



Global Researchers
Advancing Catholic Education



REPORT 6

Catholic Schools in Ireland:
Responsibility, Oversight
and Governance



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This report considers the data from Reports 2, 3, 4 and 5 under the themes of Responsibility, Oversight and Governance.

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Authors: Duffy, E. (Mary Immaculate College, Emeritus), Conway, E. (University of Notre Dame Australia), Doherty, D. (formerly Mary Immaculate College, Limerick), McCormack, C. (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick), Meehan, A. (Dublin City University), Ó Caoimh, B. (independent researcher) & O'Connell, D. (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick).

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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

AMCSS Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools

BoM Board of Management

CSP Catholic Schools Partnership CPD Continuing Professional Development

CPSMA Catholic Primary Schools Management Association

DA Diocesan Advisor

ICBC Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference

IEC Irish Episcopal Conference

JMB Joint Managerial Body for Secondary Schools

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

The documents from both the Department of Education and the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (ICBC) outline very clearly the wide range of responsibilities that rest with all patrons and trusts in the oversight of their schools. Furthermore, the patrons and trusts delegate these responsibilities to their Boards of Management (BoMs), who in turn entrust a significant level of responsibility to the principals and deputy principals in their schools. This survey has examined how these responsibilities are in fact being discharged by the various levels of oversight, leadership and management.

Catholic schools exist primarily as instruments of the Church's mission, as stated in the official statements of the Church and those of the ICBC. Being part of the Church's mission constitutes an essential dimension of the ethos of a Catholic school. This includes proposing the Gospel message to all those involved and facilitating the Catholic members of the whole school community in developing their relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. Catholic schools are inclusive communities, welcoming of all their members irrespective of their beliefs, while paying particular attention to how the message of the Gospel is explicitly proposed and lived on a day-to-day basis.

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When one looks at how the patrons and trusts are exercising their responsibilities, it appears that they are not proactive in communicating the primary importance of their ethos to the school communities; nor do they appear to demand accountability from them regarding the implementation of ethos-related issues, as the data from the survey indicate.

In the primary school sector, training is provided for BoMs, but the provision is uneven. Over two-thirds (68%) of primary BoM respondents have had some training from their patron or trust to specifically prepare them to serve on the board of a Catholic school, leaving close to another third (32%) without training. In terms of the efficacy of training provided, 29 per cent of primary BoM members report that their training specifically covered Catholic ethos to a large extent, while for almost half (49%), this is true only to some extent. Over a fifth (22%) are unsure or say that they did not really or did not at all receive ethos-specific training.

The significant lack of training for primary school BoMs and the quality of that training raise significant concerns about how seriously the patrons are taking their responsibilities in this regard. Questions may be raised as to how well the patrons are equipped to discharge their responsibilities or if they have explicitly delegated this responsibility to someone capable of competently discharging it. If proper education and training in matters of ethos are not provided for BoMs, it is very hard to expect that BoMs will be in any significant position to oversee the expression of ethos in the life of the school.

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In terms of accountability, again there are issues brought to light in the survey. Just over a quarter (26%) of BoM respondents perceive that their board reports to their patron or trust on the school's faith life, while the vast majority, at 73 per cent, either do not engage in this practice or are unaware if it occurs. Given that the faith life of the school is one of the central reasons for the Church's involvement in the first place, it appears quite startling that such a low level of oversight is demanded in this regard. The Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) *Board of Management Handbook* (2016) states that 'Board of Management members will have an opportunity, at least once a year, to review issues related to the Catholic ethos in the school and to report on this to the Patron' (#149). The survey evidence indicates that the policy set out by the CPSMA is generally not being followed. Even where BoMs provide a report to the patron, it would appear that the level of interest in such reports is incredibly low. Of those who do submit a report, only 14 per cent receive some form of feedback, whether written (4%), through a feedback meeting (2%), or through feedback being given by a patron or trust nominee (8%). All the evidence here points to the need for a radical review of how the systems of accountability are exercised in the primary sector.



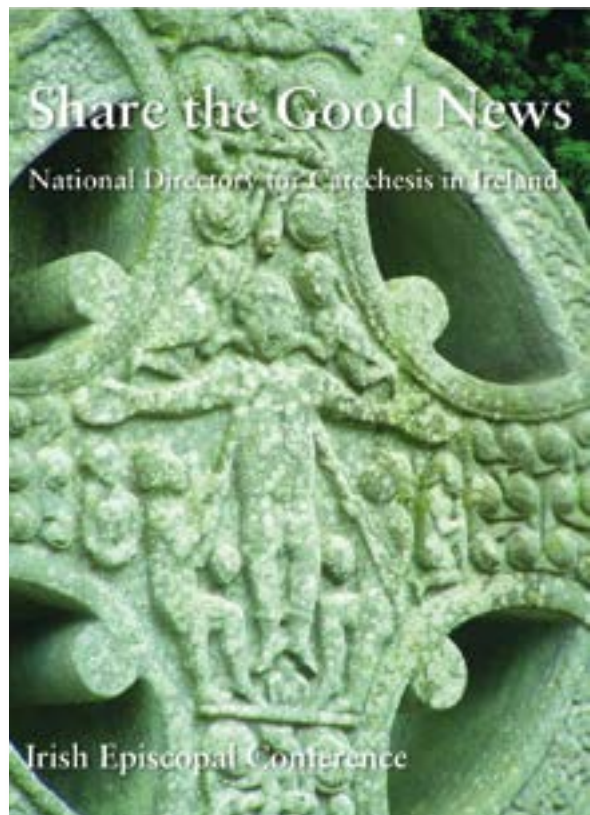
If the interest of the patrons is as low as this survey suggests, it is hard to expect that BoMs or others in leadership roles will be motivated to attend to ethos issues to any significant extent. It is remarkable, however, that so much good work is done despite this apathy on the part of patrons. Furthermore, given the incongruity between the stated vision and expectations of the bishops and how they exercise accountability, a serious credibility gap arises about their commitment to Catholic education that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The Vision for Catholic Education

The principles and vision that underpin the system of Catholic education is grounded in a range of official Church documents emanating from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and subsequently from the Congregation for Catholic Education. These include *Gravissimum educationis* (1965), *The Catholic school* (1977), *The Catholic school on the threshold of the third millennium* (1997), *Global compact on education* (2019) and *The identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue* (2022). *Gravissimum educationis* defined Catholic education as ‘the formation of the human person with respect to his/her ultimate goal, and simultaneously with respect to the good of those societies of which, as a human being, s/he is a member, and in whose responsibility as an adult s/he will share’. In the context of this report, with specific reference to the Irish context, the documents published by the Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) are used as the immediate points of reference to review the governance and leadership of Catholic schools in the Republic of Ireland. In this case, there are four key documents, to which reference will be made. These are: *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*, resource pack (CSP 2016) and *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2019).



The ICBC set out a vision for Catholic schools in their pastoral letter *Vision 08* (2008). In it, they stated that 'Catholic schools are distinguished by faith in the transcendent mystery of God as the source of all that exists and as the meaning of human existence. This faith is not simply the subject-matter of particular lessons but forms the foundation of all that we do and the horizon of all that takes place in the school' (p.3). They speak of a holistic approach to education – one that provides 'a framework of meaning and a sense of direction for their lives in a time of rapid and often confusing cultural and social change' (p.3). They place a high value on reason – both intellectual and practical – and regard the intellectual development of the person as a precious value in its own right. In continuity with the earliest traditions of the Church, they regard education and the cultivation of intellectual life as precious in themselves. They appreciate the importance of science and technology, but without allowing these to reduce education to a mechanistic rationality, thus diminishing the dignity of the human person. They want to ensure that faith and reason are vibrant partners in the human quest for understanding and ultimate fulfilment that is pursued in Catholic schools.



Share the Good News (IEP 2010, esp. pp.204–210, hereafter *SGN*) offers comprehensive and specific objectives and indicators of achievement for the governance and oversight of Catholic education, against which their performance and effectiveness might be measured. From the comprehensive list of indicators of achievement outlined, the following are particularly significant when reviewing how effectively these are implemented and overseen by those in governance and leadership roles.

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They want to ensure that faith and reason are vibrant partners in the human quest for understanding and ultimate fulfilment that is pursued in Catholic schools.

The Leadership of Catholic Education in Ireland

The Catholic Church is the largest provider of education in Ireland. There are 2,760 primary schools with a Catholic patronage (Oireachtas Library and Research Services 2019). These account for 88.5 per cent of all primary schools in the country and have an enrolment of 488,084 students (Department of Education 2023). There are 344 voluntary secondary schools, or 47.6 per cent of the total second level sector (Oireachtas Library and Research Services 2019). The majority of these schools have a Catholic patron or trusteeship, and they are educating approximately 185,963 students (Griffin 2019).

The Irish Catholic school sector relies heavily on a very large cohort of volunteers. There are over 24,000 members of BoMs involved in the management of primary and secondary schools across the Republic of Ireland. They render their services generously and gratuitously. This volunteerism represents an enormous financial saving to the State. These volunteers act to ensure the delivery of the patrons' vision for the schools, as well as ensuring that the schools adhere to provisions of the *Education Act 1998* as well as other directives and circulars from the Department of Education.

The Role of the Patron and Trustees

The *Education Act 1998* specifies the patron of a school as the entity that establishes the school. In the case of primary schools, the patron is the local diocesan bishop. The bishop, as patron, has certain rights and responsibilities, particularly in relation to ethos, the appointment of the BoM, the appointment of chairpersons, the appointment of staff, enrolment/admission policy, insurance and buildings (CPSMA 2016, p.12).

In the case of secondary schools, the patron is a board of trustees or the owner of the school. New models of trusteeship have been developing for secondary schools in recent decades, and now these include a variety of different bodies: (a) religious congregations; (b) bishops or diocesan trusts; (c) trust bodies or companies; (d) lay individuals or groups; (e) any combination of the foregoing. The majority of Catholic secondary schools are under the patronage of a trust company, and these are generally composed of lay members.

The trustees own the schools and normally exercise their role through a BoM. The patron appoints the BoM and determines the school's ethos. The ethos – or characteristic spirit of the school – flows from the intention for which the school was founded. In the light of ongoing social and cultural change, these founding intentions have been reappraised and now find expression in the mission statement of the school. The mission statement is intended to be the culmination of dialogue involving patron/trustees, BoM, staff, parents and pupils. The mission statement reflects the aims and objectives set out in the religious and educational philosophy of the trustees.

In their pastoral letter of 2008 entitled *Vision 08*, the bishops of Ireland outlined a vision for Catholic education in which they stated:

While they share many characteristics with other schools in offering a public service, Catholic schools seek to reflect a distinctive vision of life and a corresponding philosophy of education. This is based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel sees the world in which we live as God’s creation. As human persons, we are made in God’s image and destined for everlasting life with God. Life is a pilgrimage in the footsteps of Jesus, who is ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life’ (John 14, 6) (p.2).

Despite the vision and evident commitment of the patrons and trustees, some would claim that ‘a crisis in school patronage is looming’ (Connolly et al. 2023). Several factors are contributing to that crisis. These include the decline of the Church’s influence and the tarnishing of its image as an educational provider because of a growing secularisation; internal scandals relating to child sexual abuse; and significant inward migration, resulting in a more ethnically diverse society. All these factors create difficulties for patrons and trusts in maintaining a distinctively Catholic ethos today.

According to *SGN*:

Canon Law assigns the role of the oversight of religious education to the local bishop (Code of Canon Law #801–806). The Diocesan Advisor (DA) is appointed by the bishop in the exercise of this pastoral responsibility. The DA reports to the bishop at regular intervals on issues that call for his attention. Most dioceses also have a Diocesan Education Office, or share one with neighbouring dioceses, and these facilitate the management and smooth running of the Catholic schools, under the patronage of the local bishop. (2010, p.146)

Other support services are provided at a national level by organisations such as the Catholic Primary Schools’ Management Association and the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS).

The Role of Boards of Management

While patrons may manage the school personally, they normally appoint a Board of Management. The rights of patron/trustees of faith schools are implicitly recognised in the *Education Act 1998*, which requires the BoM 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’ (s 15(2)(b)).

The rules governing the management of primary schools is set out by the Department of Education and Skills in its publication *Governance manual for primary schools 2019–2023*.

In the case of primary schools, normally a BoM is appointed by the trustee, with the following representation: (a) two direct nominees of the patron; (b) two parents elected from parents of children who are enrolled and have commenced attendance at the school (one being a mother, the other a father, elected by the general body of parents of children who are enrolled and have commenced attendance at the school); (c) the principal (or acting principal) of the school; (d) one other serving teacher on the staff of the school, elected by vote of the teaching staff which includes the principal; (e) two extra members proposed by those nominees, described at (a) to (d) above (Department of Education and Skills 2019, section 3.1).



The Catholic Primary Schools' Management Association (CPSMA) published a **Board of Management Handbook** (2016), which provides further details of the management's responsibilities. According to the Handbook, citing *SGN* (2010), it is expected that the BoM, principal, staff and parents engage in regular review of how the school community lives up to its Catholic ethos.



As part of that review, the BoM is to consider:

- description of ethos
- mission statement
- connection with local parish(es)
- RE policy
- pastoral care
- SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) and RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) policy
- provision for liturgy and reflective space
- in-service in these areas
- Parents' Council (CPSMA 2016, p.16).

BoMs for secondary schools normally have eight members: four trustee nominees, two parent nominees, and two teacher nominees. The boards are to ensure that the Catholic ethos of the school is upheld, among other wide responsibilities, as outlined in the *Education Act 1998* (15(2)(b)). The roles and responsibilities of BoMs are set out in the Articles of Management for Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS 2019, pp.92ff). These Articles of Management receive general recognition in Section 7(4)iv of the *Education Act 1998*. In addition, Sections 14 to 21, inclusive, of the *Education Act 1998* have set out in legislation the roles and responsibilities of BoMs, according to which the practical involvement of the trustees is required in the following areas:

- ensuring an appropriate level of awareness among the school community of the founding purpose and ethos
- ensuring that the characteristic spirit is reflected in the school mission statement
- providing opportunities for all the partners to acquire insights into the values and beliefs that are inherent in the founding intention
- ensuring that school management links the policies and activities of the school with its characteristic spirit
- appointment and training of members of boards of management
- selection of principals and deputy principals
- support for principal and teaching staff
- regular contact with key personnel in the school
- approval of the school plan
- approval of policies regarding admissions and other important issues
- evaluation of the school's progress, especially in the context of the characteristic spirit
- curriculum and timetabling, with particular reference to the characteristic spirit.

Thus, in light of the bishops' own expectations of a BoM and the statutory responsibilities assigned to them by the ***Education Act 1998***, there are very clear indicators for the creation of benchmarks against which BoMs can be evaluated and held to account.

Given the traditional dominance of the Catholic Church as an education provider and the changing profile of the Irish population, the Church's role – in the primary sector particularly – has become contentious. Despite efforts by the State to encourage divestment (beginning in 2012) and the Church's willingness to do so, only 14 schools have divested from Catholic patronage (Foley 2023). Parents have shown a preference for the status quo when polled for the option to divest. New primary schools are opting for alternative patronages, but these are generally in the more densely populated areas of the country. Since 2012, 69 multi-denominational schools have been opened (Department of Education 2023). The issue of patronage at second level is not in dispute to any remarkable extent.

The Role of the Principal and Deputy Principal

According to a Department of Education circular (Circular Letter 0070/2018 [primary] and Circular Letter 0003/2018 [secondary]), the principal provides leadership to teachers, to other staff, and to the pupils and the wider school community. The principal also has overall responsibility, under the direction of the BoM, for the day-to-day management of the school and for the internal organisation of the school. This includes the assignment of roles and responsibilities to members of the teaching and non-teaching staff. The principal submits to the BoM statements and reports affecting the conduct of the school as the board requires (Circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/education/2018/70). The deputy principal co-operates with the principal in the fulfilment of the principal's role and acts or deputises as the principal in the principal's absence.

According to a Department of Education circular to the managerial authorities of primary schools in 2018, 'the Deputy Principal occupies a position of vital importance within the senior leadership team in a school. Shared leadership requires openness and willingness on the part of Principals and Deputy Principals, to share and to distribute leadership and management responsibilities in a manner that encourages and supports partnership' (Circular Letter 0070/2018).

The role of the deputy principal in secondary schools is outlined in Circular 4/98.

In the case of secondary schools, according to the ***Manual for boards of management of Catholic voluntary secondary schools*** (JMB/AMCSS/SSS 2021), the principal, among several other administrative duties, is delegated by the BoM to:

- implement decisions taken at Board meetings
- organise the curriculum of the school in accordance with the religious and educational criteria established by the trustees (Department of Education 2019, p.86).

The Idea of Leadership

Leadership has been a topic of discussion and research among academics for more than a century. Over that period, the focus has shifted regularly. In the early 20th century, the emphasis was on the control and centralisation of power. It defined leadership in terms of the ability to induce obedience, respect, loyalty and cooperation (Northouse 2019, pp.1–18). Then attention shifted to the personality traits of the leader and how these impacted on the group being led. By the 1950s, attention was focused on how leadership as a relationship can develop shared goals. During the 1970s, the focus was on the organisational behaviour approach, where leadership was viewed as ‘initiating and maintaining groups or organisations to accomplish group or organisational goals’. Building on the developments of all the previous decades, by the 21st century, a range of approaches has appeared, all of which could be grouped under the following headings: authentic leadership; spiritual leadership; servant leadership; adaptive leadership; followership; discursive leadership. Some even speak of the end of leadership (Kellerman 2012; Naím 2014). As Jack Barentsen has observed, the shift in this direction has been driven by grassroots democracy, follower empowerment, and wider civil and political participation (Barentsen 2017, p.5).

Following the approach of Peter G. Northouse, leadership can be seen to emerge as a process, a transactional event between leaders and followers, an interactive event. It involves influence and is concerned with how communications between leaders and followers is effected. It is about influencing a group to attain common goals, which implies that there is an ethical dimension to the process. While leadership is a relational issue, ‘it is the leader who often initiates the relationship, creates the communication linkages, and carries the burden for maintaining the relationship’ (Northouse 2019, p.6). In reviewing school leadership, it becomes very obvious that it involves a complex network of relationships and communications. As has been indicated above, there are sufficiently clear criteria in place against which to measure and ensure accountability by the various management and leadership personnel with the Catholic school system.



Accountability

Accountability is the formal obligation to submit to a mechanism designed to achieve external scrutiny in explaining and justifying past conduct, actions or performance, with the possibility of consequences arising. Accountability is a virtue and it is personal. Where it is collective, as in government or board accountability, then any consequences arising apply to all members of the collective (Duffy and Molloy 2022, p.548).

Once the above definition is accepted, then there are certain conditions which follow from it. For accountability to be just and fair, it must be clear what one is accountable for – for example, specified initiatives, objectives or results. The person being held accountable must have the authority to make the decisions that are called for and the competence to carry out the tasks involved, whether personally or with the assistance of a support staff. There must be clear policies in place with which one has to comply. This might entail how personnel are to engage or how money or property are to be used. The resources necessary must be in place to carry out the proposed task or mission.

As has been noted above, there are sufficient indicators in place within the Catholic school.



Primary Schools

Boards of Management

The individual patrons delegate the management and governance of their schools to the BoM, who in turn appoints a principal to oversee the day-to-day management of each school (McGraw and Tiernan 2022, p.39). The BoM has a primary responsibility on behalf of the patron for promoting and protecting the school's ethos. Therefore, one would expect that the members of the BoM would be well informed about the patron's vision, expectations and criteria for ensuring that the ethos – as set out in various documents issued by the IEC – are upheld and well maintained.

As already noted, a significant number of BoMs receive no training with respect to ethos. Even among those that do, a significant number regard the training as inadequate. Just as there is a deficiency in the initial training of BoMs, there is also a lack of continuing professional development for the boards. The impact of this is borne out by the survey, when board members were asked about their familiarity with official Church documents on Catholic education. At least 75 per cent of board members are unsure or have not heard of *Vision 08*; 78 per cent have not heard of *SGN*; and 74 per cent have not heard of *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school*. A consequence of this deficient training is that only 55 per cent of BoM members regard faith development as a central aim of the school.

Among BoM members, only 59 per cent agree that the school has a mission statement based on Gospel values, despite the fact that 89 per cent of principals thought this to be the case. The discrepancy here indicates that BoMs are not entirely familiar with the mission statement of their schools. The survey indicates that BoMs consider that policy documents are linked to the mission statement in only 40 per cent of those schools with a mission statement. These data make it difficult to see how BoMs can ensure that the school is operating according to the mission statement or that its policies are consistent with its ethos. Again, it is hard to see how BoMs are able to hold schools accountable to their ethos if there is such lack of awareness among their members.

According to the CPSMA Handbook (2016), '[t]eachers will be employed on the understanding that they will commit themselves actively to supporting the ethos of the school' (#151). Yet, less than half (43%) of 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. Less than half (43%) of primary BoM respondents agree that their board ensures that all teachers employed uphold the Catholic ethos of the school. 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. These data indicate that BoMs abdicate to the school principal responsibility for inducting teachers to the ethos of the school. There seems to be a hands-off approach by BoMs in this area. While the pressures on schools to find any teachers to fill vacancies must be acknowledged, BoMs could be more proactive in ensuring that teachers are well informed about the school's ethos, even if a significant number of teachers may not be active Catholics. Just under half (46%) of primary principals have received continual professional development (CPD) from their patron/trust to 'encourage, develop and promote the ethos' of their school. The remainder, at 54 per cent, have had no such training. It was found that 40 per cent of the teachers have received

professional development from their patron/trust to assist them in the teaching of religious education, leaving the majority with no such training. Here it might be expected that BoMs would make representation to the patrons and trustees to ensure that such training is provided. There is a missed opportunity here on the part of both parties – patrons and BoMs – to equip their teachers in being better able to deliver on ethos-related matters in their schools. Patrons and BoMs could use their leverage with the Department of Education to facilitate such in-service opportunities for school staff.

In practical terms, BoMs seem to be poorly informed about the actual practices in the classroom – for example, knowing to what extent the statutory time for Religious Education is being met; whether prayer is part of classroom practice; what is the quality of the faith development of the children. It is the responsibility of the BoM to ensure that these issues are properly overseen and provided for within the school setting. Patrons need to hold their BoMs accountable for carrying out this task, and BoMs in turn will have to hold the school principal responsible for what is being done in the classrooms and provide the necessary support in doing so.

Principals

Although it was not the brief for the survey to study the range of administrative responsibilities that devolve to school principals, it has to be acknowledged that it is becoming an ever more onerous responsibility with so many targets to be met and reports to be filed, coping with complex social and cultural issues in the changing demographic of school populations (see Report 4). Here only one aspect of the principal's responsibilities is being observed, namely, responsibility for upholding and developing the ethos of the school in conjunction with the BoM and the intentions of the patron or trust.

The growing diversity of school populations – in terms of ethnicity and faith backgrounds – creates problems in delivering an integrated curriculum in the school. This is further compounded by the **Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018**, whereby if a school is oversubscribed, a Catholic child seeking to gain admission to a Catholic primary school may now be refused a place in favour of a child of another religion or no religion – a rule that does not apply to other religious denominations. These conditions inevitably create major challenges for principals as they try to lead their schools according to a specifically Catholic ethos.

Just as BoMs were unfamiliar with Church documents on Catholic education, so were the primary principals. Among principals, 80 per cent are unsure or have not heard of *Vision 08*. Of the 21 per cent who have, 61 per cent have little to no familiarity with it; 86 per cent of principals are unsure or have not heard of *SGN*, and of the 14 per cent who have, 65 per cent have little to no familiarity with it. Three-quarters of principals are also unsure or have not heard of ***Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school***, and of the quarter who have, 53 per cent have little to no familiarity with it.

Within schools, about 89 per cent of teachers are unsure or have not heard of *Vision 08*, and of the 12 per cent of teachers who have, 72 per cent have little to no familiarity with it; 87 per cent are unsure or have not heard of *SGN*, and of the 14 per cent of teachers who have, 67 per cent have little to no familiarity with it. Again, 87 per cent of teachers are also unsure or have not heard of ***Understanding***

and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school, and of the 13 per cent who have, 62 per cent have little to no familiarity with it. Here one can see the trickle-down effect: if BoMs and principals in the management lines above the classroom teachers have not been sufficiently familiarised with these documents, it is hard to see how they can impact significantly on the life of the school.

Despite the shortcomings in the provision of formation in ethos for principals, they are generally diligent in ensuring that the Religious Education (RE) curriculum is followed in their schools and that there are opportunities for prayer within the school timetable. The data also indicate that the older cohort of principals is more committed to ethos than the younger cohort. This raises significant challenges for the coming years in terms of succession in leadership. It is a priority issue to which patrons and management bodies will have to devote attention.



Among primary principals, 91 per cent always or mostly ensure that the curriculum is always followed and that textbooks approved by the ICBC for RE are used. 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.

Just over a third (35%) say that their school has a policy statement on RE that includes faith formation, prayer, sacramental experiences, and awareness of the stewardship of God's creation. The same percentage report its presence to some or to a limited extent, and 30 per cent state that they do not really or do not at all have a policy of this nature. 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.

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Among principals, 59 per cent report that they are held accountable, to a large extent, for the implementation of the Catholic identity of their school. Over two-thirds (69%) report they ensure, to a large extent, that their staff understand the Catholic ethos of their school. A majority of almost two-thirds (65%) of primary principals and deputy principals definitely agree that the Catholic ethos has a positive influence on their work, with a further 28 per cent reporting that this is partly the case. A significant discrepancy between what principals think is the case and how other teachers and staff view the situation emerged in the survey. A third (33%) of teachers and slightly under a third of other staff (31%) were definite regarding the positive influence of the Catholic ethos, as against 65 per cent of principals. Just over half (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, whereas 75 per cent of principals take seriously the faith formation of their pupils.

Teachers were also asked a series of questions related to the teaching of RE. This revealed that 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. These figures indicate that there is less than optimal oversight of the teaching of RE in the primary schools and that there is no indication that teachers failing to provide the statutory hours for it are being held accountable.

These data indicate a certain discrepancy between the professed vision regarding ethos and the lived reality in the school situation. A clear and coherent vision and policy for Catholic education is provided by Vatican documents and by the IEC and its agencies. The data suggest that there are serious issues in communicating these policy documents to the school communities. Some of this may be because, in the formulation of many of these documents, particularly at the more local level, there is not sufficient consultation with the various stakeholders, whether BoMs, principals, teachers or parents. It is also clear that greater attention has to be given to the proper formation of BoMs, principals and teachers on the importance and dynamics of a Catholic ethos in the schools. This will require investment and more robust engagement by patrons and trusts with the Department of Education to ensure sufficient space and facilities in the school context to provide the necessary initial and ongoing formation for all concerned.

Secondary Schools

The second level landscape differs considerably from the primary sector in that there is a much greater range of choice for parents at second level as to where they will send their children. This is particularly the case in cities and larger urban areas. In the more rural parts of the country, however, there is less choice, so that very often the only second level school available will be a Catholic school. In the primary sector, the schools are almost exclusively under the patronage of the local bishop. At second level, only some schools are under a bishop's patronage or trusteeship. The majority of the Catholic secondary schools are under the trusteeship of religious orders or lay trustees who are the successors of religious orders who had previously owned these schools.

Trustees

As was the case for the primary sector, the survey did not interview any of the trustees of these secondary schools. The data pertain to how they are perceived by the BoMs, principals and teachers, and much of this was gathered in the qualitative section of the survey. There was general agreement that the trusts were proactive in developing leadership skills, but less engaged with specific ethos or faith development issues, although some of the trusts were more engaged with faith development than others.

A number of principals mentioned training from their trust bodies and said that they received an hour-long input from the patrons' officers or from experienced principals addressing how they lead ethos. One principal was offered a full day on ethos, while several referred to the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) training in which an emphasis on ethos played a very limited or non-existent part. Criticism was expressed about the commitment of the patrons and trusts to developing schools' ethos. There was a perception that there was little financial investment in this aspect of school activity and little training provided for boards or staff members. Some respondents regarded them as out of touch with what was happening on the ground in schools. One said that the trustees need 'to get their act together, putting it very bluntly, as they have a responsibility which I don't see them currently fulfilling and I am appalled to be quite honest'.

The quantitative survey revealed that among the practices least likely to happen was the BoM reporting regularly to the patron or trust. Just under half (48%) of BoM members perceive that their board reports, to a large extent, to their patron or trust on the school's faith life, while slightly more than a third (35%) report that they do so to some or to a limited extent. About 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. This lack of reporting may indicate that the trusts are not demanding such reports and therefore not holding their BoMs to account.



Boards of Management

The surveys indicated that there is a growing challenge in recruiting willing and suitable members for BoMs and that very often the recruitment is left to the principal. This may endanger the independence of the BoM or lead to unnecessary compromises in the management of the school. Among the BoM members in this sector, just over 80 per cent agree that they are managing their schools in accordance with the religious and educational philosophy of their trustees, and 86 per cent agree that BoMs ensure that their teachers uphold the school's ethos. However, when one examines more closely what is happening in practice, there is a considerable discrepancy. Only 38 per cent of boards reported ever discussing the school's identity, and 48 per cent ever reported to their patron or trust on the faith life of the school. While 84 per cent claimed that their mission statement was based on Gospel values, only 67 per cent said that their policies were based on their mission statement.



Board members reported mixed experiences of initial training, and mostly these were negative. Some were provided with no training. The time allocated to addressing issues of ethos was regarded as wholly unsatisfactory. One respondent said that it 'formed maybe a half-hour of that time'. Some trusts make significant links with their Founder's vision, but often overlook how education fits within the overall mission of the Church.

It was noted that the agendas for board meetings are overloaded, and time for ethos issues is a casualty of this pressure. Others noted that unlike good business practice, there is seldom any annual review or assessment of accountability by the board.

BoMs have a general perception that their schools are run in accordance with the ethos of the trustees. Yet less than 40 per cent of members strongly agree that issues relating to Catholic identity regularly feature on the agenda of BoM meetings. In this case, it is hard to see how they ensure that the school is run according to its stated characteristic spirit or ethos.

The findings also reveal that the vast majority (86%) of BoM members agree that their board ensures the teachers employed in the school uphold the Catholic ethos. Just over three-quarters of BoM

members agree that their board ensures RE receives a minimum of two hours' teaching per week and that all RE teachers are duly qualified. Almost three-quarters of BoM members agree that their board ensures the school works with parents to help them understand the underpinnings of a Catholic education.

There is a certain discrepancy between what the BoMs consider to be the case and what is happening in reality. For example, over 75 per cent of BoM members agree that their board ensures RE receives a minimum of two hours' teaching per week, whereas just over 50 per cent of principals report that they allocate two hours per weeks to RE in the Senior Cycle years. Again, BoMs and principals have divergent views on the extent to which 'parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school's Catholic ethos': about 22 per cent of BoMs strongly agree, while 55 per cent of principals strongly agree. This may point to poor communications on these issues between the BoMs and the principals. In both cases, it is indicative of poor use of the structures of accountability within the management of the schools. In practice, the same questions can be raised here as were raised earlier with respect to the governance of primary schools.

Principals

A key role for a school principal is to ensure that the ethos of the school is upheld, encouraged and developed. These roles and responsibilities of school principals are set out in Report 4. There was a higher level of satisfaction among secondary school principals working under Catholic patronage than at the primary level. This may be accounted for by the fact that it is easier to select into the leadership of a secondary school than at primary level, where the majority of the schools have a Catholic patron.

Among principals, 53 per cent said that they were held accountable by their patron or trust for the implementation of a Catholic ethos in their schools. About 40 per cent said that they supported the faith formation of their staff, and only 38 per cent felt responsible for the faith development of their students. About 80 per cent of principals reported that they ensured that Religious Education was provided for the statutory two hours per week, but this then dropped to 53 per cent for the Senior Cycle. Just 26 per cent reported having specific times for prayer in the school. It might, then, be expected that BoMs would be more familiar with these data and seek to address them.

The issue of succession in school leadership is one the patrons and trusts will need to address as a matter of importance. When one views the level of support for the Catholic ethos of the schools, this is very high among an older cohort of teachers. All of those aged over 60 respected the school's ethos, while just 54 per cent of those aged 18–29 do so; 72 per cent of those over 60 witness to the ethos, while 42 per cent of the younger cohort do. These data indicate that work needs to be done with current staff to enhance their appreciation of a Catholic ethos, and significant investment needs to be made in forming the next generation of school leaders who will uphold and develop that ethos.

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The Role of Diocesan Advisors

According to the Code of Canon Law, 'the diocesan bishop has the right to watch over and inspect the Catholic schools situated in his territory, even those established or directed by members of religious institutes' (1999, C. 806§1). Currently, the Irish bishops have no specific inspectorate in place for Catholic schools in their dioceses, although prior to Vatican II there were diocesan inspectors for both primary and secondary schools. Following the Council, the bishops opted to provide an advisory system for the Catholic schools in their dioceses despite the fact that a substantial report had been issued recommending a serious overhaul of the inspection system that was in place (Sexton and McCormack 2021). None of the recommendations were implemented in the meantime.

However, a handbook entitled *The role of the diocesan advisor for post-primary Religious Education* (ICBC 2013) recommends that an evaluation carried out by a diocesan advisor (DA) should focus on the strengths of the RE programme in the school and note any shortcomings with a view to assisting the school authorities in addressing the problems identified. Notably, the handbook does not require the DA to inspect any aspect of the school's ethos or compliance with a Catholic vision of education. According to *SGN* (IEC 2010), DAs visit the schools, support school principals, and provide in-service and resources for teachers and chaplains (IEC 2010, p.146). At second level, they work with the religious educators and coordinators of chaplaincy services to ensure that 'the particular needs of Catholic pupils in the school with regard to Religious Education and faith support' are addressed (IEC 2010, p.156).

The survey has identified significant deficiencies in the way that DAs are currently functioning. Over half of primary school teachers (54%) received one visit per year prior to COVID-19 restrictions. At secondary level, the figure was 50 per cent. In some cases, the DA only spoke with the principal or another staff member, or in other cases only visited the RE teacher in the secondary school. There is no indication of the reporting mechanisms in place following the visit of the DA, whether a report is submitted to the principal, the BoM or the bishop.



Sexton and McCormack (2021) have identified very clearly the deficiencies in the current system of oversight by the DAs. Where there is no inspection, one can expect serious drift from mission. If there is to be accountability, there has to be assessment and evaluation against a set of clear benchmarks and those responsible at the various levels clearly identifiable. As has been noted earlier and in all of the individual reports, such benchmarks are available in the documents provided by the Vatican and especially in *SGN* (IEC 2010). Similarly, those responsible for oversight of the various aspects of the upholding of the Catholic ethos are identified in the management handbooks for both primary and secondary sectors. A comprehensive instrument for such inspection is provided by the Catholic Schools Inspectorate of the Conference of Bishops of England and Wales, *The National Framework for the Inspection of Catholic Schools, Colleges and Academies: Handbook – Inspection*, (2023). This could provide a helpful template for adaptation in the Irish context.

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Conclusion

The surveys indicate that Catholic schools are performing well as educational institutions and that generally management and staff are happy to continue with their current arrangements. Overall, there is satisfaction with the management and leadership of the schools.

When one views how the schools are managed and led in terms of their Catholic ethos and as significant partners in the mission of the Church, a different picture begins to emerge. A statement of what a Catholic school should be is poorly articulated by patrons and trusts for those in leadership and management roles below them. Scant training or formation is made available to BoMs, principals, deputy principals or school staff to ensure that they are well informed about a Catholic vision of education. There is very little investment in this work. There are low levels of awareness among all levels of governance and leadership of directives or policy documents from Rome or the IEC.

BoMs give very little attention to how the ethos of their schools is being upheld. They are overly reliant on the role and good faith of the principal to attend to this. Given the discrepancy between the principals' attitudes and perceptions and those of the classroom teachers regarding how ethos and faith formation are implemented, there is an obvious breakdown in leadership on this issue. Since it is not legally possible to enquire about the faith stance of an applicant for a post in a school, it is very difficult for BoMs to ensure that those in leadership positions are capable of directing the school according to a Catholic vision of education and schooling.

There is also an over-reliance on the Religious Education teachers in secondary schools to ensure that a religious environment is created in the schools, such as creating sacred spaces, organising liturgies and prayer services, and generally providing faith formation for the students and staff. Systems of accountability are lacking in several areas. BoMs do not consistently report to their patrons or trustees on how the ethos of the school is being upheld. Ethos matters seldom appear on the agenda of BoM meetings and they are not sufficiently vigilant in ensuring that the statutory time

is given to RE on the timetable. Nor are they attentive to the quality or standard of the programmes being taught. Diocesan advisors are not as proactive as might be expected in visiting schools, in supporting Religious Education teachers, or in providing feedback to the various stakeholders about the state of Religious Education and faith formation in the schools.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of the surveys it is recommended that:

1. Greater clarity be provided to all stakeholders about the various levels of responsibility for the safeguarding and promotion of the Catholic ethos of schools.
2. Patrons and trustees invest in significant training for BoMs so that all members are familiar with a comprehensive vision of the nature and purpose of Catholic education and schooling.
3. Patrons and trustees ensure that every school has a mission statement that has been formulated in partnership with all the stakeholders.
4. Patrons and trustees take a more proactive role in the recruitment of members of BoMs, not leaving the responsibility with the school principal.
5. Patrons and trustees take measures to be better informed as to the actual day-to-day realities in their schools.
6. Ethos be a priority item on the agenda of each BoM meeting.
7. Principals and deputy principals be required to have a qualification in faith-based school leadership.
8. All new members of staff receive substantial orientation on the school's ethos on commencement of employment in a school.
9. Systems of accountability be put in place to ensure compliance with the school's ethos.
10. Regular in-service be provided for all staff relating to ethos and founding vision.
11. Opportunities for faith development be offered regularly for all staff members.
12. Serious attention be given to the quality of the curriculum for Religious Education and its implementation.
13. The role of diocesan advisors be reassessed with a view to their being more proactive in ensuring that the Catholic ethos of schools is being upheld, that Religious Education and the statutory allocation of time is provided, and that faith formation is provided for all.
14. Communications systems regarding ethos be strengthened within schools, between principals and BoMs, and between BoMs and patrons and trustees.
15. Patrons and trustees support the development of research work on Catholic education and disseminate the resulting data and information to all stakeholders.
16. Patrons of primary schools make greater efforts to divest a significant proportion of their schools and ensure a better compliance with a Catholic ethos of those that remain.
17. Proper systems of accountability with respect to the implementation and development of ethos in schools be put in place and proper oversight exercised by each responsible level.

18. Systems of accountability for the maintenance of ethos be benchmarked against the vision of Catholic education set out in official Church documents and the documents on education published by the IEC.
19. The IEC be more proactive in engaging in consultations with all stakeholders in Catholic education when preparing guidelines and directives for schools.
20. Effective systems be put in place to advocate for Catholic education with government, the public, parents, teachers' unions, and the media.



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