

Catholic Schools Partnership

Catholic Primary Schools – Looking to the Future



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Introduction

Schools and their future require diligent reflection and consideration by all parties involved. Change in educational policy needs to be thought through carefully as the contribution of good schools to the development of social capital and the common good is inestimable. The Catholic Schools Partnership, an umbrella group providing support for all of the partners in Catholic schools in the Republic of Ireland, has reflected on many of the key issues facing all of the stakeholders in Irish primary schools at this time and presents this paper to parents and students, to public representatives and civil servants, to patrons and trustees, to school staffs and management, to priests and parishes and, indeed, to all of our fellow citizens, as we look to a shared future in our democratic society.

Schools are important places. We spend a lot of time in them. This includes a significant proportion of that most formative period in life between four years of age and eighteen years of age. The informal education received at home and in the community is of crucial significance. The formal education of children in schools has its own integrity related to the stage of development of the pupils. When schools are working at or near their best they are truly a remarkable human achievement. Young children have a safe place to learn and play and pray; adolescents grow into a deeper intellectual, emotional and moral world; teachers use their personal and professional abilities to nurture and challenge new generations; parents, members of boards of management and other adults give of their time and money to support the educational enterprise. The hope is that by seventeen to eighteen years of age a young adult who is free, rational and capable of mature relationships will be able to cross the threshold into higher education or the world of work.

Today all schools find themselves in challenging circumstances due to enormous social, cultural and economic changes. In an age dominated by media and information technology, significant new pressures are brought to bear on children and adolescents, on family structures, on religious practice, on community life and, not least, on behaviour in the school classroom. In this new cultural context every school needs to redefine its identity so that it is not just reacting to the latest trend or fashion but that it can truly articulate its self-understanding. Drawing on the document of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference *Vision 08 – A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland*, the Catholic Schools Partnership has articulated the following vision for Catholic schools.

Catholic schools in Ireland are a living expression of a long and varied tradition of education inspired by the life of Christ. Such schools emphasise the dignity of the human person as a child of God called to work with other persons in creating an inclusive community in service of the common good; where knowledge is sought and respected while faith is nurtured and challenged.

One can expand on this vision as follows:

In Ireland ...

- there are about 3,400 Catholic primary and post-primary schools in the Republic
- parents are the most important educators of their children
- most Catholic primary schools are rooted in parish communities where they form a critical element in local life and foster a sense of shared responsibility for the educational enterprise
- home, school and parish work together in support of Catholic education.

A long and varied tradition ...

- witnessing to the centrality of the Gospel
- teaching and learning for more than fifteen hundred years
- expressed in different ways depending on the socio-economic context, not least through the leadership and energy of religious congregations
- changing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century as lay leadership emerges in the Church to work alongside bishops, priests and religious.

Dignity of the human person ...

- each person is made in the image of God and is called to share in God's own life forever
- valuing a broad curriculum and co-curricular activities in order to foster a deeper sense of the whole person
- emphasis on pastoral care and student support not least for those who are educationally disadvantaged
- commitment to service of all students with special needs.

Creating an inclusive community in service of the common good ...

- schools seek a life-giving environment where students and staff hear the call to service and the creation of a more caring human society
- growth in moral awareness and commitment to the search for justice, integrity and care for the earth

- schools are communities made up of pupils, parents, staff, board members, patrons / trustees and others associated with the school
- in a more multicultural society Catholic schools welcome all that is positive in this new diversity, instil an attitude of respect for the good of the other and welcome pupils of other faiths and none.

Knowledge is sought and respected ...

- respecting reason and scientific /technological progress while maintaining a balance between the humanities and technology in education
- seeking excellence, including academic achievement, in the context of a broad Christian philosophy of education
- nourishing the mind and soul through a varied academic curriculum, involvement in the arts, physical education and sporting activity, and a commitment to moral development and personal responsibility
- creating a dialogue between faith and contemporary culture.

Faith is nurtured and challenged ...

- all those who are part of a school are invited to constantly rediscover what it is to be a follower of Christ
- a religious education which includes faith formation, prayer and sacramental experiences, and a growing awareness of being stewards of God's creation
- support for staff, principals, pupils, parents and members of boards in opening their hearts and minds to the presence of God
- continuing the mission of Christ entrusted to the Church to go and teach.

The leaders of tomorrow are in the classrooms of today. All pupils are capable of imagining, creating and exploring. Fostering a commitment to critical thinking and creativity is the heartbeat of any living tradition and Catholic schooling is an expression of just such a living tradition. We hear much today of 'innovation' and the 'knowledge economy'. To be truly innovative and knowledgeable is to be more fully human. It is human beings who will create the innovation and knowledge that we need. The aim of schooling is far greater than job training or qualification for a particular third-level programme – it seeks to create a human person who is knowledgeable and innovative and so can adapt to many different roles and realities in the future. We need an approach to schooling that keeps curiosity alive, fosters a love of learning, stimulates problem-solving and critical thinking and encourages students to become independent learners.

A fundamental aim of a vibrant school system is to facilitate the emergence of a literate society where individuals learn how to learn so that each person can embark on a life-long educational journey. Literacy impacts on all aspects of life and opens the door to further horizons of knowledge and imagination through all the multiple intelligences including literature, mathematics, music, science, religion, art, sport and the whole range of new possibilities that are emerging through information technology. With all our partners in education we must renew our commitment to the attainment of literacy for all.

Parental choice in education is recognised in most democracies and enshrined in the Irish Constitution, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in United Nations and European legal instruments. It is also strongly affirmed in the teaching of the Catholic Church. This principle clearly holds that parents have the right to educate their children in accord with their social, political, cultural, linguistic, religious and moral self-understanding. Whilst others may disagree with these views, the parents' decisions concerning a child's education should be respected and, where practicable, facilitated except in the cases where a child's physical and/or emotional wellbeing are endangered. The ultimate expression of parental choice in schooling is the decision to educate children at home. Most parents do not take this option based on personal, educational and economic judgments, but its very existence in principle is an important statement with regard to parental rights in education vis-à-vis society in general and the State.

Throughout the world democratic societies provide funding and legal protection for a plurality of school types. The spectrum of provision covers a broad range from schools provided by the State itself to various forms of communal and voluntary groups who come together to give expression to a particular vision of education. Many of these groups owe their inspiration to religious beliefs.

There is no such thing as a value neutral education. All schools, whether established by the State or by one or other voluntary group, necessarily and implicitly espouse a vision of the human person and give expression to a particular ethos by their choices, actions and priorities. Some people argue that schools should adopt a neutral stance in relation to religion. The inference is that religious belief is purely a private matter and should have no role in the public sphere of education. However, those who would exclude religion from school also espouse their own ethos. They impart a worldview, a philosophy of life, just as much as the person of faith. Moreover, they imply an understanding of the nature of religion which is philosophically mistaken and unjustified.

The interaction between religious belief and education is as old as schooling itself. From the schools and universities of medieval Europe, through the growing rates of literacy promoted by the reformation and counter-reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and on to the furthest end of the spectrum with the atheistic schools of twentieth-century communist regimes, the question of God cannot be avoided in education. Some schools in their structures and curriculum embrace a particular belief in God; others present all religions and atheistic humanism as equally valid responses to the question of God; others demand that such beliefs be left at home and not influence the life of the school; others ban all mention of God. But the question of God will not go away. Religious belief makes a fundamental claim on the conscience of religious believers because it deals with ultimate questions. Since religion deals with matters of fundamental, ultimate concern it follows that the religious response has a priority in all one's subsequent reasoning and deliberation. The identity of believers is inseparable from their religious faith. It is not one more interest alongside others akin to a hobby or a leisure time pursuit or a family tradition. Rather, it is a reality which frames and interprets all of life. To equate all religions is, in a real sense, to empty them of any significance. No believer will ever do this. The study of religions and religious beliefs by the social sciences quite properly brackets out the question of belief and the truth claims of each religious tradition. But such studies, while contributing to our knowledge, are a limited lens through which to interpret the conscientious option for religious belief. Many adults are committed to the education and formation of their children in accord with their religious beliefs.

Faith schools exist in almost all countries except those where they are outlawed by non-democratic regimes. In many nations they form a central part of the education system while in almost all democratic societies they are funded by the State. Such schools provide a real public service and they are a notable expression of the contribution of the voluntary sector to the development of a vibrant civil society. Jurisprudence has evolved in this area to emphasise two freedoms: the individual freedom of parents to choose the school they want for their children and the collective right to form and run schools of a particular denomination. There is a well-developed awareness among policy makers in western democracies concerning the need to provide space for structures of civil society to emerge between the powerful centralising forces of the State on the

one hand and the impersonal dynamic of the market place on the other. The principle of subsidiarity should inform such a process. As an organising principle it suggests that matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest or least centralised competent authority. The principle is based upon the autonomy and dignity of the individual, and holds that all other forms of society, from the family to the State and the international order, should be in the service of the human person. Subsidiarity assumes that these human persons are by their nature social beings, and emphasises the importance of small and intermediate - sized communities or institutions – like the family, schools, the churches, and voluntary associations – as mediating structures which empower individual action and link the individual to society as a whole. All of this contributes to the common good.

Catholic schools are caring and inclusive communities precisely because they are Catholic. They have adapted to demographic change with significant net migration into Ireland and have led the way in integrating migrants into local communities. They have been leaders in areas such as special needs, social inclusion and traveller education. One of the great strengths of our primary school system has been that in most parts of the country children from various social strata have attended the same school together. In any reconfiguration there is a danger of much more streamlined social stratification as the evidence demonstrates that, given the choice, many parents will opt for a school which draws most of its pupils from the more upwardly mobile social classes. Thus the strength of our present system where most parents identify the local primary school as their school should not be underestimated.

It must be noted that parents who have a choice sometimes opt for more socially exclusive schools. Travelling some distance to a particular school while passing by other schools can be an indication of this. Similarly, language or the payment of fees can raise the bar of likely social participation. While the principle of parental choice must be respected, the Catholic Schools Partnership believes that parents should also reflect on the common good when it comes to issues relating to schooling. In particular, Catholic fee-paying schools must make serious efforts to reach out to socially deprived communities, to pupils with special needs and to foster an ever deeper sense of social awareness among all members of their school communities. Otherwise, they risk becoming a sign that is contradictory in terms of Christ's mission. It is the responsibility of the leaders of all schools to foster an ever deeper sense of social inclusion and service of the common good.

Catholic schools are committed to a religious education which invites students to grow into a deeper understanding of Christian faith; it is respectful of difference, it is holistic and it is in dialogue with contemporary culture. Such religious education is philosophically justified, it is based on well-established educational principles and it fully respects the human rights of all involved. But this does not mean that all religions are the same or that we can reduce religious beliefs to the lowest common denominator between them or that we merely need to impart some information on all religions. Religious education has nothing in common with indoctrination which amounts to a deliberate harming of students by undermining their natural ability to reason. In contrast, Catholic schools are committed to the deepest respect for both faith and reason and as such they contribute significantly to the formation of rational and mature citizens of our democratic society.

The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland – *Share the Good News* was launched by the Irish Episcopal Conference in 2011. This details a ten-year plan for catechesis across the life cycle from childhood through adolescence to later adulthood. At its heart is a strong commitment to adult religious education. With regard to schools, the Directory acknowledges the impact of a changing culture on children and adolescents. It calls for a religious education based on a partnership of home, school and parish. There is an ongoing debate in the Irish Church about the relationship between these three realities. It is generally accepted that Catholic primary schools do a very good job in religious education, not least with regard to preparation for the sacraments. However, difficulties arise because of the lack of any faith context in some homes. Thus the best efforts of school and parish can be undermined.

There is the further problem in some large urban areas that the link between school and parish is weakened by mobility as many pupils attend schools in parishes other than their own. All of this has led to an understandable divergence of opinion on the best way forward. Many believe that this is a time to strengthen the links between parish and school so that this nexus sustains Christian faith in a secular world. Others believe that the parish should now take on many of the responsibilities currently discharged by Catholic schools, not least with regard to the sacrament of confirmation. It is generally agreed that a religious education which ignored the sacramental life of the Church would

not be Catholic in any meaningful sense of the term. Given these various views it would be helpful if a group of parishes or a diocese were to undertake a pilot programme over several years to experiment with a more parish-based religious education. In particular, this might focus on the sacrament of confirmation. In the meantime other parishes and dioceses would continue to strengthen the element of parish support for school-based religious education. Were such a pilot programme to be completed there would then be a lot of evidence to inform everyone's judgment on the best way forward.

In the Republic of Ireland we speak of denominational, inter-denominational and multi-denominational schools. The meaning of these terms is very unclear. There is a tendency to speak only of denominational and multi-denominational schools and to define the latter as more open and inclusive. Inevitably, this gives rise to negative representations of denominational schools as closed and sectarian. This is completely at odds with the experience in local communities throughout the country.

A non-denominational, wholly secular school would give expression to its own ethos but it would exclude, on clearly articulated philosophical grounds, all religious symbols, rituals and formation. The Catholic Schools Partnership acknowledges the right of patrons and parents to establish such secular schools. It is notable that no patron is providing such an education in Ireland today. To expect Catholic patrons to provide such education is obviously irrational. The absence of truly secular schools is a contributing factor to the confusing terminology used in Irish educational discourse. As a result the term 'multi-denominational' is used in numerous, often contradictory, senses.

Primary Schools

The primary school system in the Republic of Ireland has two notable characteristics. There is a preponderance of denominational schools and there is a very large number of schools. These two facts are inter-related. There are 3,305 primary schools for a population of 4.58 million people. This is an extraordinarily high ratio of schools per capita. As a result there is a preponderance of very small schools.

Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland

No. of pupils	No. of schools	% of total
200 or less	2,275	69%
100 or less	1,471	45%
50 or less	637	19%
20 or less	107	3%

This profile of a large number of small, denominational schools is a characteristic of the Irish primary school system since its inception. It is unlikely that such a large number of schools would have opened were it not for the close links with local parish communities. These parish structures were themselves a response to a uniquely scattered demographic settlement pattern whereby Ireland has a notably high ratio of rural dwellings. Even today almost 50 per cent of the citizens of the Irish Republic live in population centres of around five thousand persons or less. By European standards this is an enormous rural population.

Not least because of the size of school enrolments, the Irish system has been dependent on local, voluntary effort with regard to management and finance. There are just over seventeen thousand volunteers acting on boards of management. New boards were put in place in December 2011 and have begun a four-year term. They receive no pay, no subsistence and no travel expenses. This is a very notable example of local participatory democracy. The remarkable thing about these schools is that they are managed so well and at such little cost. In Ireland we have thousands of well functioning denominational schools. A primary school system rooted in local communities serving a dispersed population at little cost in terms of patronage and management is a notable reality in terms of social capital. This is quite remarkable in a country where all

political leaders admit that the public service must become less expensive to operate and more responsive to people's needs. Where is the evidence in any walk of Irish life demonstrating a capacity to motivate such a level of volunteerism? The only other example on such a scale is the Gaelic Athletic Association and it is notably rooted in the same parish structure as the Church. In many small communities the only infrastructure remaining is schools and churches. These schools are the very heartbeat of small local communities so the traditions and services they preserve, provide and foster should be considered carefully before reconfiguring the current system.

In 2007 the Irish Bishops stated:

It is sometimes the case that people choose the Catholic school simply because it is the only school available, and not because they wish their children to have a Catholic education. This can cause difficulties for parents who do not share the ethos of a Catholic school. It can also put an unfair financial and administrative burden on the parish. We feel that in such circumstances the Church should not be left with the task of providing for the educational needs of the whole community. As the Catholic Church accepts that there should be choice and diversity within a national education system, it believes that parents who desire schools under different patronage should, where possible, be facilitated in accessing them. In new centres of population it is incumbent upon the State to plan for the provision of school sites and to ensure, in consultation with the various patron bodies, that there is a plurality of school provision reflecting the wishes of the parents in the area.

(Catholic Primary Schools: A Policy for Provision into the Future, 5.1)

Over recent years new schools in rapidly developing demographic areas have been opened by various patrons – An Foras Pátrúnachta, Educate Together, Vocational Education Committees and the Catholic Church. This broad range of provision is welcome as a response to a more diverse population. In many locations the Catholic Patron has not applied to be considered as the patron of a new school because there is already perceived to be adequate Catholic provision of school places.

With regard to areas of stable population where there are unlikely to be any new schools over coming years some existing schools may no longer be viable as Catholic schools. In such situations the Catholic Patron, in dialogue with the local community, might make any buildings which are surplus to requirement available so that the Department of Education and Skills could plan for greater diversity of school provision in that area. This must be planned locally and based on respect for the rights of parents and all other stakeholders, including local parish communities. If sufficient demand for a school under different patronage can be demonstrated then all of the stakeholders should work in partnership

towards this goal. This will most likely occur where a Catholic school closes due to lack of numbers or where two such schools amalgamate. In any case of a change of patronage of a Catholic school, provision will have to be made for the rights of Catholic parents and their children. Furthermore, in all such cases local communities will understandably raise the issue of finance given the large transfer of resources from parish to school over many decades.

In 2009 the Catholic Schools Partnership was established as an umbrella body for all the partners in Catholic schools. One of its aims is to plan for broader provision of primary education in response to parental demand. Following on the publication of data by the Department of Education and Skills in 2010 on areas where the Catholic Patron might consider divesting of some schools, the Catholic Schools Partnership undertook further qualitative analysis of parental understandings of school patronage, published a position paper and facilitated consultation with parents, patrons, teachers, priests, pastoral council members, pupils, assessors, trustees and managers.

The results of this process were presented at four regional assemblies in May/June 2011 in Knock, Kells, Dublin and Adare where 237 participants discussed the findings, prioritised issues and identified the next steps to be taken. Reports on all of these deliberations, along with the research findings and consultations are available on the Catholic Schools Partnership website (www.catholicschools.ie).

The Council of the CSP has identified the following ten outcomes on the basis of its research and consultations:

1. The CSP will publish a brief, engaging and reader-friendly statement on 'What is a Catholic School' to be distributed to all such schools. Copies of the CSP paper on primary schools should also be available for distribution to parents and teachers.
2. To facilitate a deeper understanding of what it is to be a Catholic school in Ireland and to prepare the way for a change in patronage where that would be appropriate, the CSP will provide schools with a process for understanding, supporting and taking ownership of the characteristic spirit in a Catholic school. This will facilitate schools in reflecting on their identity and priorities with all of the school community: parents, pupils, staff, members of the board and the local community.
3. This process will provide examples of good practice with regard to developing school ethos while also identifying areas of difficulty and concern. The CSP website will make examples of good practice available.
4. The new Boards of Management appointed in late 2011 will need support in reflecting on issues related to school identity and ethos.
5. Teachers in Catholic schools need and deserve in-service on the ethos of the school and the Religious Education programme.
6. A new curriculum in Religious Education would be most helpful as it could deal with many of the concerns that need to be addressed. The CSP welcomes the fact that such a curriculum is currently being developed.
7. A protocol should be agreed with regard to Religious Education in primary schools. This protocol should identify best practice with regard to parents who, on conscientious grounds, do not wish their child to receive religious formation.
8. The mutual relationships of school, home and parish should be re-imagined. This should be done in the context of the new National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland – *Share the Good News*. The process could begin with the Parish Pastoral Council making formal contact with the schools within its area. Over time the parish identity of schools will be strengthened and the parish community will grow in awareness of its faith formation responsibilities to all of its members from early childhood through to mature adulthood.
9. Since some parents wish to have their children initiated into the Catholic Church (through the sacraments of baptism, eucharist and confirmation) while they themselves are not active participants in the parish community, there is a need to develop an opt-in process for sacramental preparation. This should begin with baptism.
10. Catholic schools have an important role to play in the future of Irish education. They can be proud of their inheritance but, in a radically changed context, we must encourage them to look to the future with dynamism and commitment. In reflecting on what it is to be a Catholic

school in 2011, account must be taken of sociological and demographic realities which impinge on the everyday life of the school. Thus such schools will vary as they respond to the needs of the local communities in which they are embedded, whilst in a more secular society they will need to strengthen their links with the local parish. In this way we can look forward to fewer Catholic schools but with an enhanced identity.

It is undoubtedly true to say that Catholic education is more than schooling. Rooted in an understanding of the human person as a child of God, redeemed by Christ and destined to share in God's own life forever, it is a lifelong process of human growth and development in response to God's call. It begins in the home, continues in the school and matures through involvement with the Christian community in the parish. These three dimensions of home, school and parish must work together if Catholic education is to truly attain its goal of forming mature human persons in the image and likeness of Christ. But schools remain critically important. One of the most notable characteristics of Catholic education is a respect for faith and reason. This helps to explain why such schools are so popular throughout the world. Faith and reason can live and thrive in the same person; while one cannot be reduced to the other they both can play a dynamic role in forming and educating a mature person. The Church continues to be involved in education as it forms a central part of its mission and because there are parents who wish to have their children educated in a context which respects both faith and reason. We hope that those educated in such a context will be able to make a dynamic contribution to our democratic society, to the life of the Church and to the dialogue of faith and culture.

Christian faith is always lived in particular cultures. The dialogue between faith and culture takes place in the heart and mind of the individual believer, in families, in parish communities and, not least, in schools and colleges. Catholic schools and colleges stand as a reminder that the Christian faith is not a private, irrational commitment embraced by individuals but it comprises a philosophically justified act of faith in a transcendent, personal God and an intelligent and reasonable response to what was revealed in the life of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, they give expression to the public dimension of Christian faith in their commitment to social solidarity, outreach to those in need and promotion of the common good. There will always be a certain tension between religious faith and culture: some people reduce culture to religious faith and so withdraw into a fundamentalist ghetto where everything outside is seen as a threat; others empty culture of all religious reference so that religious belief amounts to nothing more than personal whim and traditional superstition. A true dialogue between faith and culture allows one to inform the other and calls individuals, families, communities, and indeed, our schools and colleges, to an ever greater commitment to human maturity.

The Members of the Council of the Catholic Schools Partnership

Michael Drumm	Chairperson	Brendan O'Reilly	Executive Secretary, Episcopal Council for Catechetics
Kathleen Bradley	Retired School Principal	Leo O'Reilly	Bishop of Kilmore and Chairperson, Episcopal Department for Catholic Education and Formation
P.J. Callanan	Catholic Primary School Management Association	Ena Quinlan	Vice President, Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools / Joint Managerial Body
Marie Carroll	Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools	Ann-Marie Quinn	Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools
Jim Cassin	Executive Secretary, Episcopal Council for Education	Paul Scanlan	Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools
Patrick Collier	Conference of Religious of Ireland	Maria Spring	Chairperson, Catholic Primary School Management Association
David Corrigan	Conference of Religious of Ireland	Ann Walsh	Deputy Principal, CBS Kilkenny
Mairead Darcy	Pastoral Worker		
Tom Deenihan	Diocesan Secretary, Diocese of Cork and Ross		
June Fennelly	Conference of Religious of Ireland		
Thomasina Finn	Conference of Religious of Ireland		
Eileen Flynn	General Secretary, Catholic Primary School Management Association		
Maighread Ní Ghallchobhair	Dominican Sisters		
John Hayden	Former Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority		
Margaret Mary Healy	Catholic Primary School Management Association		
Brendan Kelly	Bishop of Achonry and Chairman of Episcopal Council for Education		
Ferdia Kelly	General Secretary, Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools / Joint Managerial Body		
Gerry Lundy	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Northern Ireland		
Anne McDonagh	Education Secretary, Archdiocese of Dublin		
Donal McKeown	Auxiliary Bishop of Down & Connor, Chairperson of Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education		
Denis McNelis	Vice Chairperson, Catholic Primary School Management Association		
Maeve Mahon	Advisor for Religious Education, Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin		
Paul Meany	Secondary School Principal, Marian College, Dublin		
Noel Merrick	President, Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools / Joint Managerial Body		
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