



Global Researchers
Advancing Catholic Education



REPORT 3

**Commitment to Faith Development &
Religious Practice in Catholic Schools
in Ireland**



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REPORT 3 GRACE (Ireland) National Research Project 2021-2024 Findings

Commitment to Faith Development & Religious Practice in Catholic Schools in Ireland

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About the GRACE (Ireland) Research Project

Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE) is an international research-based partnership between academics in universities and Catholic education bodies across three different continents (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick; Notre Dame University, Fremantle, Australia; Roche Center for Catholic Education, Boston College; St Mary's University, London; University of Glasgow; and the International Office for Catholic Education). GRACE provides an opportunity for scholars and practitioners of Catholic education and theology in their respective countries to affirm, study, collaborate, and respond meaningfully to challenges in Catholic education. Among its aims is to strengthen the argument for the importance of faith-based schools in a plural society.

This GRACE (Ireland)¹ research project – entitled *Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools in Ireland, Exploring the Attitudes and Behaviours of Stakeholders* – aims to establish a clear baseline and a set of signposts for the advancing of Catholic education at primary and secondary levels in the Republic of Ireland. The objectives of the research are:

- to complete a stakeholder mapping that identifies all the relevant actors and assesses their vision and roles – actual and potential – in contributing to the provision of Catholic education at both primary and secondary levels
- to capture and classify the values that underpin stakeholders' approaches
- to establish stakeholders' capacity to progress and further Catholic education.

Four Irish ecclesial documents underpin this research:

- The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference pastoral letter for Catholic schools *Vision 08* (ICBC 2008)
- *Share the Good News – The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (IEC 2010)
- *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic voluntary secondary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2016)
- *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2019).

The Overview to the six reports considers in some detail the underlying vision for Catholic schools that is charted in these documents with reference to how identity and ethos are expected to be amplified in Catholic schools.

Acronyms

BoM Board of Management

CCE Congregation for Catholic Education

CEIST Catholic Education, an Irish Schools' Trust

CPD Continuing Professional Development

CSP Catholic Schools Partnership

CPSMA Catholic Primary School Management Association

GE Gravissimum Educationis

ICBC Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference

IEC Irish Episcopal Conference

JMB Joint Managerial Body for Secondary Schools

QCEC Queensland (Australia) Catholic Education Commission

RE Religious Education

SGN Share the Good News

¹ With the support of the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education DCU in the analysis of the data and write-up of reports.

Key Findings

1. Mission statements based on Gospel values and if they influence policy.

- At primary level, the vast majority of school staff (86%) confirm that their schools have mission statements based on Gospel values. Their Board of Management (BoM) members are less convinced: just three out of five of them (59%) can affirm this to be the case and only two out of five (40%) believe that school policy documents are linked to them.
- The vast majority of secondary school staff (89%) and BoM members confirm the existence of mission statements based on Gospel values. However, a lesser number, just over two-thirds, are satisfied that policy development is largely linked to these statements.

2. How well Catholic schools live the Catholic ethos.

- The majority of primary principals (69%) report that they ensure their staff understand Catholic ethos 'to a large extent'. This finding is confirmed by teachers, who also report in large numbers that 'to a large extent' they 'respect' (77%) and 'witness' (62%) to the ethos. At secondary level, staff members are more likely to 'respect' (68%) than to 'witness' (57%) to Catholic ethos, but clearly the majority of staff report doing both.
- In contrast, less than half of primary BoM members (43%) surveyed report that they ensure that teachers uphold the school's ethos; most of the remainder (42%) report leaving this responsibility to the principal. At secondary level, however, the vast majority of BoM members (86%) report ensuring that teachers uphold the school's ethos.
- Whereas just over four-fifths of those surveyed, at both primary and secondary level, state that they respect and witness to their school's Catholic ethos, this figure becomes less reassuring on closer examination. It is evident, in fact, that commitment to Catholic ethos among teachers is on a trajectory of decline, dropping steadily at primary level and more dramatically at secondary level across the age cohorts. At primary level, there is a significant gap between the numbers who identify as 'respecting' and 'witnessing' to the Catholic ethos. Just over half (53%) of the youngest cohort of primary teachers state that they witness to the ethos to a large extent. It is interesting to note that the 50–59 age category has a significantly higher rate (75%) of witness to a large extent than the older 60–69 age category, which is less than the 30–39 age cohort (57% versus 59%). At secondary level, almost 3 in 10 teachers (28%) aged 18–29 report not 'witnessing' to Catholic ethos at all, or doing so only to a limited extent.
- While BoM members, both primary and secondary, report high levels of confidence that their schools are being run in accordance with the ethos and educational philosophy of their trustees, notably fewer members report that issues in relation to Catholic identity appear regularly as agenda items at BoM meetings. Just under 30 per cent at primary level and 40 per cent at secondary level report that such matters are 'to a large extent' regularly tabled at their meetings.

3. Prayer and the liturgical life of the school.

- Prayer forms an integral part of board meetings according to 72 per cent of BoM respondents in the primary sector, and in almost all cases (96%), primary principals report that some time is devoted to prayer during the school day. Similarly, the majority of principals (82%) agree at least to some extent that meetings in school usually begin with a prayer. Teachers' views regarding frequency of prayer in school differ somewhat: three out of five (59%) report praying with their pupils a few times each day, and a further one in five (20%) just once a day. A minority (13%) state that they pray with pupils only very occasionally, rarely, or never at all.
- At secondary level, the situation is different: over half of respondents (53%) agree that time is set aside at least to some extent for daily prayer with pupils.
- There is a lack of clarity regarding the provision of a sacred space or prayer space in primary schools. The majority of principals (59%) reported yes, with just half of teachers (48%) and less than a third (32%) of other staff agreeing. The majority of secondary respondents (70%), in contrast, agreed that sacred spaces are provided.
- In regard to marking particular religious celebrations in primary schools, approximately four out



of five respondents (78% to 85%, depending on the feast) report marking the main liturgical seasons. At secondary level, over 90 per cent of principals respond similarly, but the percentage drops to just over 80 per cent for the rest of the staff.

4. Provision of opportunities to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ.

- Just under two out of five (38%) of BoM members at primary level perceive that their board ensures to a large extent that pupils in their schools have opportunities to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ, with just half (52%) of all respondents satisfied that this is true to some or at least to a limited extent. Just under three out of five primary school principals (57%) agree that their decision-making is influenced by the person of Jesus Christ to a large extent, and a higher number (76%) report taking the faith formation of their pupils seriously. A similar number (72%) report providing the opportunity to develop a personal faith in Christ as a central educational aim in their schools. The number of teachers who agree with their principals that this

is the case, however, is lower (51%), and for other school staff it is lower still (48%). Notably, a fifth of teachers and other personnel (21%) disagree that developing a personal faith in Christ is a central educational aim. Related questions regarding how the message of Christ is at the heart of the life of the school yielded similar responses.

- At secondary level, levels of agreement in respect of the provision of opportunities for the development of a personal faith in Jesus Christ are generally lower than at primary level. Just under half (45%) don't agree that this can be considered a central educational aim in their school. Once again, we see BoM members and principals responding significantly more positively than school teaching staff and other personnel. One-fifth of all respondents disagreed with the statement. It is worth noting as well that one-half of RE teachers (50%) either are neutral or disagree that developing a personal relationship with Christ is a central educational aim in their schools.

5. Provision of opportunities for the faith development of pupils and staff.

- The vast majority (92%) of BoM members in primary schools report positively regarding how faith development is considered a central educational aim of their school. Three-quarters (76%) of principals also report high levels of commitment to this aim and 80 per cent affirm that opportunities in this regard are actually provided to pupils. The figure for teachers in response to the same question, however, is just over half, at 56 per cent.
- Just over half of primary teachers (53%) report that their RE classes include faith formation, sacramental experience, and awareness of stewardship for creation to a large extent, with most of the remainder (39%) reporting that this happens only to some or to a limited extent. Another matter is the frequency of RE classes: only one in six (17%) teachers provide RE daily; just under one in five (18%) report teaching it four times a week, and one in four (25%) report teaching it on three days a week. Almost one in ten (8%) report rarely or never teaching RE.
- While one in three (33%) primary principals report that they have had opportunities for faith development made available to them, this figure falls to less than one in five (18%) among teachers.
- In regard to secondary schools, four out of five respondents (78%) across the board reported positively in regard to the provision of faith development opportunities for pupils. Over half of principals (55%) state that they ensure to a large extent that faith formation is integral to RE classes, and almost all (91%) say that they try at least to some extent to support and develop the faith life of their staff. Meanwhile, the majority of BoM members in secondary schools perceive that their board attends to the matter of faith formation (see Figure 3.4.1), yet only just over half of the principals report being held to account by the board in regard to Catholic identity (Figure 3.4.2). Furthermore, less than half of secondary personnel, including BoM members, report agreement in regard to the provision of faith development opportunities for themselves.

6. Care for others, especially the poor, and the moral development of pupils.

- At both primary and secondary levels across all cohorts, there is wide agreement that moral education in accordance with Catholic principles is promoted in their schools and that their schools promote care for others, especially the poor. There is a notable gap in the level of agreement on this, however, between levels expressed by principals and teachers. Furthermore, the number of teachers who are either neutral, in disagreement with, or say they do not know, in regard to both of these matters, is not insignificant.

7. Respect and welcome for pupils of other faiths.



- In primary schools, almost three-quarters (71%) of all staff agree that pupils of other faiths in Catholic primary schools are 'free' to express their beliefs, but just half (49%) take the view that such pupils are 'welcome' to practise their beliefs. According to this research, the view from the classroom was bleaker, with only two out of five teachers (42%) confirming that their school 'welcomed' pupils in this way.
- At secondary level, the 'freedom' to express their beliefs (77%) and the 'welcome' to do so (61%) is reported as somewhat higher than at primary level, at 71 per cent and 49 per cent respectively.

8. Respect and witness to the Catholic ethos by staff.

The survey clearly demonstrated that there is a significant differentiation to be noted between 'respecting' and 'witnessing' to the Catholic ethos. Figure 3.2.3 shows that just over half (53%) of the youngest cohort of primary teachers state that they witness to the ethos to a large extent. It is interesting to note that the 50–59 age category has a significantly higher rate (75%) of witness 'to a large extent' than the older 60–69 age category, which is less than the 30–39 age cohort (57% versus 59%). However, over four-fifths in all age categories state that they witness to the Catholic ethos, whether 'to some extent' or 'to a large extent'. Overall, the trajectory in terms of witness and respect for ethos indicates a decline among younger cohorts, though this is not as steep at primary level as is the case at secondary level, as we shall see below.

The Vision: What the Catholic Church Requires in Regard to Faith Development and Religious Practices in Catholic Schools

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) addressed the theme of Catholic education with the proclamation of *Gravissimum educationis* (1965). This Declaration was generally considered a rather rushed and weak document. The teaching of Vatican II on Catholic education was only substantially appropriated in the field of education with the publication of *The Catholic school* (CCE 1977). *Educating to intercultural dialogue in Catholic schools* (CCE 2013) and *The identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue* (CCE 2022) represent important updating of Church teaching in regard to Catholic education in light of changing sociocultural circumstances and contexts, though the 1977 document remains the ‘foundation charter’ or ‘mission statement’ for Catholic education (Grace 2017, p.14).

The Catholic school (1977) mandates episcopal conferences ‘to consider and to develop ... principles which should inspire the Catholic school and to translate them into concrete programmes which will meet the real needs of the educational systems operating in their countries’. The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* gives canonical (Church legal) effect to requirements in regard to Catholic schools. A Catholic school is defined as ‘one which is under the control of the competent ecclesiastical authority or of a public ecclesiastical juridical person’, and no school can bear the title ‘Catholic’ without formal permission (Catholic Church 1983, Can #803). The Code also requires formation and education in a Catholic school to be based upon ‘the principles of Catholic doctrine’ and instructs that ‘teachers must be outstanding in true doctrine and uprightness of life (Can # 803). Episcopal conferences are to regulate formation and education in Catholic schools and bishops are to ensure that those appointed as religion teachers ‘are outstanding in true doctrine, in witness of their Christian life and in their teaching ability’ (Can 804). The Code also gives bishops the right, under certain circumstances, to remove religion teachers or have them removed – a right that would be nonetheless contestable under employment legislation.

Four key documents produced by or on behalf of the Irish Episcopal Conference outline and determine the implications of *The Catholic school* (1977) for Irish Catholic schools: the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference pastoral letter for Catholic schools, *Vision 08* (ICBC 2008); *Share the Good News – The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (IEC 2010); *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic voluntary secondary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2016) and *Understanding and living the ethos in a catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (CEP 2019).

The content of these documents shaped the survey questionnaires utilised in this research. According to *Vision 08* (ICBC 2008), ‘Catholic schools are part of the Church’s continuing mission to carry the life-giving message of Christ to every generation ... For Christians, true human fulfilment and the redemption of society are to be found through faith in Jesus Christ and through service of others in imitation of him’ (ICBC 2008, p.3). Therefore, the Christian understanding of the human person, which includes the call to the fullness of life and eternal destiny, is to be ‘the focus of the Catholic school’s educational endeavour’ ((ICBC 2008, p.4). It follows that Religious Education (RE), prayer and liturgy are considered indispensable curricular components. Educational excellence that fosters intellectual and practical reason, together with the promotion of ‘dialogue and understanding between faith, tradition, culture, and heritage’ (ICBC 2008, p.1) are also understood as key hallmarks of a Catholic school, all in service of the holistic development of the pupil over market-driven or competitive ends (ICBC 2008, p.1). As pupils are educated through the lens of Gospel values, the Catholic school provides them with opportunities ‘to act with justice and integrity in an imperfect world, now and when they are adults themselves’ (ICBC 2008, p.1).

The other three documents which serve as a benchmark for our research and findings seek to reiterate the key characteristics of a Catholic school as expressed in *Vision 08* and encourage and support the implementation of these with concrete strategies. *Share the Good News – the National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland (SGN)* (IEC 2010) seeks to 'lay down a framework and principles, suited to local needs in Ireland, for the presentation of the Good News of Jesus Christ' (IEC 2010, p.2). It identifies six key tasks that are instructive for all levels of catechesis and RE, including those that take place in schools. Originally set out in the *Congregation for the clergy* (GDC 2017) these include:

promoting knowledge of the faith; liturgical education; moral formation; teaching to pray; education for community life (including the ecumenical dimension); and missionary initiation (including inter-religious dialogue) (IEC 2010, p.142).

SGN holds the BoM 'responsible for the development of the school on behalf of the patron/trustees, with the support of management bodies' (IEC 2010, p.203), and members should be trained for this (IEC 2010, p.207). The board's key role is to ensure that the school's mission statement and accompanying policies and decision-making all reflect the Catholic ethos. It is to support the principal and staff in actualising the Catholic ethos, review ethos-related issues at least annually, and 'report on this to the Patron' (IEC 2010, p.207).

SGN stresses the need for ongoing education and training for key personnel including principals and RE teachers (IEC 2010, p.146; cf p.157, p.203, p.207). It also highlights that the principal is to 'encourage, develop and promote' the Catholic ethos of their school and ensure reflection upon the spiritual and religious well-being of the school community' (IEC 2010, pp.207–208). In addition, principals are to safeguard 'a consistent and coordinated approach to religious education' and to the faith formation of Catholic pupils (IEC 2010, p.146, pp.156–157), supported by diocesan advisors in these endeavours (IEC 2010, p.156, p.209). The document also points to the principal's role at primary level in encouraging the faith education of children of other traditions. At secondary level, it is expected that 'all students, Catholic or otherwise, should be able to attend second-level Religious Education classes which follow the Department syllabuses, investigating the spiritual and moral questions central to human living' (IEC 2010, p.144, pp.156–157).

SGN also requests that all who teach in Catholic schools be 'fully informed about the life and teaching of the Catholic Church' and expects all teachers to promote the school's ethos and mission statement' (IEC 2010, p.201, p.214). It also expects that teachers at primary level and RE teachers at secondary level will participate in the faith formation and faith development of Catholic pupils and will engage with the RE curriculum in a way that supports their pupils'/students' spiritual and moral development (IEC 2010, p.58, p.146, p.155, p.215).

Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic voluntary secondary school: a process centred on conversations (CPA 2016) aims to enhance school ethos through a whole-school, self-facilitated, dialogical process that focuses on the nature of Catholic voluntary secondary schools in Ireland, the Christian mission of the schools, and the challenges and opportunities facing them now and into the future. The manual also pays attention to the need for continuing professional development (CPD) for all staff to allow them to 'deepen their understanding of the school's ethos' and to 'develop their understanding of Jesus Christ'(CSP 2016a pp.30) The provision of a range of faith development opportunities, supported by trustees, for all school stakeholders, is also a key concern (CSP 2016, pp.30–31), while the need for

significant resources to be allotted to ensure that ‘the mission of each voluntary school’ is imbibed and understood by all stakeholders is emphasised (CSP 2016, p.31).

Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations (CSP 2019) understands ethos as being expressed concretely in a school’s ‘choices, actions and priorities’ (CSP 2019, p.7). It proposes a self-facilitated process for assessing effectiveness in this regard that is similar to that already described above for secondary schools.

Methodology

This mixed-methods study employed an explanatory sequential design whereby a large body of quantitative data was initially gathered by means of an online survey. This process was followed by a smaller qualitative strand of semi-structured interviews designed to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results (Creswell 2022; Shorten and Smith 2017). This design allows the quantitative data to inform the questions to be explored during the qualitative strand; integration is further enhanced when qualitative analysis uncovers how the qualitative findings help explain the quantitative results in more depth (Creswell 2022).

Survey questionnaires were distributed to four cohorts of secondary and primary school stakeholders. At primary school level, these included members of BoMs, principals (including deputy principals), teachers, and other school staff (including ancillary, support, and administrative staff). In the secondary-school context, these included BoM members, principals (including deputy principals), teachers of RE, and all other teaching staff. To take account of the distinctions in the two contexts, the surveys incorporated a number of additional or differently worded questions specific to each environment. The table below gives a breakdown of the number of respondents at both levels.

Table 1 Number of survey respondents at primary and second levels

Cohort	Primary	Secondary	Total
Board of Management	1,162	95	1,257
Principal or Deputy Principal	1,111	117	1,228
Teachers - Classroom or Subject	794	302	1,096
RE Teacher		129	129
Other Staff	122	74	196
Total	3,189	717	3,906

At the close of each questionnaire, respondents were invited to self-select for follow-up interviews by inserting their email address. All were assured that this information would be decoupled from their survey responses to protect anonymity. As a result, 52 interviews were conducted, 28 at primary and 24 at second level. Survey data were collated and analysed thematically by means of frequency tables and cross tabulations. Qualitative data were analysed thematically using Nvivo software (for a more detailed methodology, see the Overview in this series).

Survey Findings

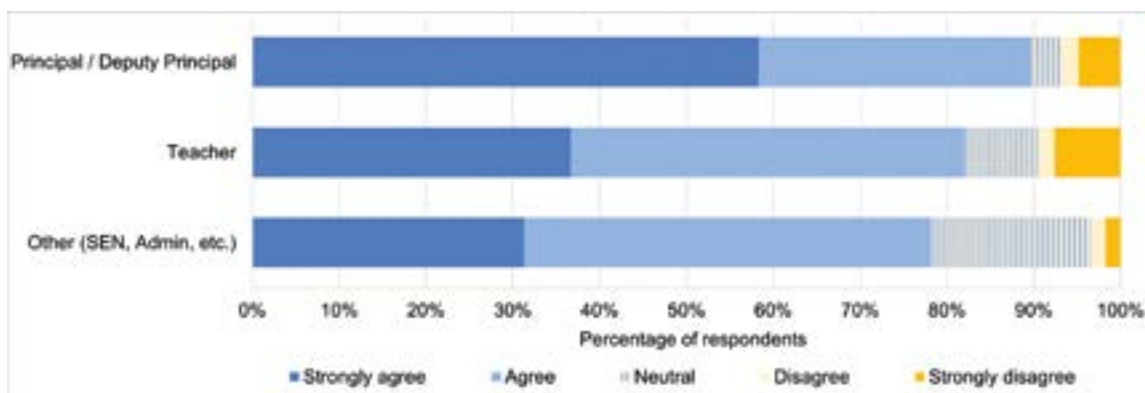
1. The existence and application of a mission statement based on Catholic values.

Primary

The Patron and Trustees have responsibility for determining the ethos of the school and the Board of Management is responsible to the Patron for upholding it (Education Act 1998 Section 15), CPSMA Board of Management Handbook 2016)

The survey findings show that the vast majority (86%) of primary staff respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their school has a mission statement based on Gospel values. As Figure 3.1.1 shows, the highest level of agreement was among principals and deputy principals (89%), followed closely by teachers (82%) and other school staff (78%).

Figure 3.1.1 Extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the statement 'the school has a mission statement based on Catholic values'



The responses of primary BoMs to this same question vary significantly from those of school staff. Only 59 per cent agree that the school has a mission statement based on Gospel values. A further question led to the response by BoMs that policy documents are, to a large extent, linked to the mission statement in only 40 per cent of those schools with a mission statement.

Figure 3.1.2 Percentage of primary schools with a mission statement based on Gospel values, according to BoM

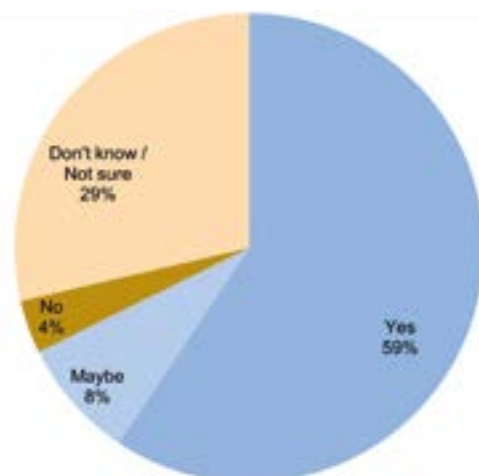
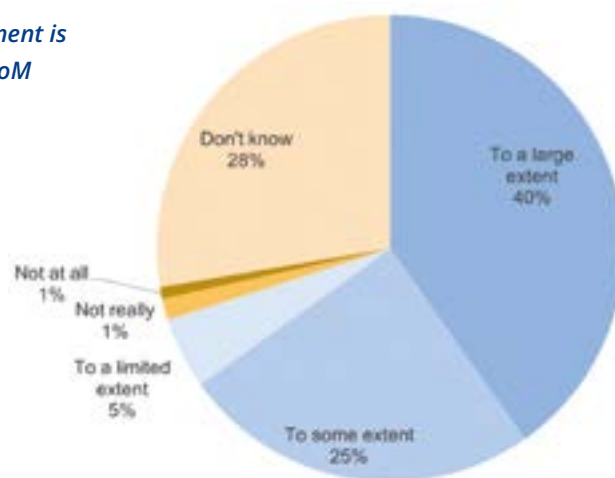


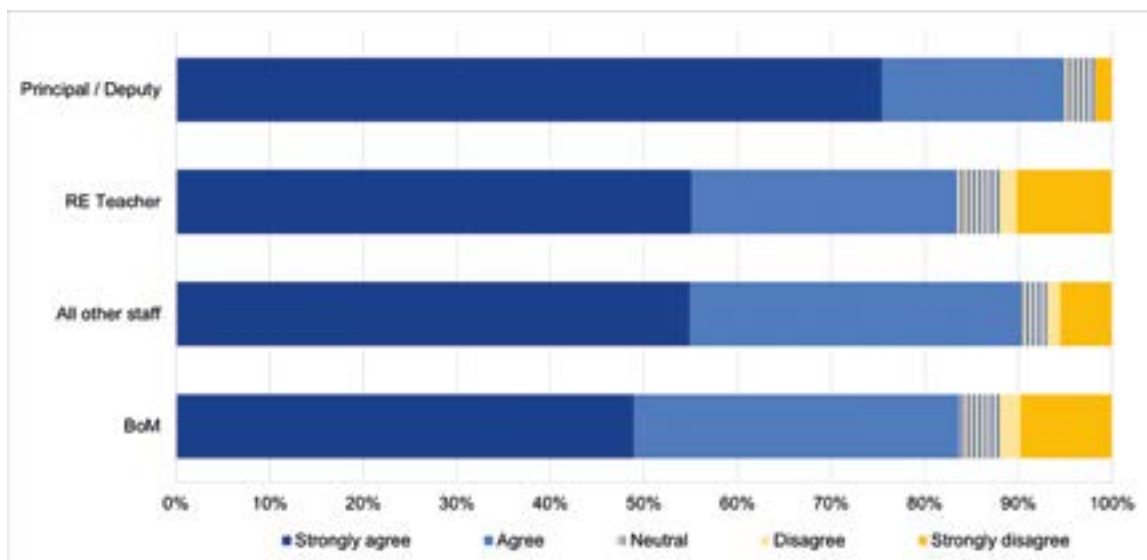
Figure 3.1.3 Extent to which policy development is linked to mission statement, according to BoM



Secondary

The survey findings at secondary level show that the vast majority (89%) of respondents either agree or strongly agree that their school has a mission statement based on Gospel values. The following graph shows that the highest level of agreement (95%) was among principals and deputy principals, while the lowest level was among RE teachers (83%).

Figure 3.1.4 Extent to which secondary respondents agree or disagree with the statement 'the school has a Mission Statement based on Catholic values'



The vast majority of secondary BoM members (84%) report that their school has a mission statement that is based on Gospel values, while just over two-thirds (67%) report that policy development is, to a large extent, linked to the mission statement. This is in contrast to only 40 per cent at primary level. Figures 3.1.5 and 3.1.6 present these details at secondary level.

Figure 3.1.5 Percentage of secondary schools with mission statement based on Gospel values

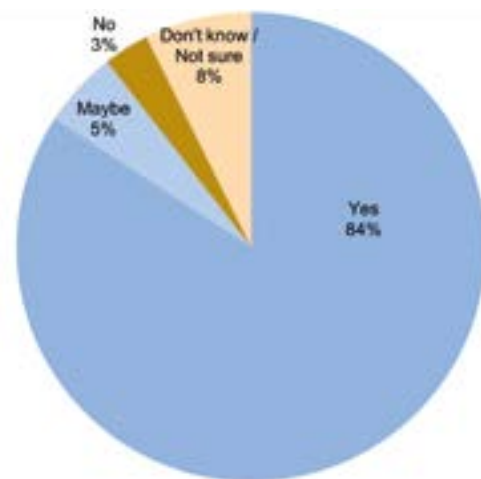
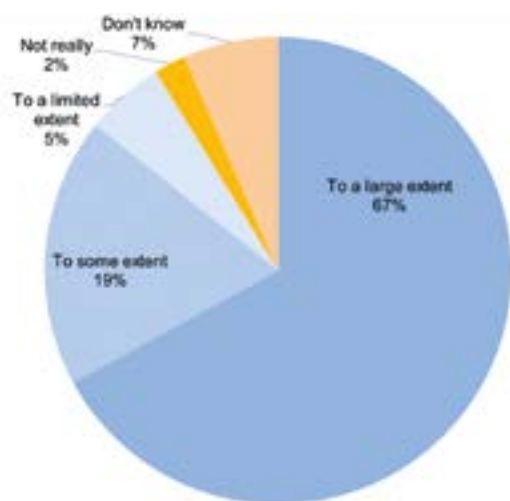


Figure 3.1.6 Extent to which policy development is linked to the mission statement



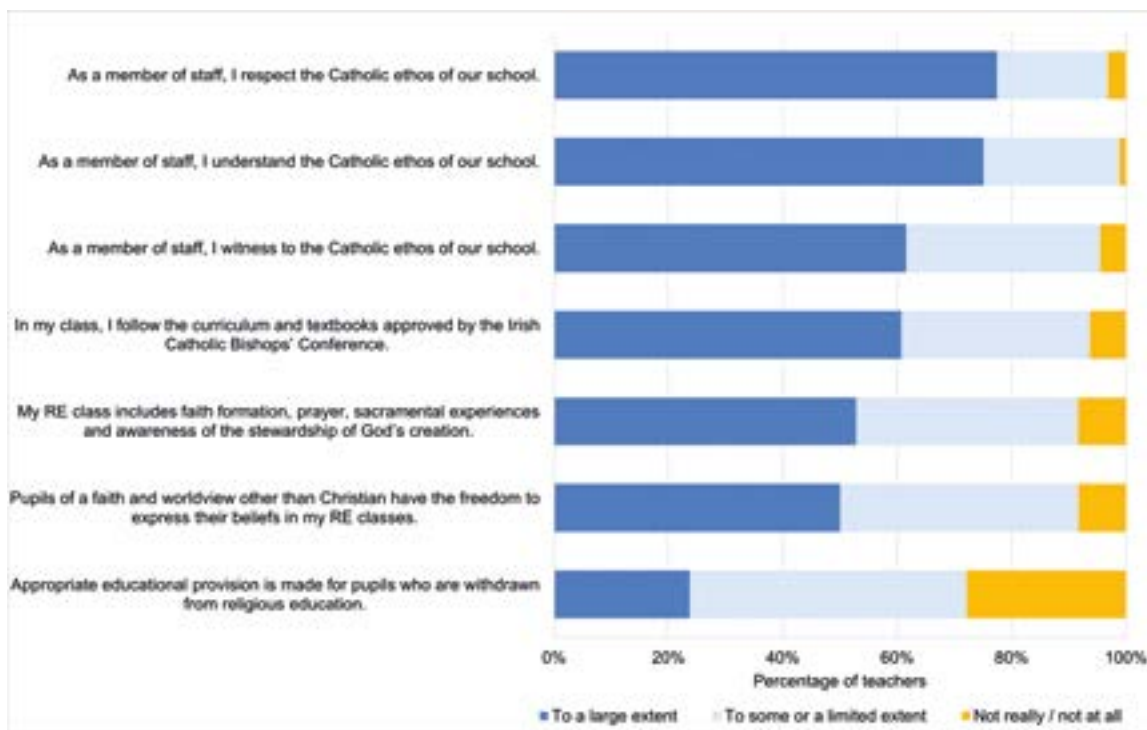
2. Understanding, respect for and witness to ethos in schools

Primary

As demonstrated in Figure 3.2.1, over two-thirds of primary principals (69%) report that they ensure, to a large extent, that their staff understand the Catholic ethos of their school; 29 per cent, close to 3 in 10, say they ensure this to some or to a limited extent.

The graph further shows that three-quarters of primary teaching staff (75%) reported that they understand the Catholic ethos of their school to a large extent, with almost a quarter (24%) reporting understanding to some extent. Over three-quarters (77%) respect the Catholic ethos to a large extent, with almost a fifth (19%) reporting this to some or to a limited extent. A majority (62%) of primary teachers witness to their school's Catholic ethos to a large extent, while over a third (34%) do this to some or to a limited extent. Approximately 5 per cent report not witnessing to the Catholic ethos at all; in fact, one respondent expresses the ultimate statement in non-commitment to a Catholic ethos: 'Jesus Christ means as much to me as the tooth fairy does'.

Figure 3.2.1 Primary teachers' experiences and perspectives



In contrast to the responses on ethos from primary principals and teaching staff, less than half (43%) of primary BoM respondents agree that their board ensures that all teachers employed uphold the Catholic ethos of the school. A closely comparable percentage (42%) leave this to the school principal, and the remainder do not get involved or say this issue has not come up. Only 30 per cent of BoMs agree that their board ensures that the induction of new teachers includes the opportunity to focus on the Catholic character of the school; half (50%) leave this to the school principal.

As Figures 3.2.2 and 3.2.3 demonstrate, there is close correlation between the age of teaching staff and the extent to which they respect and/or witness to the Catholic ethos of their school. Figure 3.2.2 shows that a significant majority (>70%) in all age groups state that they respect the ethos; this increases with age. In the youngest age category of teachers surveyed (18–29 years), almost one-third (29.5%) state they respect the ethos either to some or to a limited extent or not at all. In the older age groups, this decreases significantly to just over 1 in 10. Among the younger cohort of teachers, almost 1 in 10 (8.8%) state that their respect for the ethos falls into either the not really or not at all category.

Figure 3.2.2 Extent to which primary staff members respect the Catholic ethos of their school, by age category

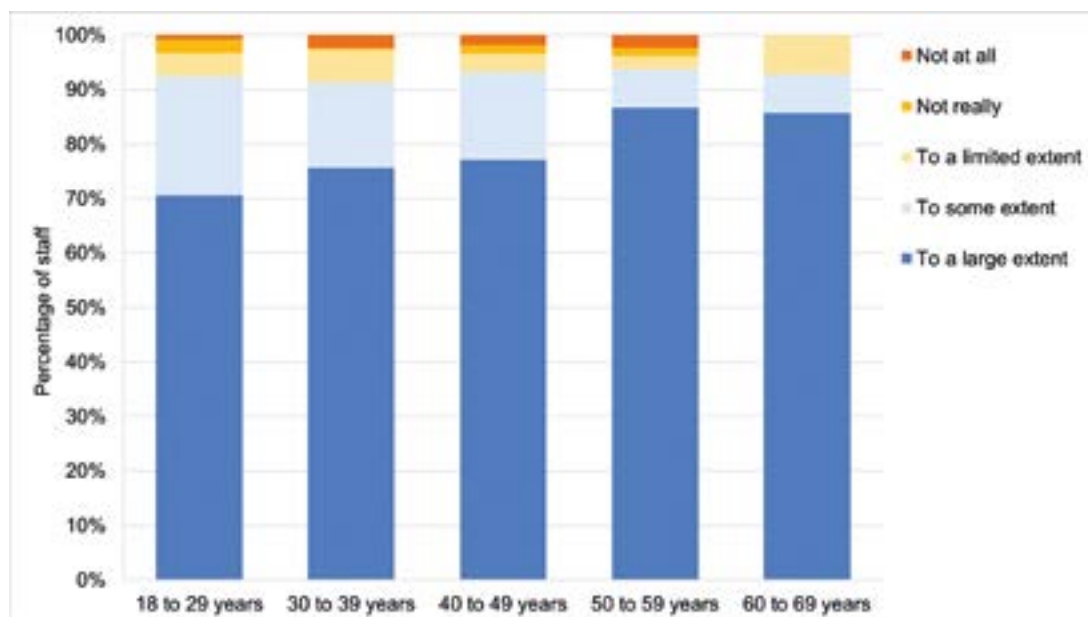
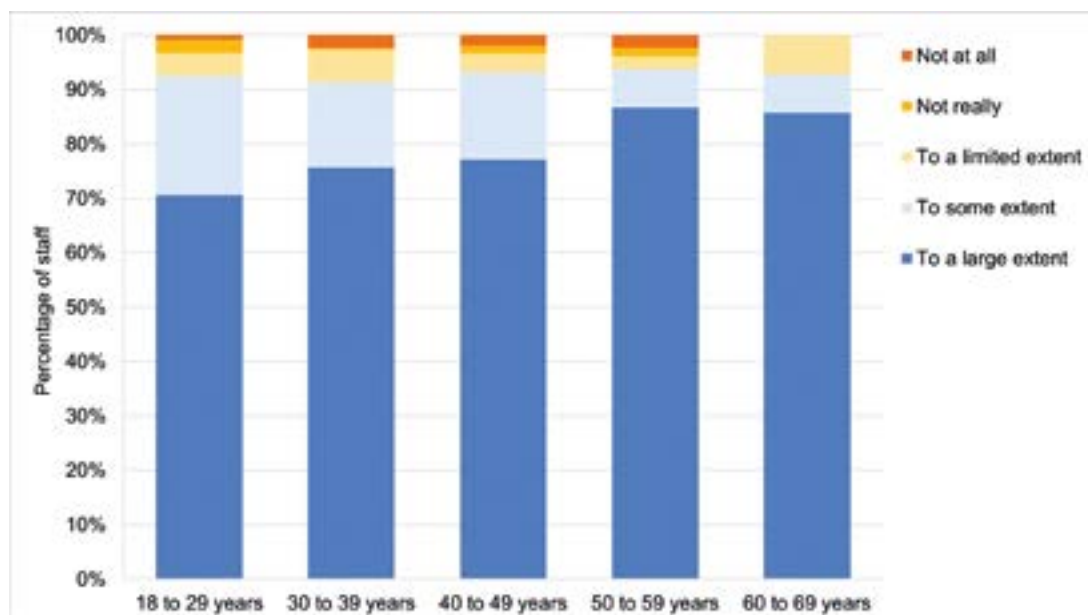


Figure 3.2.3 Extent to which primary staff members witness to the Catholic ethos of their school, by age category



The survey clearly demonstrated that there is a significant differentiation to be noted between ‘respecting’ and ‘witnessing’ to the Catholic ethos. Figure 3.2.3 shows that just over half (53%) of the youngest cohort of primary teachers state that they witness to the ethos to a large extent. It is interesting to note that the 50–59 age category has a significantly higher rate (75%) of witness ‘to a large extent’ than the older 60–69 age category, which is less than the 30–39 age cohort (57% versus

59%). However, over four-fifths in all age categories state that they witness to the Catholic ethos whether ‘to some extent’ or ‘to a large extent’. Overall, the trajectory in terms of witness and respect for ethos indicates a decline among younger cohorts, though this is not as steep at primary level as is the case at secondary level, as we shall see below.

During the qualitative phase of the study, the shortage of teachers was identified as an issue when attempting to ensure that all staff uphold the Catholic ethos of the school. When positions become available, the shortage of applicants means the commitment to the Catholic identity is put on the back burner, when, as one principal put it, ‘at interviews a principal is so relieved to find a body to stand into a classroom when required, they cannot afford to be choosy because there is such a shortage, so if I bring up the Catholic piece, well that’s not trendy, it’s not cool and I’m going to scare away that teacher’, and ‘there’s a shortage of teachers so when you need a qualified person you set your minimum requirements. I have interviewed maybe 8 or 10 people and not one of them mentioned the word “Catholic”.’ In these circumstances, principals may reluctantly surrender the need to have teachers who are committed to a Catholic ethos in order to appoint someone to fill the gap.

‘Ethos is something we live and breathe in the school but it’s also something very hard to quantify, you feel it in the atmosphere.’

‘A strong sense of mission is very important in our school; it is also very important to encourage the children and teach them that they are loved and that they are called to love.’

‘...ethos is just something that’s on a wall and I don’t see it applied when they’re dealing with students ...’

‘There doesn’t seem to be the conviction to do anything about it, in case you sort of annoy people.’

BoM members were asked whether they believe their schools are run in accordance with the trustees' religious and educational philosophy. They were also asked if issues relating to Catholic identity appear on the agenda for BoM meetings.

Figure 3.2.4 Extent to which the BoM ensures that the school runs in accordance with the religious and educational philosophy (the ethos) of the trustees

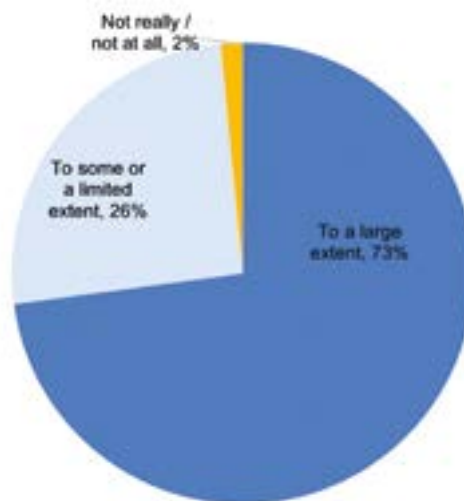
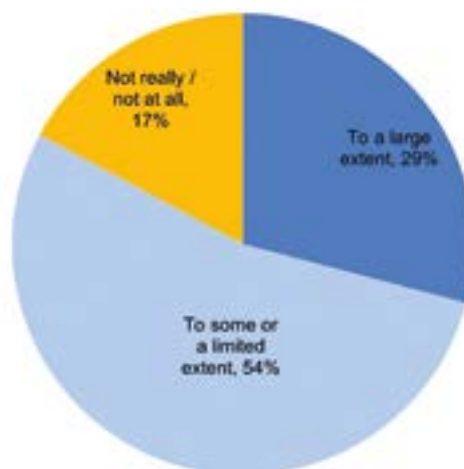


Fig 3.2.5 The frequency with which issues relating to Catholic identity appear on the agenda of BoM meetings

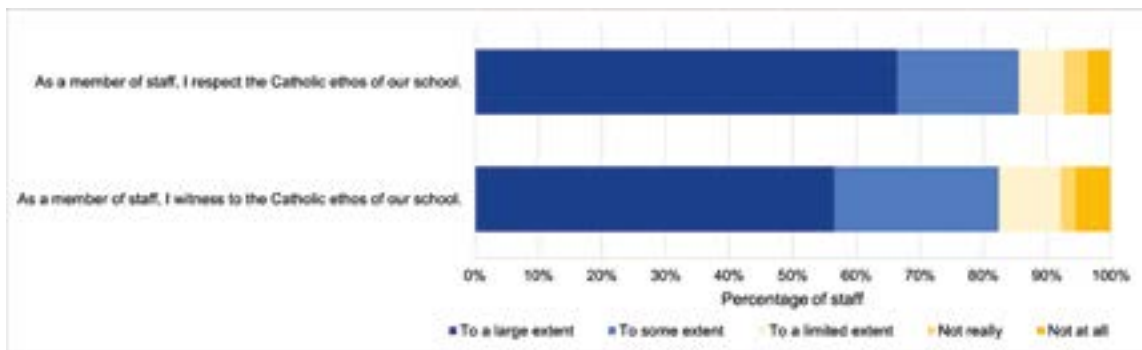


We see in Figure 3.2.4 that BoMs express high levels of confidence that their schools are being run in accordance with the religious and educational philosophy of the school's trustees. When the more concrete question is posed, however, in regard to how frequently issues related to Catholic identity are tabled at BoM meetings, the same high level of confidence is not as evident, with the majority indicating that such matters are only discussed to some or to a limited extent, and close to a fifth responding that ethos-related issues are never tabled. (See Figure 3.2.5.)

Secondary

At secondary level, teachers were asked if they respect and if they witness to their schools' Catholic ethos. As Figure 3.2.6 shows, staff members are more likely to 'respect' the Catholic ethos than to 'witness to' it – 68 per cent say that they, to a large extent, respect the ethos of the school, but this falls to 57 per cent stating that they witness to the Catholic ethos. Alongside these figures, we see that the vast majority (86%) of BoM members state that their board ensures the teachers employed in the school uphold the Catholic ethos.

Figure 3.2.6 Extent to which secondary teaching staff respect and witness to schools' Catholic ethos



One secondary teacher commented 'I often wonder why we can have certain groups that represent all parts of society, but we can't have a pro-life group, for example, in a school, as that would cause reactions to have that. I just think that if we're a Catholic school, we're a Catholic school, and we should be allowed to portray that ethos in any way that we see fit in a respectful way, all of the time'.

One principal states that she starts every staff meeting with a prayer and ensures that the well-being programme has an element of faith in it.

As in the primary sector, there is an association between age and the extent to which staff members respect and witness to schools' Catholic ethos, as Figures 3.2.7 and 3.2.8 illustrate. The older staff members are more inclined to both 'respect' and 'witness to' the Catholic ethos.

Figure 3.2.7 Extent to which secondary staff members respect their schools' Catholic ethos, by age

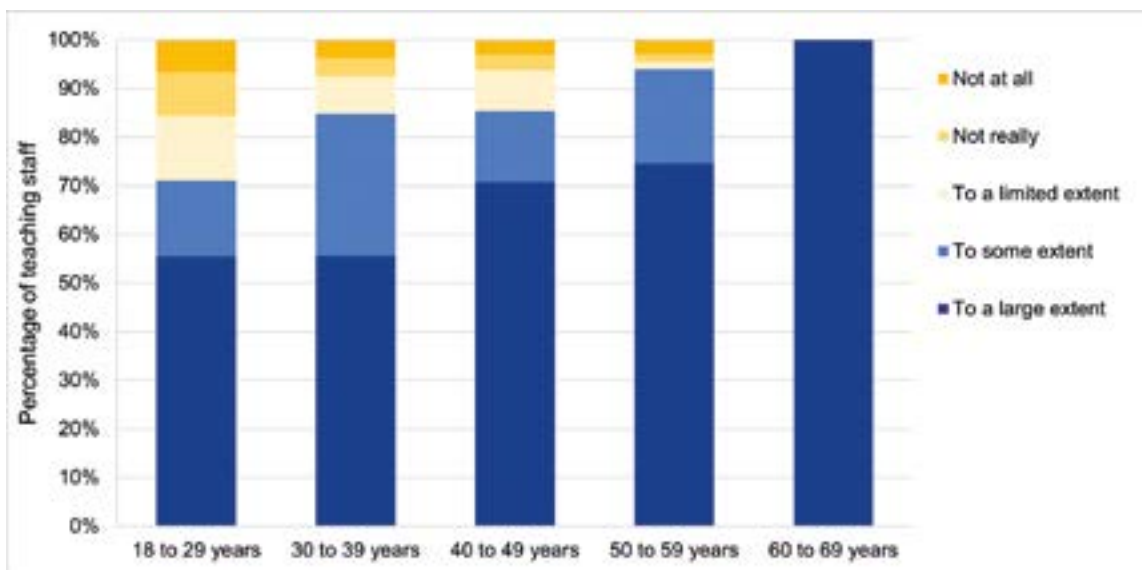
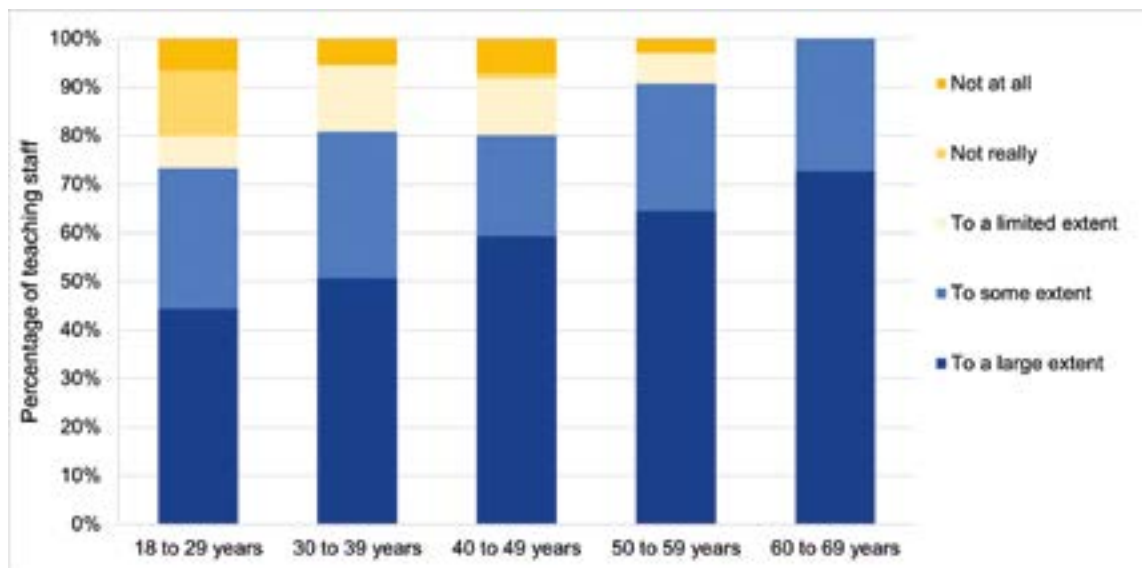


Figure 3.2.8 indicates that 28 per cent of staff aged 18 to 29 do not witness to the Catholic ethos at all or to a limited extent. The corresponding statistic for those aged 30 to 39 and 40 to 49 is 20 per cent. There is a significant difference between primary and secondary responses to these questions.

Figure 3.2.8 Extent to which secondary staff members witness to their schools' Catholic ethos, by age



As with the primary sector, BoM members at secondary level were also asked if their schools are run in accordance with the religious and educational philosophy of the trustees.

Figure 3.2.9 The BoM ensures that the school is run in accordance with the religious and educational philosophy (the ethos) of the trustees

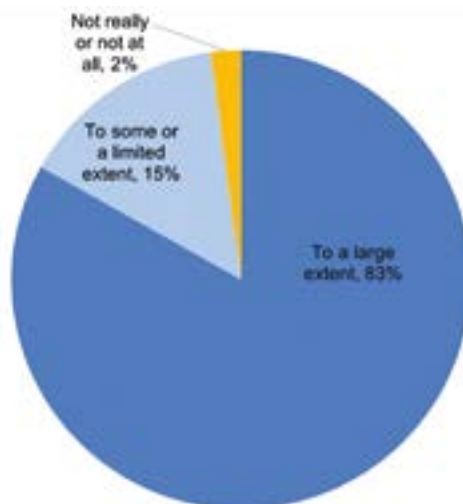
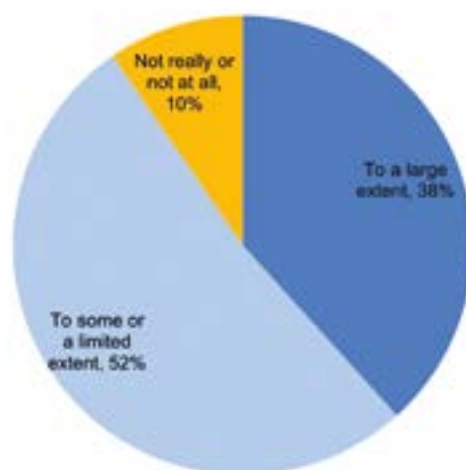


Figure 3.2.10 The frequency with which issues relating to the Catholic identity of the school appear on the agenda of BoM meetings



A similar picture emerges here as we observed at primary level (above). Board members generally express a high level of confidence in regard to their oversight of their schools' identity, but less than two-fifths say that identity-related issues appear regularly on agendas, and one-tenth state that they are never discussed.

The ethos or characteristic spirit of the school, animated by the values of the Gospels, will be evident not only from the specific religious rituals of the school but also from the quality of the interactions between all of the partners involved in the life of the school and from the school's Christian commitment to the needs of people beyond the school community. Essential ingredients in the ethos of the school are instruction in the Catholic faith, Masses and liturgical celebrations, retreats, social awareness projects and provision of chaplaincy services.

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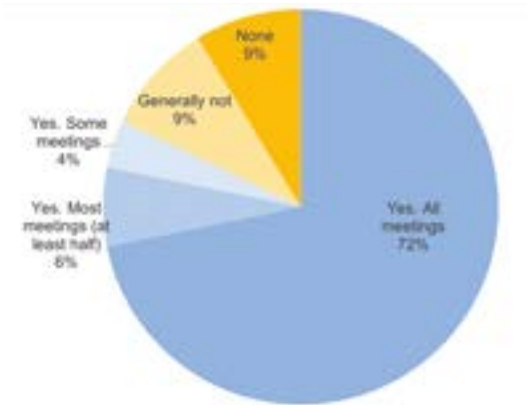
In the interviews we conducted, some noteworthy comments were made by both principals and teachers in regard to Catholic ethos. One principal stated that they felt 'Catholic ethos is not alive and well and they [the patrons] need to help to support that and to develop it but we need CPD and more of a Catholic presence in the school'. On the other hand, another principal stated that identity and ethos are 'very overt, it's the core Gospel values throughout the school – our policies, who we are, how we deal with people, how we punctuate the calendar year with the liturgical celebrations'. For one teacher, the presence of a significant number of non-Catholic children in the school creates a difficulty in that 'it results in a desire to not be seen as 'overly Catholic', and the teacher is 'afraid that it will upset the parents if their child is exposed to Catholic elements'. Another staff member suggested that 'if the Catholic wording was removed, people might buy in better, as this whole idea of being a Catholic thing is a bit dated'.

3. The prayer and liturgical life of the school

Primary

When asked about prayer as an integral part of meetings, primary BoMs responded as seen in Figure 3.3.1. A significant majority (72%) stated that all meetings begin or end with a prayer, but 18 per cent stated that meetings either 'do not' or 'generally do not' have a prayer element.

Figure 3.3.1 Percentage of primary level BoM meetings which begin and/or end with a Christian prayer



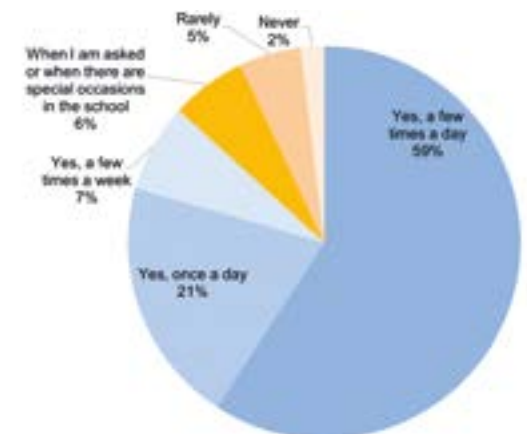
Primary school principals stated that in almost two-thirds of cases (64%), time is devoted to Christian prayer in the school community at specified times during the school day to a large extent, while just over 3 in 10 principals (32%) report that this happens to some or to a limited extent.

Almost 4 in 10 principals (39%) report that meetings within the school begin with a Christian prayer to a large extent, while 43 per cent per cent say this happens to some or to a limited extent.

Primary teachers were asked whether they pray with their pupils during the day. The findings differ slightly from the perception of the principals, in that 59 per cent of teachers state that they pray with their pupils a few times each day, while a fifth (20%) do so once each day. Approximately 13 per cent of primary teachers stated that they very occasionally, rarely or never pray with their pupils.

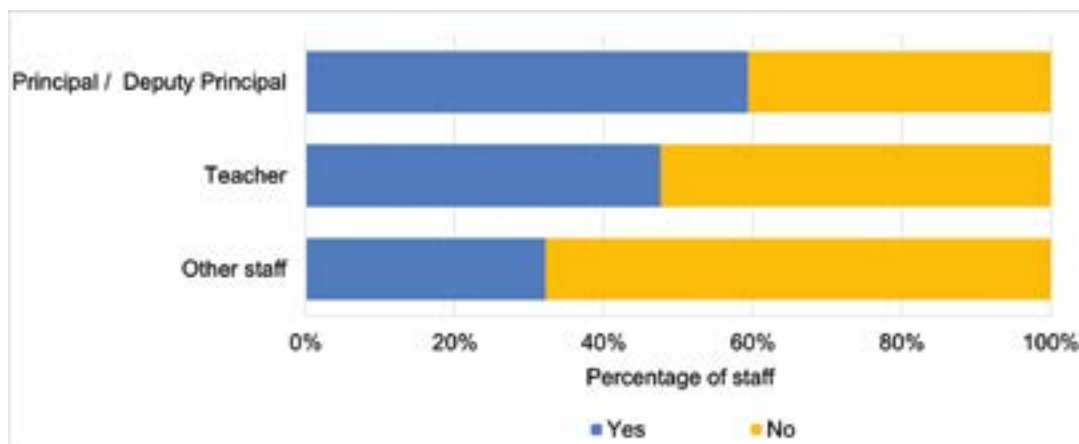
'I have 25 pupils in my class and only 4 or 5 have any connection with the parish or Mass or prayers. In our school we are apologetically Catholic.'

Figure 3.3.2 Frequency of prayer with pupils from the perspective of primary teachers



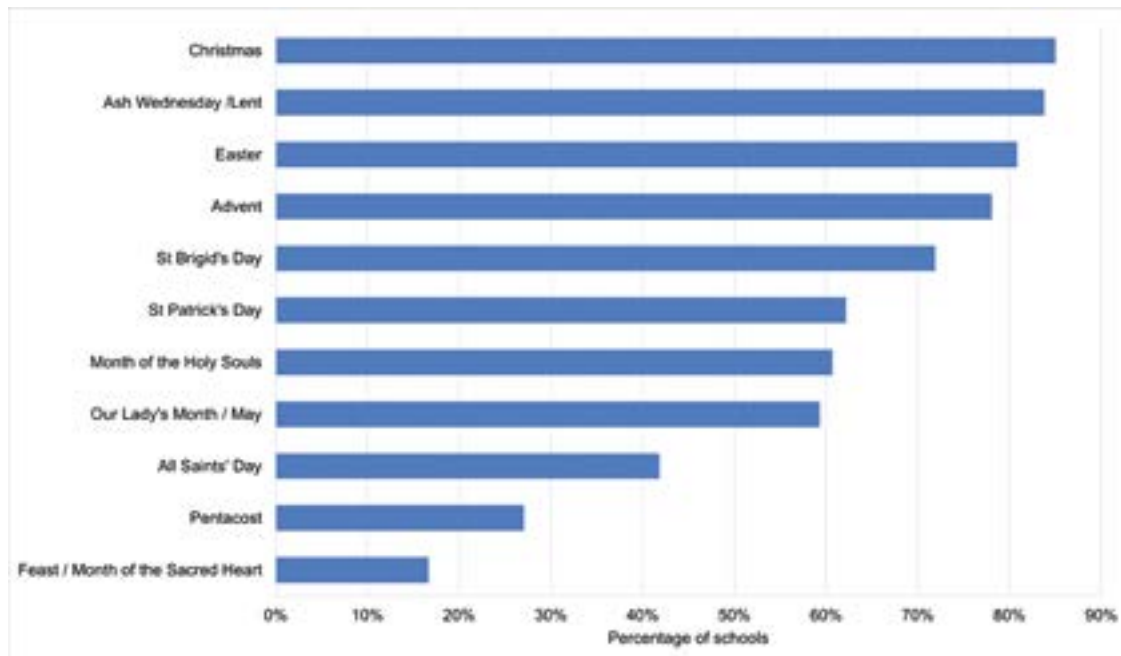
There was a discrepancy among staff cohorts on the question of the availability of a place of prayer/ sacred space in schools, with 59 per cent of primary principals stating that such a space exists compared with 48 per cent of teachers; this falls to 31 per cent in the perception of non-teaching/ admin staff, as Figure 3.3.3 illustrates.

Figure 3.3.3 Primary staff respondents who agree/disagree that there is a place of prayer/sacred space within the school which is available to all in the school community



Primary principals, teachers and other staff were asked about liturgical events in the school. As Figure 3.3.4 shows, Christmas is the main religious celebration (85%), followed closely by Ash Wednesday/ Lent (84%), Easter (81%) and Advent (78%). Next in terms of priority ranking is St Bridget's Day, with just under three-quarters (72%) of respondents reporting the feast's observance. Less than two-thirds of the staff cohort (62%) mark St Patrick's Day and the Month of the Holy Souls (61%) in a religious way. Our Lady's month of May is observed by 59 per cent of the cohort, while All Saints' Day is marked by 42 per cent. Pentecost receives more limited attention, with just over a quarter (27%) of the cohort formally celebrating this feast. At 16 per cent, the Feast/Month of the Sacred Heart receives least attention.

Figure 3.3.4 Percentage of primary staff whose schools mark the following as religious celebrations



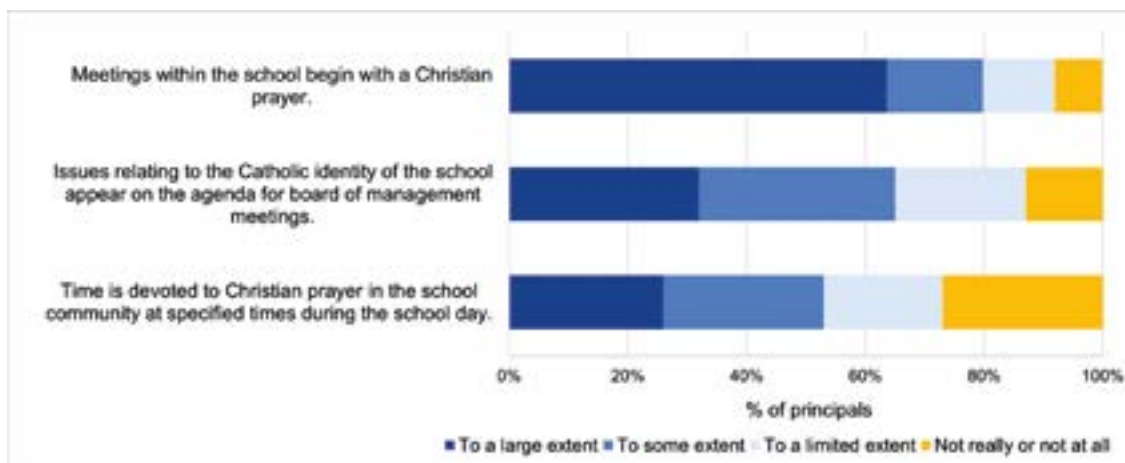
While no questions were specifically asked on the issue of sacramental preparation in schools, a number of staff commented on this at interview. One principal stated ‘we do have the assemblies and the sacraments, but there’s always complaints about the amount of time we spend on them’. A classroom teacher says ‘the sacraments are now all about partying’, while another suggests that RE should be removed from primary schools: ‘I think religion should be taken out of schools and let people opt in who want to opt in and learn it outside of the school because the sacraments are sort of a sham.’

Secondary

There is a stark difference between primary and secondary sectors on the issue of prayer in the school. Just over a quarter (26%) of secondary principals stated that time is set aside for prayer to a large extent, while a further similar proportion (27%) reported that it happens to some extent (compared with 64% at primary level). The following graph provides the details of principals’ responses in respect of the issues that were presented to them.

In almost two-thirds of cases, secondary principals state that, to a large extent, staff meetings begin with a prayer; this is in contrast to only 39 per cent at primary level.

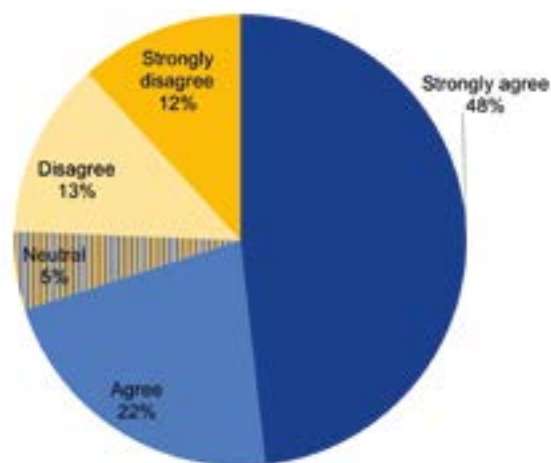
Figure 3.3.5 Extent to which secondary principals report particular practices occur in their schools



For half of the principals interviewed, there was a willingness to lead prayer at BoM level and with pupils, but a reluctance to do so with staff. One principal admits ‘I’ve never started a staff meeting with a prayer’; another stated ‘with my pupils I’m 100% comfortable, with staff no, and I wouldn’t say that’s coming from a lack of confidence in my ability, it’s just that in front of your peers, when not all will be on the same page as you it’s quite difficult’.

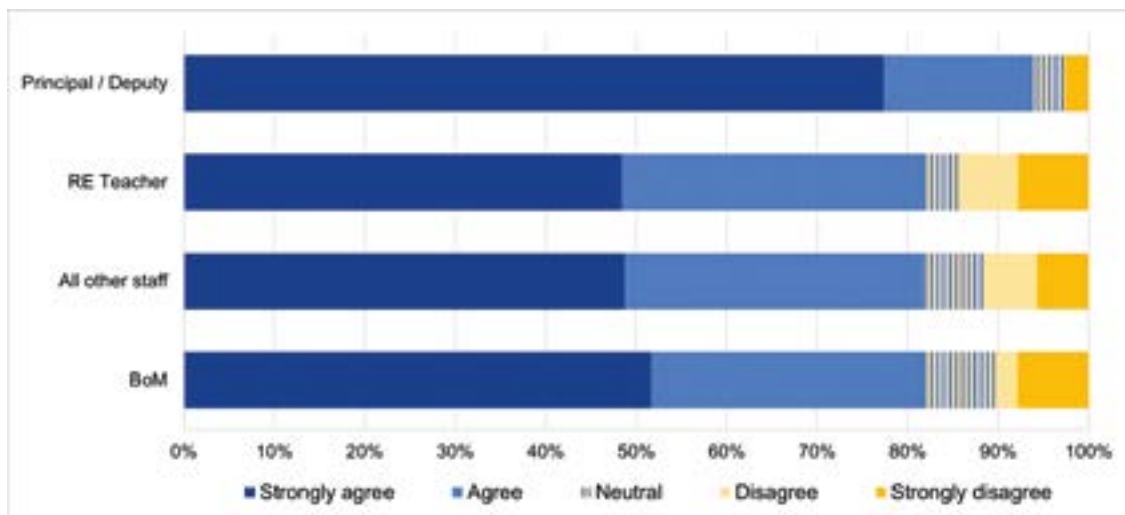
When asked if their schools have prayer/sacred spaces, almost half (48%) of secondary respondents strongly agreed, while a further 22% agreed, as can be seen in Figure 3.3.6. There were no discernible divergences among the various cohorts in respect of their responses to this statement.

Figure 3.3.6 Extent to which secondary respondents agree or disagree with the statement 'there is a place of prayer/sacred space within the school, which is available to all in the school community'



At secondary level, the survey findings reveal that most schools formally mark the seasons of the Christian year. Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that 'the seasons of the Christian year are formally marked with the whole school community'. As Figure 3.3.7 shows, the vast majority, in all cohorts, either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. As was the case with previous indicators in respect of ethos and practices, principals and deputy principals were the cohort most likely to agree with this statement. The findings also reveal that 10 per cent of respondents disagree with this statement, and among non-principals/deputies, this figure rises to 12 per cent.

Figure 3.3.7 Extent to which secondary respondents agree or disagree with the statement that 'the seasons of the Christian year are formally marked with the whole school community'



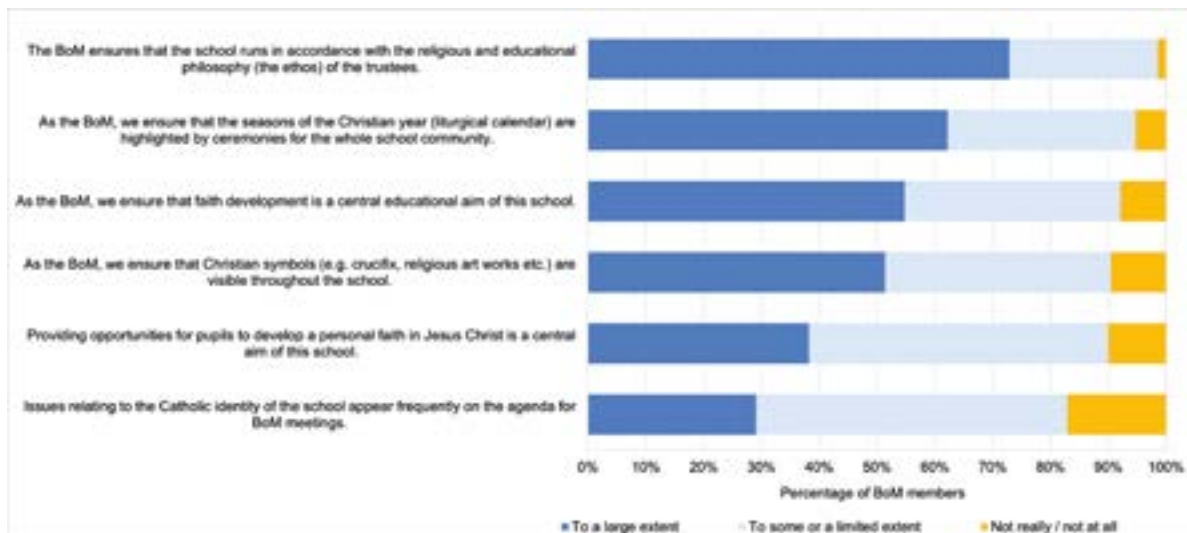
4. Developing a personal faith in Jesus Christ

Primary

Over a third (38%) of primary BoM respondents perceive that, to a large extent, their board ensures that the provision of opportunities for pupils to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central aim of their school, while over half (52%) see it as true to some or to a limited extent.

When examined alongside other roles of the BoM, providing such opportunities is among the practices least likely to occur, as can be seen in Figure 3.4.1.

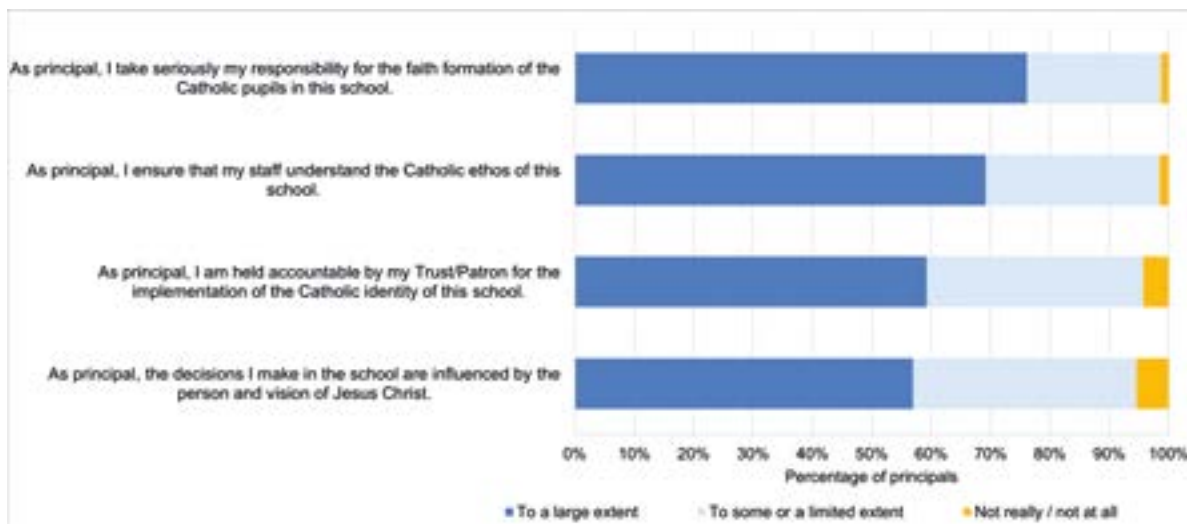
Figure 3.4.1 Extent to which the BoM, at primary level, exercises particular roles



Among primary principals, 57 per cent report that, to a large extent, they are influenced in their school decision-making by the person and vision of Jesus Christ. Just under 4 in 10 (38%) report such influence to some extent or to a limited extent.

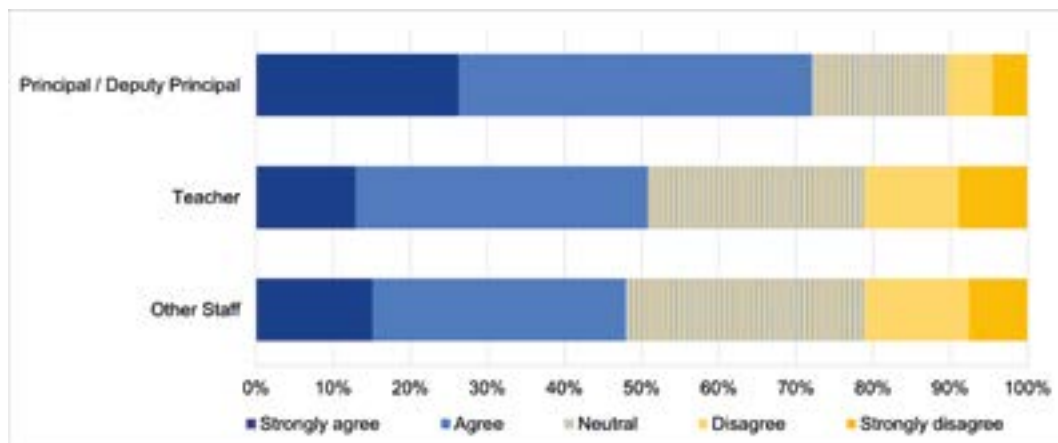
This is illustrated by Figure 3.4.2, which also states that 76 per cent of primary principals take their responsibility for the faith development of their pupils seriously.

Figure 3.4.2 Extent to which primary principals perform particular roles



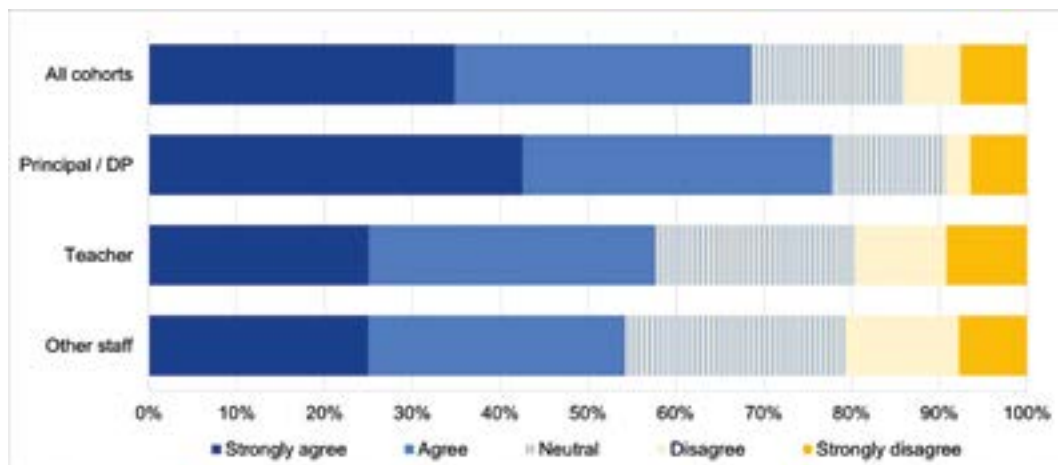
Staff respondents were asked if, in their schools, providing opportunities for students to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central educational aim. When taken as a single cohort, 62 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Principals and deputy principals were more likely to agree with it than were teachers or other staff, with almost three-quarters (72%) of the former, as opposed to just over half (51%) of teachers and 48% of other school staff, expressing some level of concurrence. In the combined staff cohorts, 15 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, with over a fifth (21%) of both teachers and other staff reporting disagreement, as opposed to 11 per cent of principals.

Figure 3.4.3 Extent to which primary respondents agree with the statement that 'providing opportunities for students to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central educational aim of this school'



All primary staff respondents were also asked if 'the love of God, the person of Jesus Christ and his message are at the heart of the life of their schools'. As illustrated by the graph below, 69 per cent of the combined staff cohort reported agreement or strong agreement with this statement; principals (43%) and deputy principals again were more likely to strongly agree than the other staff cohorts (25%). In total, a quarter of other staff and a marginally lesser percentage (23%) of teachers remained neutral on this compared with 13 per cent of principals. Amongst those who disagreed or strongly disagreed, a similar pattern of alignment emerged, with around a fifth (20%) of teachers and other staff (21%) expressing some level of disagreement with the statement as compared with 9 per cent of principals.

Figure 3.4.4 Extent to which primary respondents agree with the statement that 'the love of God, the person of Jesus Christ and his message are at the heart of the life of this school'

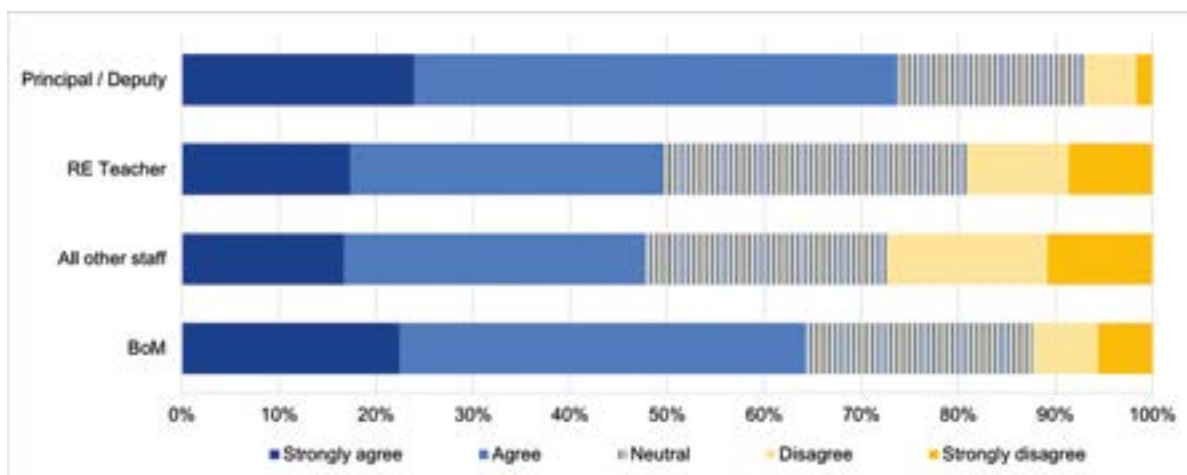


At interview, one primary principal stated that ethos ‘has to be living, there’s no point in listing off what it means to be a Catholic school, it should be there every day. It’s not something you switch on or off, it’s how you see the world’.

Secondary

At secondary level, the survey findings reveal lower levels of agreement than in the primary sector in respect of opportunities for the development of a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Staff were specifically asked if, in their schools, providing opportunities for students to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central educational aim. Figure 3.4.5 shows that over half (58%) of all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Principals, deputy principals and BoM members were more likely to agree with it than were members of the schools’ teaching staff. One-fifth of all respondents disagreed with this statement, with the level of neutrality or disagreement being highest among non-RE teaching staff (53%), followed by RE teachers (50%).

Figure 3.4.5 Extent to which secondary respondents agree with the statement that ‘providing opportunities for students to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central educational aim of this school’



One principal said that they ‘see the need for trustees to focus on the person of Jesus Christ, prayer and social justice’. One board member stated that ‘a Catholic school will help young people to appreciate that there is a power greater than themselves, and if they do not come to know Jesus in school, they may not encounter him anywhere else and if they haven’t a power to invoke through prayer this can lead to a lot of “mental distress”’; they further stated that ‘I’m talking about the Gospel values of Jesus being at the heart of everything we do. And by that, I mean from how we treat our students, our staff, ancillary staff who are vital to the running of our school, to our parents and our visitors who come into the school.’

5. Faith development of pupils and staff

Primary

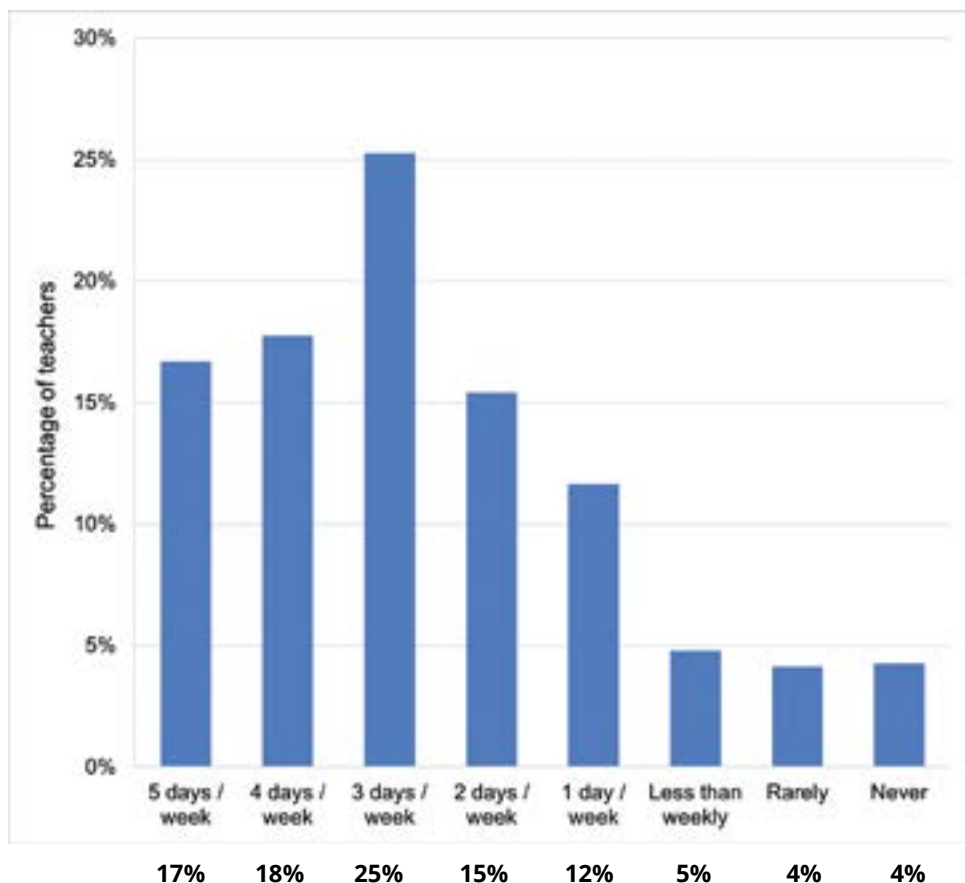
At primary level, 55 per cent of BoM members perceive that their board ensures, to a large extent, that faith development is a central educational aim of their school, while over a third (37%) perceive this is so to some or to a limited extent. More than three-quarters (76%) of primary principals report that, to a large extent, they take their responsibility for the faith formation of their Catholic pupils seriously, while almost one in four (23%) do so to some or to a limited extent. The data do not elaborate on how this is manifest in the classroom except for the fact that, as illustrated in Figure 3.5.1, just over half of primary teacher respondents (53%) report that their RE class includes faith formation, prayer, sacramental experience, and awareness of the stewardship of God's creation to a large extent, with almost 4 in 10 (39%) saying this is so to some or to a limited extent. This refers to Figure 3.2.1 (page 13) which highlights the perspective of primary teachers regarding their own understanding of and witness to the Catholic ethos of their school. Almost three-quarters (73%) state that they understand the ethos to a large extent, with a further 26 per cent stating that they understand it to some or a limited extent. A smaller number (61%) state that, to a large extent, they witness to the ethos of the school.

A mere 17 per cent of primary teachers teach RE every day, 18 per cent teach it four days per week, 25 per cent teach it three times per week and 40 per cent teach the subject twice a week or less. Alarming, 8 per cent of primary teachers say they rarely or never teach RE.

However, Figure 3.5.2 clearly shows how little class time is given to the teaching of RE (and concomitant faith formation): the findings indicate that a mere 17 per cent of primary teachers teach RE every day, 18 per cent teach it on four days per week, 25 per cent teach it on three days per week, and 40 per cent teach the subject twice a week or less. Alarming, 8 per cent of primary teachers say they rarely or never teach RE.



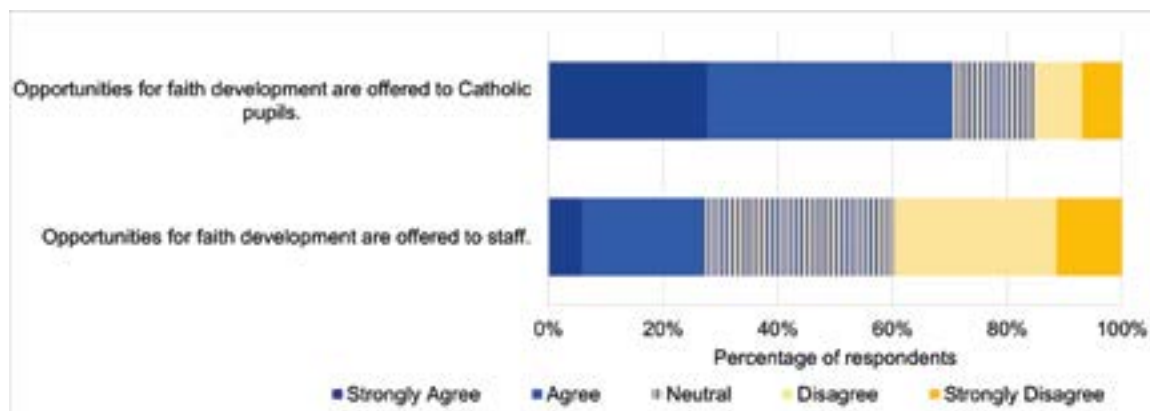
Figure 3.5.1 Frequency with which RE is taught as reported by primary teache



Furthermore, the research shows that just over half (51%) of the primary teachers' cohort state that pupils in their class use the *Grow in Love* homework book, and over a third (38%) send the *Grow in Love* homework book home with a specific task/request either weekly or on two or three occasions per month. At 37 per cent, an almost identical percentage, never send it home. In the interview, we explored the issues why it can be difficult to teach Religious Education. In passing, a number of teachers referred to the *Grow in Love* programme and said it is 'very difficult to teach', 'very Catholic', 'very heavy and very factual', 'cumbersome and clumsy', 'there's nothing to inspire you' and 'the language needs to be updated'. One teacher compares it to the previous programme (*Alive-O*), believing 'it (*Alive-O*) was more age appropriate, and the songs were brighter and happier'.

The survey findings show that schools are less likely to offer faith development opportunities to staff than to students. As Figure 3.5.2 also illustrates, a third (33%) of staff respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that 'opportunities for faith development are offered to staff', with just 6 per cent expressing strong agreement that such opportunity was made available to them.

Figure 3.5.2 Extent to which primary respondents agree or disagree with given statements about opportunities for faith development for staff



Teachers were less likely than their other staff colleagues to agree that faith development opportunities are offered to pupils. As Figure 3.5.3 shows, while more than three-quarters (80%) of principals and deputy principals expressed agreement or strong agreement that faith development is provided for pupils, this applied to only a little over half of teachers (56%) and to slightly more than two-thirds (68%) of other staff. Teachers were also less likely to agree that faith development was available to staff. As Figure 3.5.4 illustrates, while one-third of principals and deputy principals – and over a quarter (28%) of other staff – agreed or strongly agreed on this, concurrence among teachers falls to 18 per cent.

Figure 3.5.3 Percentage of primary staff, by role, who agree/strongly agree that faith development is offered to Catholic pupils

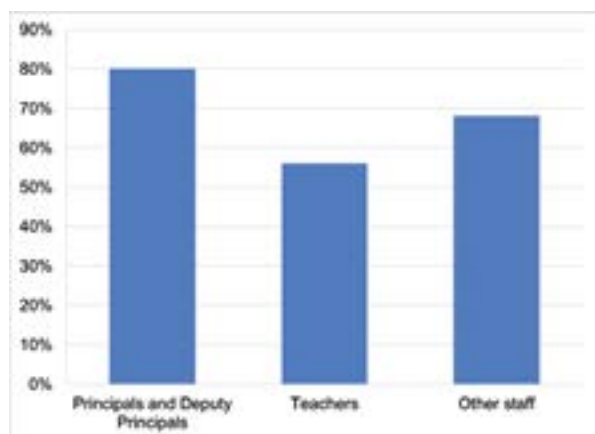
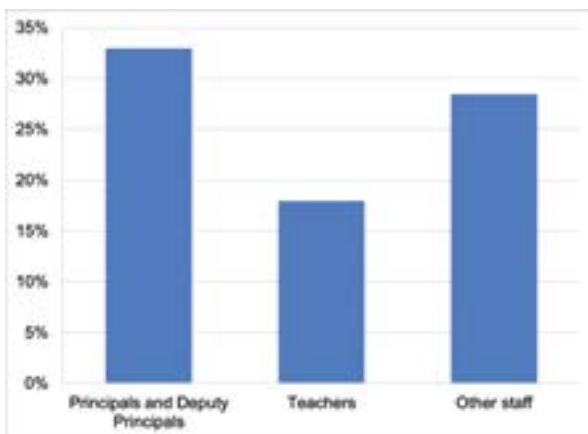


Figure 3.5.4 Percentage of staff, by role, who agree/strongly agree that faith development is offered to staff



No data were collected on type or frequency of staff faith formation at primary level, but one principal commented that there is ‘very little support coming to us for faith formation, like options of retreats for teachers’.

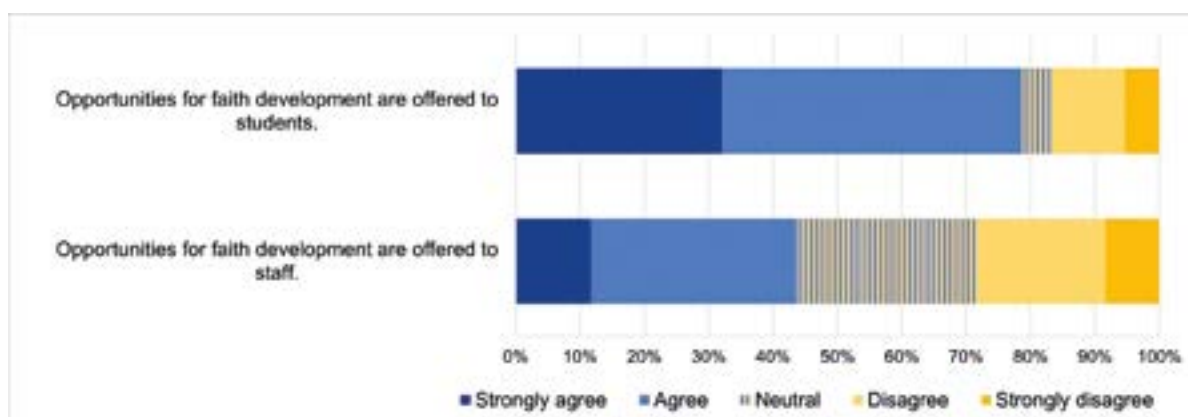
Secondary

At secondary level, just under two-thirds of BoM members perceive that their board ensures, to a large extent, that attention is given to faith formation in line with the characteristic spirit of the school, while most of the remainder perceive this happens to some or to a limited extent.

Over half of secondary principals (55%) state that they ensure, to a large extent, that faith formation is included as a constituent element of all RE classes, but 1 in 12 does not tend to do so. Just over half of principals (53%) report being held accountable, to a large extent, by their patron/trust in respect of the implementation of the school's Catholic identity, and just 41 per cent of principals report that they try, to a large extent, to develop and support the faith life of staff members in accordance with the Catholic tradition, while over half (51%) state that they do so to some or to a limited extent. These figures do not correlate with previous statements around commitment to and witnessing to the Catholic ethos of the school.

When asked specifically if their school offers opportunities for faith development, over 30 per cent of secondary respondents strongly agreed that such opportunities are offered to students, with a total of 78 per cent agreeing/strongly agreeing that this is the case. However, only 12 per cent of respondents strongly agree that such opportunities exist for staff, with another 32 per cent agreeing. This implies that over 50 per cent of all respondents either have a neutral opinion on this or disagree with the statement that faith development opportunities are offered for staff in the secondary sector.

Figure 3.5.5 Extent to which secondary respondents agree or disagree with given statements about opportunities for faith development



Evidence of ongoing faith development for secondary staff did not emerge from the interview phase of the study. However, some participants outlined initial induction for teachers when they joined the school and some outlined the patron's input:

'The only thing that I remember was, we were sent on a half day to attend a lecture on our founder. So, all the schools in the Trust were present. And it was maybe two hours about the philosophy behind the founding intention.'

‘So, when I first joined the sector – within two weeks we were invited by our trustees and all new teachers to the voluntary sector within the trusteeship in any of the schools in the region were invited to this conference.’

‘We attended a day’s training, where we got information about the history of the order, the ethos behind it, and how the order is functioning, I suppose COVID had a lot to do with it, but it was just a Zoom meeting. And it was quite a short one. And to be honest, it wasn’t as informative as I would have liked it to have been or maybe as serious as it could have been.’

One teacher suggested that ‘bringing teachers from schools together physically is definitely a good way to do that (faith development). And to give us that time.’

Others interviewed could not recall any training specifically on ethos, with one teacher noting that there hasn’t been any ‘since I’ve been in the school’.

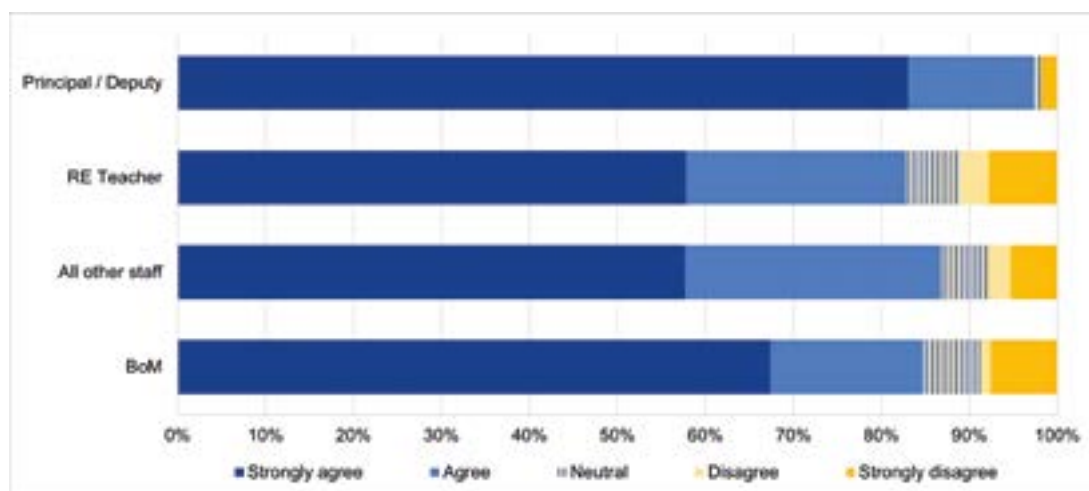
A secondary principal very strongly spoke of the need for faith development of staff, recognising that ‘all schools have a diminishing number of practising Catholics and have a much greater multicultural mix and so there is need for a re-evangelisation, as they have less and less grounding in the practice of the faith’. One board member suggested that an annual retreat for staff might support their faith life.

6. Care of others, especially the poor, as a core value, and the moral development of pupils

Primary

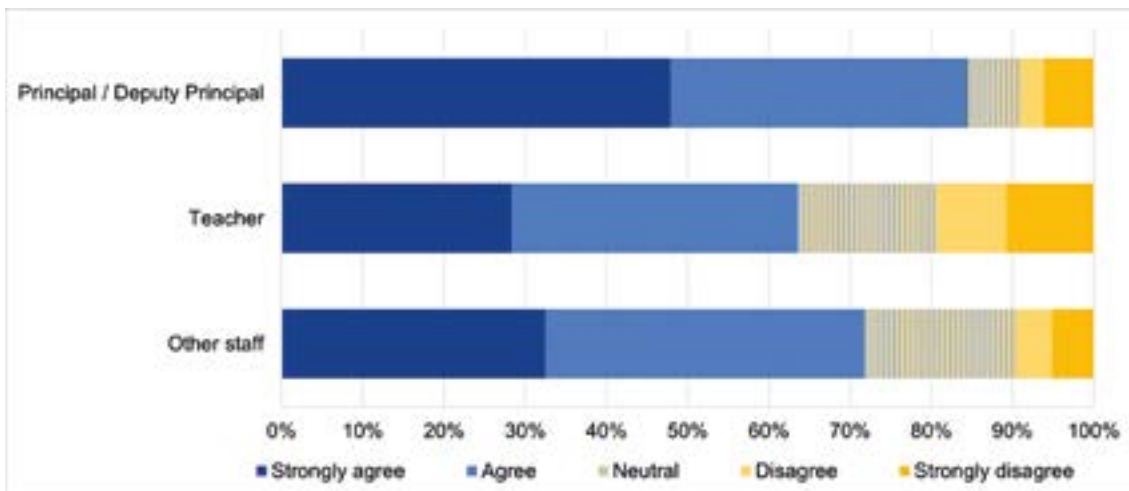
Primary school staff were asked if care for others, especially the poor, was considered a core value in their school.

Figure 3.6.1 Caring for others, especially the poor, is a core value of this school



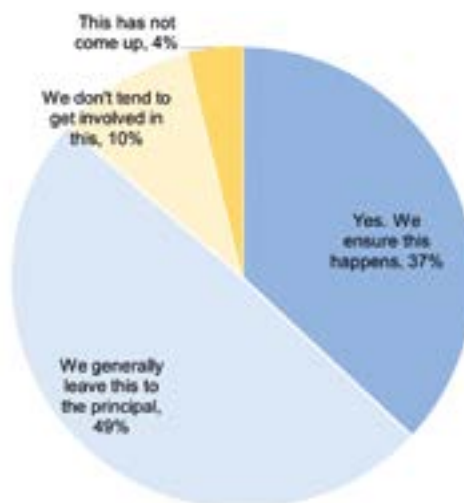
Generally, we can see in Figure 3.6.1 that high levels of agreement are expressed in regard to care for others, especially the poor, being a core value of the school. It is worth noting, however, the gap evident in this regard between teachers and principals. It is also worth noting that the cumulative figure for those who are 'neutral', 'disagree', or 'disagree strongly' or who report as 'don't know' is not insignificant, especially among teachers, at one in four.

Figure 3.6.2 Moral development of pupils in light of Catholic principles is promoted across the school



Strikingly similar observations can be made here as in Fig. 3.6.1, namely, a high level of overall agreement, a notable gap between principals and teachers, and a not insignificant number of teachers, closer to two in five, expressing low levels of agreement that moral development in accordance with Catholic principles is promoted across the school.

Figure 3.6.3 As a BoM we ensure that our school participates in Catholic Schools'

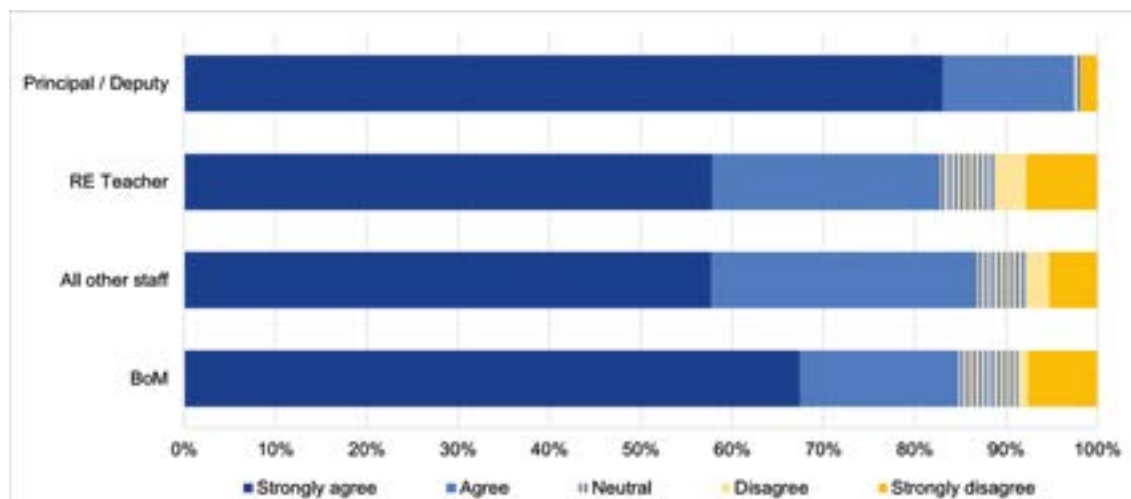


A question in regard to Catholic Schools' Week was put to members of BoMs. As we can see from Figure 3.6.3, high levels of confidence were expressed that they ensure their schools' active participation.

Secondary

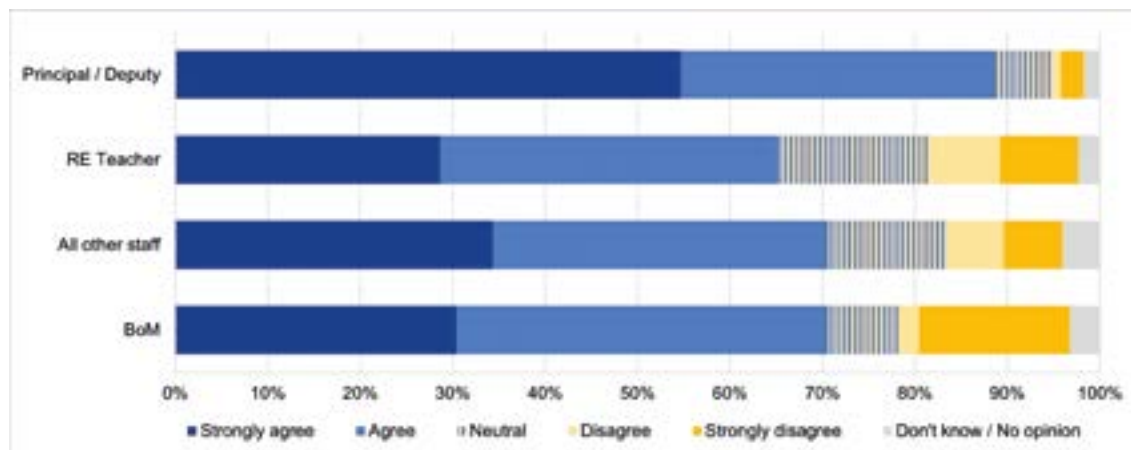
At secondary level all cohorts, including BoM members, were asked if caring for others is a core value in their schools.

Figure 3.6.4 Caring for others, especially the poor, is a core value of this school



We can see in Figure 3.6.4 the high levels of agreement in regard to this statement expressed across the cohorts. Worth noting, however, is that the highest level is expressed by principals, followed by BoM members. Teachers, along with other staff, while still reporting high levels, nonetheless are notably lower in their expression of agreement than principals, at less than three in five.

Figure 3.6.5 Moral development of pupils, in light of Catholic principles, is promoted across the school



A clear majority of respondents, irrespective of their role in the school, state that they agree or agree strongly that their schools promote the moral development of pupils in light of Catholic principles (Figure 3.6.5). Principals report the highest levels of agreement, with just over half (54%) strongly agreeing and a further 34 per cent agreeing (for a total of 89%). It is noteworthy, however, that other cohorts come in at a relatively lower combined figure of agreement at just 69 per cent. We can also see that in this instance BoM members align more closely with teachers than principals.

7. Inclusion of pupils of other faiths and none

Primary

The survey asked two questions about the accommodations provided to pupils of faiths other than Christian as well as those of humanist and secular beliefs. It asked if these students had freedom to express their beliefs while in school, and it also asked if they were welcomed to practise those beliefs. Figures 3.7.1 and 3.7.2 show that non-Christian students in primary schools are more likely to have freedom of expression than to be welcomed to practise their beliefs. In both respects, principals and deputy principals were more likely than other cohorts to agree with the statements in these regards.

Figure 3.7.1: Extent to which primary respondents agree or disagree with the statement that 'pupils of faiths other than Christian, and those of humanist and secular beliefs, have the freedom to express their beliefs in this school'

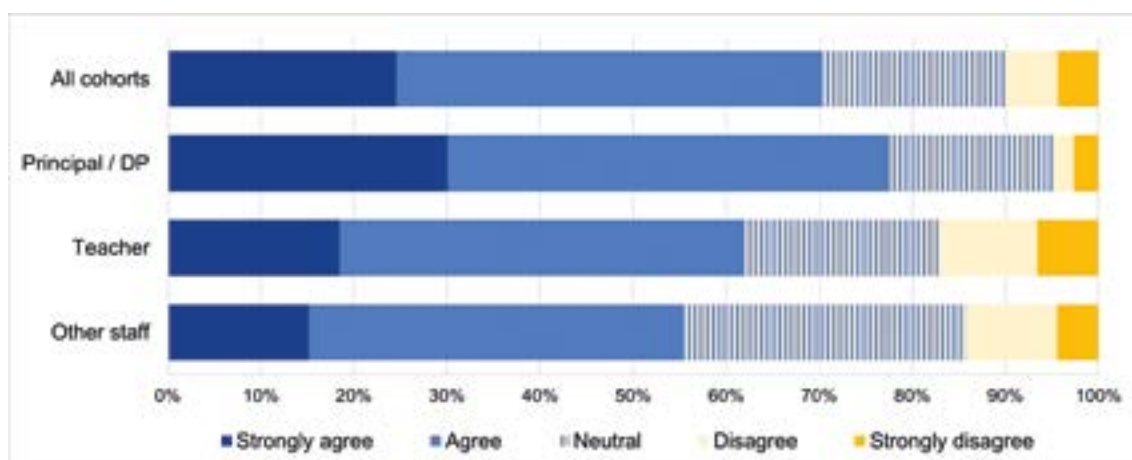
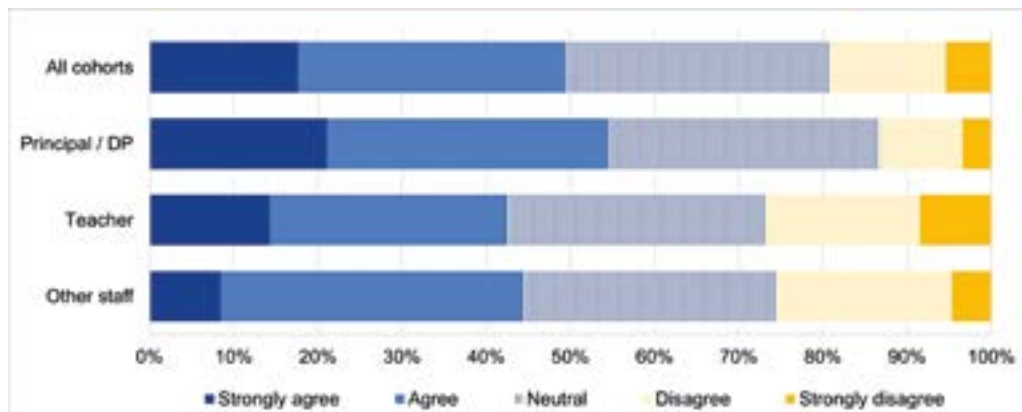


Figure 3.7.1 above shows that 71 per cent of all school staff agreed that students of a faith other than Christian have the freedom to express their faiths while in their schools; 78 per cent of primary principals and deputy principals agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, and 17 per cent of teachers disagreed with this statement.

However, when asked about the extent to which these pupils are 'welcomed' to practise their beliefs, the statistics show a marked variation, as can be seen in Fig 3.7.2. Just under half (49%) of all staff agreed with the statement that 'students of faiths other than Christian, and those of humanist and secular beliefs, are welcomed to practise their beliefs in this school', with 54 per cent of principals and deputy principals agreeing compared with 78 per cent saying they have the freedom to express their beliefs. At 42 per cent, levels of agreement in regard to pupils being welcome to practise their beliefs were lowest among teachers.

Figure 3.7.2 Extent to which primary respondents agree or disagree with the statement that 'pupils of faiths other than Christian, and those of humanist and secular beliefs, are welcomed to practise their beliefs in this school'



Several participants justified these low figures on the grounds of non-availability of resources, that is, space and staff for supervision, as opposed to a reluctance to enable practice.

Several classroom teachers commented on the presence of non-Christian or non-Catholic pupils in their classes and how this affects their practices of prayer and ethos, with one teacher stating that 'it results in a desire to not be seen as "overly Catholic"', and the teacher is 'afraid that it will upset the parents if their child is exposed to Catholic elements'.

Secondary

At secondary level, the extent to which non-Christian or non-Catholic pupils have the freedom to express their beliefs and are welcome to practise their faith while in school is markedly higher than in the primary sector. The same two questions were asked as at primary level. Again, there was a significant difference between the extent to which pupils had the freedom to express their beliefs and the extent to which they were welcome to practise those beliefs, as can be seen in Figures 3.7.3 and 3.7.4 below. Over three-quarters (77%) of all respondents agreed that students of a faith other than Christian have the freedom to express their faiths while in their schools, with over 90 per cent of principals and deputy principals agreeing with this statement (Figure 3.7.3).



Figure 3.7.3 Extent to which secondary respondents agree or disagree with the statement that 'students of faiths other than Christian, and those of humanist and secular beliefs, have the freedom to express their beliefs in this school'

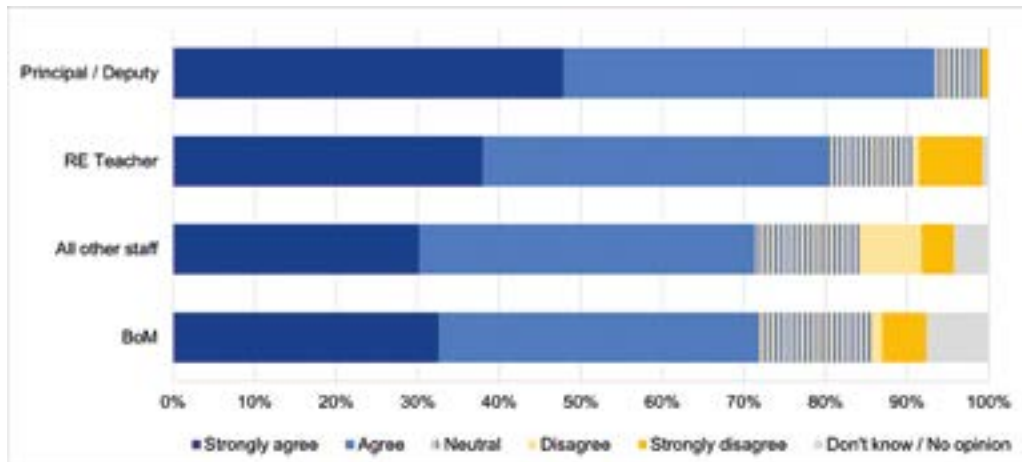
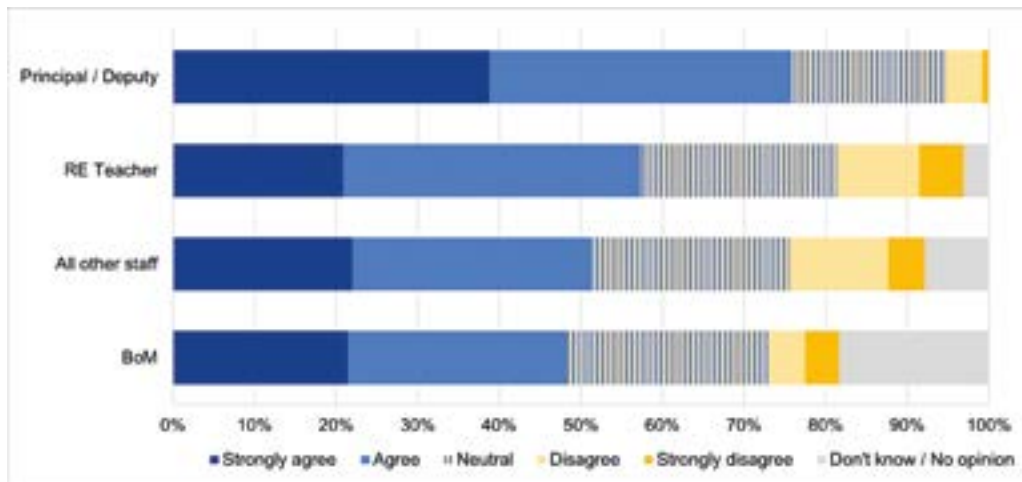


Figure 3.7.4 Extent to which secondary respondents agree or disagree with the statement that 'students of faiths other than Christian, and those of humanist and secular beliefs are welcomed to practise their beliefs in this school'



In comparison to the primary sector (at 50%), 61 per cent of all staff at secondary level (not including BoMs) agreed with the statement that 'students of faiths other than Christian, and those of humanist and secular beliefs, are welcomed to practise their beliefs in this school'; this is significantly lower than the percentage (76%) of principals and deputy principals who agreed with the statement (Figure 3.7.4).

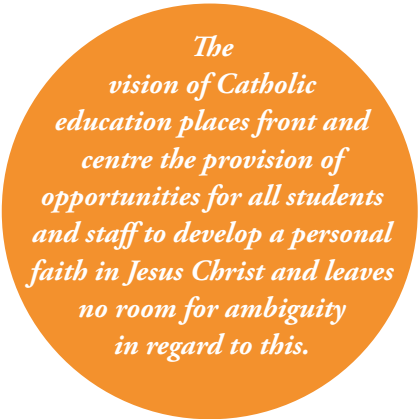
Analysis, Implications and Recommendations

The findings show many important and impressive ‘positives’ about how the lived reality in regard to Catholic education in Catholic primary and secondary schools in Ireland reflects the vision as expressed in Church teaching. Most of the respondents across all cohorts, as many as four-fifths, report valuing their schools’ Catholic ethos and supporting it, albeit to varying degrees. This level of support reflects broadly the findings of the Genesis Report (CPSMA/CSP/AMSCC 2019) commissioned by Catholic education management bodies in Ireland. In their investigation into the spectrum of belief and practice in contemporary Ireland, only 13 per cent of respondents rejected Catholic faith and its influence on Catholic education outright. The report concluded that just one in five ‘are less likely to be satisfied with school choice, will place far less emphasis on any form of religious practice or faith formation, and will be more likely to want a multi/non-denominational choice of school, and to restrict the Church in the sphere of education CPSMA/CSP/AMSCC, 2019, p.18). This accords with the current findings.



That said, the more one drills down into the data and joins the dots, the less encouraging the findings. Here we will consider just two examples. The first is in regard to the mission statement, which, according to Sullivan and McKinney (2013): ‘should frame, inspire, give purpose to, drive and guide the daily work of an educational community. It should focus the mind and concentrate the energies of all those associated with the community. It should clarify for the members of a particular school or college answers to the following: who we are, why we exist, how we are unique, what we do, who we serve, what inspires us, who we hope to become and what we stand for ...’ The mission statement, according to the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) for secondary schools, ‘is [to be] the culmination of dialogue involving patron/trustees, board of management, staff, parents and pupils’ (JMB 2021). On the face of it, it is encouraging that the vast majority of respondents report the existence of mission statements that reflect Gospel values. Less encouraging, however, is that only two out five members of primary BoMs and two out of three of their counterparts in secondary schools believe that policies are linked to them. This indicates a serious gap between the vision and the reality.

Another key issue is that of opportunities for pupils and staff to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ. The vision of Catholic education places front and centre the provision of opportunities for all students and staff to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ and leaves no room for ambiguity in regard to this. Primary schools, for example, are to model and promote 'a philosophy of life inspired by belief in God and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Catholic school provides Religious Education for the pupils in accordance with the doctrines, practices and tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and promotes the formation of the pupils in the Catholic Faith' (CPSMA 2016.) Yet, just over half of primary teachers report that RE classes include faith formation and its related components. There is an inextricable link between opportunities for faith development, opportunities to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ, and the provision of an RE programme that supports the understanding that 'the love of God, the person of Jesus Christ and his message are at the heart of the life of their schools'.



The vision of Catholic education places front and centre the provision of opportunities for all students and staff to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ and leaves no room for ambiguity in regard to this.

In a Catholic primary school, the teaching of RE is expected to play a key role in regard to both faith development and development of a personal faith in Jesus Christ. The teaching of an RE syllabus in a Catholic school that does *not* support development of faith in Jesus Christ is not 'neutral'. Rather, it communicates the contrary message that the development of faith in Jesus Christ is not, in reality, a central educational aim of the school.

The findings give rise to concern as to whether RE is fulfilling the faith development role that can be expected and required of it in a primary school under Catholic patronage. This concern arises in what we have seen in regard to the frequency with which RE is taught. The infrequency with which RE homework is assigned is also a very concrete statement in regard to the importance placed upon RE in the classroom. In addition, views expressed by some respondents who regard the *Grow in Love* programme as 'too Catholic' give cause for concern about how committed at least some RE teachers are to teaching RE from a Catholic faith perspective in Catholic primary schools.

At secondary level, just over half of principals (55%) state that they ensure to a large extent that faith formation is integral to RE classes. We need to note here that what people understand by 'faith development' can be ambiguous and should not necessarily be understood as Christian faith development. Significantly, higher numbers report provision of the former (faith development) than the latter (support in developing a personal faith in Jesus Christ).

As we have seen, one-fifth of RE teachers both at primary (21%) and secondary (19%) levels disagree that developing a personal faith in Christ is a central educational aim in their schools. A further cohort (31%) hold a neutral stance in this regard. It is difficult, therefore, to affirm, on the evidence of this research, that the vision held forth in Church documents for Catholic schools in regard to enabling pupils to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is satisfactorily realised. There are two matters that give rise to additional concerns.

The first is the gap in perceptions about the lived reality in schools that has emerged between BoM members and principals, on the one hand, and teachers and other school personnel, on the other. In regard to the level of oversight of Catholic ethos issues exercised by BoM members, two figures are telling. The first is the infrequency with regard to ethos-related matters appearing on BoM agendas

(Figure 3.2.10). The second is that the more specific an agenda item relates to Catholic ethos, the less attention it gets from the board (Figure 3.4.1).

The practice of boards at primary level, for the most part, is to leave such matters to school principals. Most principals themselves express a high commitment to faith development and to providing opportunities for pupils to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ, and many of them take the person of Jesus Christ into account in decision-making. Yet their views, and those of teachers, school administrators and others – arguably personnel who are more ‘on the ground’ – are at odds regarding their schools’ ‘operative’ culture (Schein 1999, p.42). This is evident in relation to almost every issue considered: the frequency of prayer and the teaching of RE, care of others as a core value and the promotion of moral development in accordance with Catholic principles, how RE classes support faith formation, general provision for faith development for pupils and staff, the provision of sacred space, and so on.

**The rights of patron/trustees of faith schools are implicitly recognised in the Education Act 1998 which requires the board of management to: ‘uphold, and be accountable to the patron (trustees) for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as 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 ...’
Section 15(2)(b).**

This gap between how principals and teachers perceive the reality on the ground is all the more serious when one considers the fact that the BoMs, even by their own judgement, are ‘hands-off’ when it comes to ethos matters and rely on principals not only to implement ethos and identity but also to be largely ‘self-regulating’ in this regard. It is no wonder that, as we have seen, the views expressed by BoM members and principals almost universally align, because the principal is the key conduit, and most certainly the one who carries the greatest weight, between the school and its board. Yet, as we have seen, teachers are generally conveying a different message in regard to the ‘health’ or otherwise of their schools’ ethos to that of principals – worryingly so.

The second issue of serious concern is the downward trajectory of commitment to Catholic ethos among the younger generations of teachers (see in particular Figures 3.2.2, 3.2.3, 3.2.7, 3.2.8). Any complacency in regard to the low numbers of respondents who outrightly reject Catholic ethos and influence in schools disappears when one realises that those who indicate little or no commitment to Catholic ethos are predominantly young staff in the under 29 age bracket. In terms of those who respect ‘to a large extent’ their school’s Catholic ethos and who are under 39, the number is just over half. Already, as the findings suggest, principals increasingly are running out of options when it comes to employing teachers who are willing to be meaningfully committed to the Catholic ethos. However, it is clear that BoMs will soon be running out of options when it comes to choosing principals so committed. And, as the data confirms, the role of principal is absolutely key.

Campbell (2020, p.76) identifies the school principal as the key figure entrusted with ensuring an alignment between the ‘professed’ and the ‘operative’ in Catholic schools. How matters such as the implicit curriculum, patterns of communication, and types of relationships at work are managed can determine the lived reality in regard to ethos. According to Sullivan and McKinney, ‘given weakness

of will and adverse circumstances more often there is quite a gap between what is espoused and what actually happens on the ground' (2013, p.215). To remedy this, it is necessary, they suggest, that Catholic school teachers and principals 'develop a sound understanding of their faith' (2013, p.213). Campbell cites Schein, who says that 'the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture' (Schein 1985, p.2). By culture in the educational context, she suggests, is meant 'the school's myths, visions, values, mission, assumptions, norms, rituals, ceremonies, traditions and symbols' and 'all aspects of school life'. Principals 'create a Catholic school culture in different ways: hiring teachers who support the mission; celebrating events on the liturgical calendar; preparing children for the sacraments; and making time and space for prayer, religious formation and social justice projects'. Campbell also stresses the importance of principals' personal witness and role modelling to the operative culture of the school.



It is worth referring briefly to how other Catholic education contexts are exploring how religious beliefs and practices as well as faith development are manifest in their schools. The Queensland (Australia) Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) recently (2023) published the outcomes of a project that investigated the relationship between mission and practice in their schools. It defined the mission of Catholic education in terms of 'Education inspired by Christ for human flourishing evidenced in Tradition and Purpose'. Drawing upon vision documents that are broadly similar to those that informed our research, the QCEC concluded that the interplay and alignment of mission and practice – which it referred to as 'Mission and Practice Integrity' – comes about through recognising the value of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, pursuing learning as a holistic process, valuing the witness to tradition, purpose and learning, and viewing Catholic school identity through the lens of the Catholic Tradition in dialogue with the community (QCEC 2023, p.16).

The following steps towards Mission and Practice Integrity are suggested by the findings that have been under discussion here:

- Patrons need to implement effective mechanisms for holding BoMs to account to their role in overseeing the Catholic ethos in their schools. Potential board members need to know in advance what they are signing up for, and so, recruitment procedures need to spell out clearly the BoM's responsibilities in regard to ethos. In addition, the implementation of ethos 'audits' by patrons can only be fairly and effectively undertaken if and when sufficient opportunities for ethos-related training and professional development have been provided to Boards. In keeping with the synodal approach to accountability emerging in the Catholic Church, accountability also needs to be exercised not only vertically (to patrons) but horizontally, ensuring that the various stakeholders, parents, teachers and so on, are consulted and their views given consideration. In this way patrons themselves will also be appropriately held to account.
- Mechanisms need to be put in place both to audit and monitor how Catholic ethos is being lived out on a daily basis in schools. This needs to be accompanied by development of appropriate selection and recruitment criteria for key school personnel and the provision of induction and CPD programmes that specifically relate to the school's role in faith development for both staff and pupils.
- Current initial teacher education programmes, both at Catholic and secular Higher Education Institutions, as well as staff induction and CPD programmes, all need to be reviewed in light of the Catholic Church's vision and requirements for Catholic schools. In conducting this review, the findings of declining commitment to Catholic ethos among younger teachers needs examination and response at programmatic level.
- The lived reality in Catholic schools, as evident from this research, needs to be better registered and taken into account in composing key documents and directives of the Irish Episcopal Conference and of management and trust bodies. In this regard, recent research and declarations from the Dicastery for Culture and Education need to be given careful consideration and incorporated.
- Careful research and investigation are required in regard to (1) how many schools under Catholic patronage are required to serve the mission of the Catholic Church in Ireland, and (2) how many can be meaningfully provided, given the findings in regard to commitment to Catholic ethos among teachers under 29, and who will be the future principals (see Conway et al. 2023).



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