

Submission Form

CONSULTATION ON PROMOTING GREATER INCLUSIVENESS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Respondent's Details:

Name	Michael Drumm
Position (if applicable)	Chairperson, Catholic Schools Partnership
Organisation (if applicable)	This is a joint submission on behalf of Catholic Schools Partnership and the Catholic Primary School Management Association
Address	Columba Centre, Maynooth, Co. Kildare
Telephone	01 5053161
Email address	mdrumm@catholicschools.ie
Date	22 November 2013

Is this submission a personal view or is it made on behalf of an organisation?

Personal [] On behalf of an organisation []

Introduction

This is a joint submission on behalf of the Catholic Primary School Management Association and the Catholic Schools Partnership. These two bodies work closely with all of the stakeholders in Catholic primary schools in Ireland to create a child-centred environment where the gifts of all children can be nurtured. In this submission we analyse some of the fundamental principles which underpin Catholic primary schools in the Republic of Ireland especially with regard to the education of children of other faiths and those whose parents profess no faith. We believe that the recommendations¹ of the *Report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* need to be read in the context of these fundamental principles. Otherwise these recommendations could seriously undermine denominational schools.

A large percentage of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (89%) are under the patronage of the Catholic Church. This means that the ethos or characteristic spirit of the school is informed by the teachings and traditions of the Catholic faith. 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.

The census of population (2011) found that 84% of the population self-identify as Catholic.² In 2002 the figure was 88%. There is substantial regional variation in the numbers of Catholics from 77% in the four Dublin local authorities³ and Galway city, to 82% in Cork City and somewhere between 84%-90%⁴ in the rest of the country.

Over the past decade there has been a notable change in the profile of those attending Catholic schools in Ireland. Irish-born Catholics have been joined by children from

¹ Coolahan, J., Hussey, C., Kilfeather, F. (2012), *The Forum on patronage and pluralism in the primary Sector*, Report of the forum's advisory group, available online at: www.education.ie.

² Central Statistics Office, *Census 2011*, Government Publications Dublin 2012, available online at <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/census2011reports/>.

³ Dublin City, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, Fingal and South County Dublin.

⁴ Mayo has the largest proportion of Catholics - 90%.

other backgrounds. These include other Catholic pupils whose parents have migrated into Ireland. There is also a significant minority of children from other faiths and those whose parents profess no religious faith. Many Catholic schools have been enriched as they have adapted to serve such a broad spectrum of pupils.

The recently published *Chief Inspector's Report 2010-12* clearly indicates that the overwhelming majority of parents and pupils find their schools to be well managed and welcoming. The Report states that:

Some very positive findings were reported about the management of pupils in primary schools in the period 2010-2012. During notified WSEs, 96% of schools were found to be managing their pupils effectively by, for example, fostering respectful pupil-teacher interactions, by cultivating an inclusive, child-centred ethos and by using positive strategies to promote good behaviour. Incidental inspections similarly found that the management of pupils was effective in practically all (96%) of the classrooms visited.⁵

Given that this report is based on impressive research both in its breath and its depth, great weight must be attached to its findings. The Report tells us that these findings are based on:

- Almost 800 whole-school evaluations
- Over 1,100 incidental inspections
- Thematic inspections of planning and target setting in 34 DEIS schools
- Almost 36,000 confidential pupil questionnaires administered to pupils in fourth and sixth class in larger schools and to pupils in third, fourth, fifth and sixth classes in smaller schools during the course of whole-school evaluations
- More than 47,600 confidential parental questionnaires administered to parents of a selected sample of pupils in larger schools and to all parents in small schools during the course of whole-school evaluations.⁶

It is clear then that Catholic schools are inclusive and welcoming places for the children who attend them. The aim of this consultation process should be to enhance

⁵ Department of Education and Skills, *Chief Inspector's Report 2010-12*, Dublin 2013, p.34.

⁶ *Chief Inspector's Report 2010-12*, p.30.

the already excellent work being undertaken in schools as clearly evidenced in the *Chief Inspector's Report 2010-12*.

Interpreting the Second Vatican Council

Though it took place some fifty years ago the teaching and pastoral insights of the Second Vatican Council are still being received and interpreted in the broader Catholic community. The Council heralded a new openness to the modern world which has been expressed most forcibly through various dialogues: with other Christians; with people of other faiths, with non-believers. The most powerful symbolic expression of these dialogues has been in Assisi where Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI gathered with leaders of Christian Churches and other faiths. These dialogues take place at various levels from international gatherings to local communities, from universities to schools and colleges. The most important dialogue is that between faith and reason. Pope Benedict XVI consistently drew attention to this fundamental issue. At his meeting with representatives of British society in Westminster Hall he said:

I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and on-going dialogue, for the good of our civilization.⁷

He has described the Second Vatican Council as dedicated to finding a new definition of the relationships between the Church and the modern age, between the Church and the modern state and between Christian faith and other religions.⁸ Catholic schools and colleges are continually re-interpreting these various relationships as they are at the forefront of the interaction between Catholic faith and modern science, between Catholic institutions and democratic governments and the encounter with those of other faiths and none.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with the Representatives of British Society, including the Diplomatic Corps, Politicians, Academics and Business Leaders*, Westminster Hall, 17 September 2010.

⁸ *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia*, 22 December 2005.

The on-going reception and interpretation of Vatican II now takes place in the context of the ministry of Pope Francis. He has challenged all members of the Church to reach out again to the world, not least to those who are on the margins of society. He speaks of two temptations: that of seeking to return to a past which no longer exists and that of embracing every secular trend. In contrast, he calls Christians to live out their faith in the world in which they find themselves.

The Irish Constitution

The Irish Constitution states:

The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.⁹

This article clearly affirms the critical role of parents in education and, not least, the importance of religious education. The State guarantees to respect the inalienable rights and duties of parents to provide for the religious education of their children. The Constitution notes that such education (including religious education) can be provided at home, in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.¹⁰ This is based on the principle of religious freedom. The legally recognised human right referred to as ‘freedom of religion’ can be thought of as comprising two distinct but equally important dimensions or moral rights. It is both a positive freedom *for* religion, e.g. the freedom to practice, manifest and share one’s religious commitments (including the establishment of schools with a religious ethos), and a negative freedom *from* religious coercion, e.g. the freedom from coercion by public or private parties to *assent to* or *deny* any particular religious or philosophical proposition. Thus it is wrong to simply understand freedom of religion as freedom from religion. Indeed the Constitution understands a positive right to give expression to religious belief and the State has continued to emphasise this right.

⁹ *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, article 42.1.

¹⁰ Article 42.2.

Religious groups are free to establish their own schools to cater for members of their particular faith. This religious freedom is a core element in our system at primary and secondary level.¹¹

Parental rights

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.

State regulation

While a large percentage of schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church these schools, like all schools in the Republic of Ireland, are regulated by the State through the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The DES strictly regulates the curriculum of schools through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the inspectorate's various processes. Section 30 of the *Education Act* (1998) states that the Minister determines:

- (a) the subjects to be offered in recognised schools,
- (b) the syllabus of each subject,
- (c) the amount of instruction time to be allotted to each subject, and
- (d) the guidance and counselling provision to be offered in schools.

Further, Section 9 of the Act defines in exact detail the functions of a recognised school, Section 13 describes at length the powers of the inspectorate, while Section 15 demands that a board of management of a recognised school carry out its functions in accord with the policies determined by the Minister. It is, therefore, not correct to state that schools are "self-governing". Schools must comply not only with extensive

¹¹ *Ireland's Fourth Periodic Report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (2012), p.168.

legislation and the *Rules of National Schools*, but also the multitude of Circulars and Guidelines, which issue from the Department of Education and Skills. These schools are managed by a Board of Management. The exact composition of Boards of Management at primary level is prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills through its *Boards of Management of National Schools: Constitution of Boards and Rules of Procedure*¹².

The characteristic spirit of a Catholic school

Every school has its own ethos or characteristic spirit. In the *Education Act* 15 (2) (b) the characteristic spirit of the school is understood as being “determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school”. It is clear from this that Catholic schools will vary depending on their history and the socio-demographic realities of the communities that they serve. Yet, from the small rural school serving a whole community to the large urban school serving a very diverse population, all such schools are challenged to give expression to their characteristic spirit through the lens of Catholic faith. This should not be understood as something static or oppressive; rather it is best understood as an invitation to allow Catholic faith to inform the values and traditions that are lived out on a daily basis in the school.

Religious education

The *Education Act* 30 (2) (d) requires the Minister to ensure that time is set aside in each school day for “subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school”. In Catholic schools this time is devoted to the programme in Religious Education (RE).

Religious Education is an integral part of the revised *Primary School Curriculum*¹³. One general objective of the curriculum is that children should be enabled to “develop a knowledge and understanding of his or her own religious traditions and beliefs, with

¹² Department of Education and Skills, *Boards of Management of National Schools: Constitution of Boards and Rules of Procedure*, Dublin 2011.

¹³ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Primary School Curriculum*, Dublin 1999.

respect for religious traditions and beliefs of others”¹⁴. This objective reflects Catholic Church teaching in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council as outlined earlier in this document.

With these principles in mind, the draft *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* has among its objectives the need to “...prepare young children for living in contact with other Christians and people of other religious faiths, affirming their Catholic identity, while respecting the faiths of others”. The curriculum further proposes that children in 1st and 2nd class will have one and a half hours of formal study of faiths other than Christianity per year. 3rd and 4th class will have one week of formal study of other faiths per year, and 5th and 6th class will have two weeks set aside for the study of other faiths per year. The following set of basic principles of inter-religious dialogue will guide the delivery of this inter-religious education¹⁵:

1. All children in all Catholic schools have a right to learn about diverse faiths. Teaching about world faith traditions should not be based on the number of pupils who come from diverse faith in a class or school.
2. Introducing children to two or more faith traditions simultaneously or consecutively causes confusion. Children should be given accurate, clear, age and ability-appropriate information concerning the faith tradition.
3. The positive aspects of the faith tradition should be explored and the teacher should always attempt to avoid stereotypes and superficial understandings. The teacher should avoid focusing excessively on what children may perceive as unusual details of a faith tradition which may give children an unbalanced view of the faith tradition.
4. Teachers in Catholic schools should show children that there are many living faiths practised by ordinary people in contemporary Ireland. Ideally, local

¹⁴ *Primary School Curriculum*, p.36.

¹⁵ See Patricia Kieran and Anne Hession, *Children, Catholicism and Religious Education*, Dublin Veritas 2005, p.283.

members of faith traditions should be invited into the Catholic school to inform the children about their religious beliefs and practices.

All religious education in Catholic schools should be informed by the recent publication of the National Directory for Catechesis, *Share the Good News*¹⁶. The following is a sample of the spirit and vision of this foundational document, relevant to the topic of inclusion:

- Catholic schools are inclusive and welcoming of Catholic pupils and pupils of other traditions (124, 168)
- The Catholic primary school will respect the religious traditions of other students and facilitate them in every way (147)
- Where parents of children, other than Catholic children, wish to provide faith education, the school principal will be happy to encourage them in this regard (101)
- Catholic schools will respect the freedom of conscience of teachers in matters of personal religious belief and practice (151)

The term used to describe the time spent on discrete religious learning in schools in both the *Rules for National Schools* and the *Irish Constitution* is “religious instruction”. It could be argued, however, that this phrase, while an important legal term, does not do justice to the totality of what happens as part of a broader religious education in primary schools. John Hull suggests, for example, that there are three different ways to teach religious education in schools: ‘learning (into) religion’, ‘learning about religion’ and ‘learning from religion’.¹⁷ All three types of learning are evident in Catholic primary schools today.

‘Learning into religion’ is most appropriate for the many children in Catholic primary schools who are baptised Catholics. Good religious education will help them to grow ‘into’ their faith. This type of learning could also be described, therefore, as ‘faith formation’. For example, Catholic children in 1st and 2nd class could participate in an

¹⁶ Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News*, Dublin Veritas 2010.

¹⁷ John Hull, “The contribution of Religious Education to Religious Freedom: A Global Perspective”, in IARF (ed) *Religious Education in Schools: Ideas & Experiences from around the World*, London 2001, pp.1-8.

Ash Wednesday ritual, and might enter into the spirit of Lent by making particular promises. This type of learning is also open to, and may be appropriate for, children of other Christian denominations. 'Learning into religion' is the aspect of religious education that can also be described as 'religious instruction'. However, it is important to note that 'religious instruction' is just one part of the learning that is undertaken as part of 'religious education' in Catholic schools.

'Learning about religion', a second dimension of religious education, refers to pupils' learning *about* the beliefs, teachings and practices of the great religious traditions of the world. In a Catholic school, children will learn primarily about Christianity. This type of learning is open to all children. For example, all children can learn that Lent is a season of prayer, fasting and almsgiving for Christians. In addition to this, children in Catholic schools should also learn about faiths other than Christianity. For example, they might learn about how their local Hindu community celebrates the festival of Diwali. The report from the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* advocates Teaching about Religion and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics for all children in all schools. This contributes to the development of tolerant and religiously educated citizens.

'Learning from religion' refers to what children learn *from* religion *for* themselves. This involves evaluating both *what* has been learned and *how* it has impacted on their own belief systems. It builds on 'learning about religion' by ensuring that religious education is not reduced to the mere presentation of information, but that children are invited to learn *from* what they are discovering. For example, children in a Catholic school might learn about the practice of almsgiving during Lent. Christian children might understand this as an expression of their compassion for those who are poor, following the example of Jesus. Concurrently, children who come from a humanist, atheist or agnostic background might see in almsgiving a good charitable practice, in which they would also like to engage.

In this way, we can see that religious education in a Catholic school is open and inclusive, and that children who are not Catholic should therefore be invited to participate in and to engage with the religious education programme provided at whatever level they wish. Religious education in Catholic primary schools 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.

Diversity within a school

Catholic schools in Ireland and throughout the world are attended by students who do not come from Catholic families. In many cases parents opt for this type of education and welcome the ethos and values which underpin such schools. In some other cases parents may have little or no choice but to send their child to a Catholic school. This raises the question of opting out of some classes. Article 44.2.4 of the *Irish Constitution* acknowledges the right of a child not to attend religious instruction in a school. The Supreme Court has commented on this as follows:

The Constitution therefore distinguishes between religious "education" and religious "instruction" - the former being the much wider term. A child who attends a school run by a religious denomination different from his own may have a constitutional right not to attend religious instruction at that school but the Constitution cannot protect him from being influenced, to some degree, by the religious "ethos" of the school. A religious denomination is not obliged to change the general atmosphere of its school merely to accommodate a child of a different religious persuasion who wishes to attend that school.¹⁸

Catholic schools respect and acknowledge the right of parents who require that their children be excluded from religious instruction. Facilitating such opt outs is a resource based issue. Schools are committed to facilitating parents in this regard but they can only do so as resources are made available so that the school complies with its own policies re curriculum, supervision and child safeguarding. The provision of such resources is the responsibility of the Minister. However, even with current resources, Catholic schools have developed local arrangements to accommodate the valid wishes of such parents.

¹⁸ Mr Justice Barrington, *Campaign to Separate Church and State Ltd v Minister for Education* [1998] 3 IR 321.

Some commentators have raised concerns about the integrated curriculum with regard to this issue. It should be noted that the philosophical basis of such a curricular approach is not the desire to integrate religious education into all other subjects but the pedagogical principle that subject specificities are irrelevant in early childhood learning. Thus children are introduced into an integrated world rather than one arbitrarily divided into discrete academic subjects.

Conclusion

In this paper the Catholic Schools Partnership and the Catholic Primary School Management Association have analysed some of the fundamental principles which underpin Catholic primary schools in the Republic of Ireland especially with regard to the education of children of other faiths and those whose parents profess no faith. Currently, we have a working group studying this issue and developing guidelines for best practice in Catholic schools. We look forward to further dialogue with the Department of Education and Skills on this important issue so that schools can continue to be places of welcome for all the children who attend them.