Brothers' schools in three different states in Australia. I developed three cases from these interviews and document searches, one drawn from each school, that indicate the range of issues that emerged, for them, as teachers in academically successful Christian Brothers' schools.

The specific use of high stakes testing was found to be very different in each of the schools. One school used high stakes testing as an accountability measure for staff, another used it as an accountability measure for students, and the third had no history of using high stakes testing. The study concludes that academic excellence can be achieved in Christian Brothers' schools whilst remaining faithful to the ethos that underpins these schools: the Charism of Edmund Rice. Significant factors in the determination of the successful implementation of high stakes testing in these schools were found to be: the effect of senior management; influence of the media; the influence of culture; and changing culture and the nature of the schools. The thesis concludes with a blueprint for a hypothetical Christian Brothers' school to follow that may lead to academic success.