A walk through history

By Louise Thrower

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IN a symbolic act this Friday 700 Catholic School students will walk the short journey from Seiffert Oval to Sts Peter and Paul's Cathedral.

Their parade will mark the triumph of the State aid debate exactly 50 years ago, the courage of leadership and a community united.

Back on July 16, 1962 Goulburn's Catholic School students were walking the other way. Some 640 of the city's 1350 'tyke' children were enrolled in state schools, including Goulburn High.

Then principal, the late Jack Plews, told the new arrivals he'd do his best to accommodate them and "make it an enjoyable learning experience for everyone."

The July 1962 Catholic School 'strike' as it came to be known, has gone down in history as the catalyst in winning state funding for independent schools.

A humble and inadequate toilet block at Our Lady of Mercy Preparatory School in Bourke St was the unlikely start of it all.

Threatened with deregistration if the 300-student school didn't build another three toilets, the Sisters of Mercy took up the matter with Bishop John Cullinane.

The church simply didn't have the money, the Bishop told the City Council and state government.

With the health and education departments at loggerheads and a non-responsive Premier Heffron, the church, backed by angry parents took matters into their own hands.

As St Patrick's College president, Brother FD Marzorini would later write: "The plot of the Goulburn School strike has all the elements to make a highly successful comedy series on Australian television.

"There were the bumbling bureaucrats, embarrassed and buck passing politicians, a country bishop at the head of a town full of indignant Irish Australian Catholics, a St Trinian's style use of school children to invade the state schools, and it was the state of the lavatories that began it all!"

The issue catapulted already prominent men like dentist Brian Keating, solicitors JB Mullen and Kevin Walsh, bank manager Arthur Rolfe to the fore.

The church hierarchy, including Bishop Cullinane, Archbishop Eris O'Brien, and Cathedral administrator Fr Frank Keogh, implicitly supported community action, which culminated in a 700-strong meeting at the Lilac Time Hall voting to close Catholic schools for a term in protest.

"History was made in Goulburn last night when, for the first time in Australia for 80 years, a Catholic bishop, backed by a mandate from his congregation and with the blessing of the

Diocesan Archbishop, threw down the gauntlet to the government of the day," the Goulburn Evening Post reported.

For almost all involved, it was a matter of justice. With Catholic Schools educating so many students, why shouldn't they have help?

Archbishop O'Brien pointed out their education would have cost the state $200,000 in 1961/62.

"Naturally we cannot provide anything like this sum," he said at the time.

"But with the help of a much smaller sum, we should be able and happy to provide additional buildings, equipment and teachers to relieve the present overcrowding in the schools."

The protest drew national publicity, to the extent that Mr Plews had to throw journalists off the school grounds. The shutdown only lasted a week after the state government was shocked into action.

The new toilet block didn't come immediately but other infrastructure did.

The following year the Menzies government funded science labs in all schools but it was the Whitlam administration in 1972 that introduced greater equity with needs based funding.

Meantime, Mr Keating always saw the 'strike' as just the beginning. He helped set up the Australian Association for Educational Freedom (later the Australian Parents Council) in August, 1962 and devoted his life to educational improvement.

Mary Queen of Apostles parish priest Fr Dermid McDermott recently told the Canberra Times it was ironic that in the end "the parish cobbled together the money for the new toilet block."

Writing about the momentous protest in the 1980s, Bishop Cullinane said some had suggested that more political experience could have solved the problem "with a few phone calls to our friends at court."

That might have been true, he said, but the real problem "was that we were trying to carry a far greater educational load than was possible with the resources at our disposal."Canberra/Goulburn Catholic Education Office CEO, Moira Njadecki has described the action as a "flashpoint" for a nationwide issue.

"In terms of Catholic schools it had an absolutely enormous and fundamental impact," she told the Post.

The Archdiocese says it is celebrating not so much the strike, but Catholic education with a number of activities this week.