

**RESPONSE OF THE STATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
IN IRELAND TO THE DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION CONSULTATION ON  
RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION**

**NOVEMBER 2023**

**Background**

1. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has over 200,000 members belonging to 530 congregations across 19 Presbyteries, throughout Ireland, north and south. The Council for Public Affairs is authorised by the General Assembly of PCI to speak on its behalf on matters of public policy, with the Council's State Education Committee (SEC) carrying specific responsibility for education matters in Northern Ireland. PCI is also represented on the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) with colleagues from the Boards of Education of the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland.
2. Throughout the denomination many hundreds of PCI members work across a wide variety of roles within education including principals, teachers, classroom assistants and support staff. In addition, hundreds of others serve as transferor governors on boards of governors within the controlled sector, both at primary and post-primary levels.
3. It is deeply regrettable that the Secretary of State has introduced legislation imposing aspects of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) on the post-primary curriculum in Northern Ireland, without any consultation or prior warning. His actions are based on the flawed CEDAW report (United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) which claimed that RSE is 'underdeveloped or non-existent' in post-primary schools across Northern Ireland. Such judgements were, and are, unfair and unfounded, and do not correspond to the reality of existing legislative or curricular requirements. Nor indeed do they reflect the experience of many schools which have an RSE policy implemented in consultation with parents and governors, and RSE provision in place.
4. PCI recognises that the delivery of RSE within schools, including how and what is taught, will cover sensitive and personal issues. At the outset PCI would wish to commend school leaders and governors who have sought to develop RSE policies for schools in line with guidance from DE; and the teachers who currently provide RSE to children and young people in their care, in a way which is appropriate for their age and stage.

5. PCI would also wish to recognise the very difficult situations faced by many schools in Northern Ireland regarding funding and capacity within schools to deliver on ever increasing demands.
6. The primary objective and outcome of this consultation, and other deliberations on RSE, must be that students in schools receive excellent RSE, which allows them to explore their own moral frameworks and sets of values, and which equips them to have healthy, respectful relationships in all aspects of their life.

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**Section A: Consultation on Department of Education’s guidance on the change to legislation – curricular content at Key Stages 3 and 4**

**Question 1. The content of teaching and learning resources for Learning for Life and Work developed by CCEA should be factual and contain age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, and these resources should not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception.**

**NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE**

**Additional comments:**

7. Every approach to RSE is shaped by a particular worldview. Embedded in every approach, and every resource, are explicit and implicit judgements about the meaning and purpose of relationships and sexuality. It is naïve to suggest that any topic under the auspices of RSE can be presented in a way which does not involve moral or ethical considerations as there is no ‘neutral’ worldview or understanding of human identity and relationship.
8. It follows then that in developing resources CCEA will be making value judgments on what facts and what science is presented, and what is understood by ‘age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate’. These resources should therefore be open to scrutiny, and should ensure that they acknowledge differences in worldview positions e.g. the Christian belief in the sanctity of life from conception.
9. It is encouraging to see within the Consultation, the Department notes that the changes do not ‘prevent teachers and pupils being able to continue to discuss and comment on the moral and ethical issues which may arise in relation to the content of teaching and learning resources developed by CCEA.’ The teaching and learning resources developed by CCEA should therefore present moral and ethical issues that arise when it comes to sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.

10. The resources developed by CCEA around prevention of early pregnancy should continue to promote the delaying of first sex. The resources should not presume that young people are or will be sexually active and should affirm that saying no to sexual activity is a possible and positive choice. This is in line with current government policies around sexual health and health promotion. In the resources CCEA should also present the reason or reasons why someone would wait until they are married before engaging in a sexual relationship.
11. The General Assembly of PCI has consistently noted and affirmed the legal right of Boards of Governors in controlled schools to adopt a non-denominational Christian ethos as a valuable framework for nurturing the holistic wellbeing of children and young people, educationally, emotionally, morally and spiritually, and a framework for shaping the teaching and learning in RSE. Whilst the high-quality teaching across all our schools is deeply appreciated, it is a fallacy to suggest that any aspect of education, including on these most sensitive of topics, can be presented in a morally-neutral or value-free environment. Schools with a Christian ethos should therefore have the freedom to teach RSE in line with their ethos.
12. In an increasingly pluralistic context, Relationships and Sexuality Education should, of course, be taught in a sensitive and inclusive manner, where teaching is reinforced and supported by policies and processes that schools have in place around safeguarding, bullying and pastoral care. Young people should have the opportunity to explore their own personal morals, values and beliefs including the moral and ethical considerations around sensitive issues like abortion and contraception. This is reflected in the following resolution adopted by PCI at its General Assembly in June 2023:  
  
*“That the General Assembly, deeply regret and express their grave concern at the Secretary of State’s patronising imposition of a series of measures (based on the findings of the flawed 2018 CEDAW Report) most recently in the area of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in post-primary schools, with little or no consideration of the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland; and call on the Department of Education as it develops guidance on the teaching of RSE in post-primary schools to ensure that such teaching can be supported and shaped by a strong, clear and coherent moral framework, as set out in a school’s ethos and implemented across the school community.”*
13. PCI welcomes the acknowledgement within the Department’s consultation booklet that the professionalism of teachers should be trusted in designing a flexible curriculum that is tailored and responsive to the needs of the children and young people whom they already know.
14. The consultation booklet notes that issues relating to RSE may also be taught as part of other subjects including Religious Education, Biology, History, Drama and English. However, not every student will choose to carry on these subjects past Key Stage 3 and

so it cannot therefore be assumed that every student will have different opportunities to explore these matters in other parts of the curriculum delivery.

15. PCI is aware that some of the public discourse around the Department's consultation has included consideration of whether an 'opt-out' should be made available to teachers who do not wish to engage with the material on prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion services. Recognising that teachers know their students best we would strongly encourage the Department to find a way to meet the Secretary of State's demands which resources and equips teachers adequately, and which allows them to discuss general health provision, but does not put them in the position of being forced to direct a pupil to abortion services.

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**Section B: Consultation on Department of Education's Guidance to support the change to legislation – parental opt-out from lesson(s) on sexual and reproductive health and rights covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.**

**Question 2. Parents/carers should be informed about the specific nature and content of the age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion.**

**AGREE**

**Additional comments:**

16. Teaching on RSE should not be the sole responsibility of teachers and schools. RSE begins in the home and is the primary responsibility of the parents/carers, who also have the right to have their children educated in accordance with their wishes.
17. It is vitally important that parents know who is delivering the teaching – whether that be teaching staff or external providers, and schools should inform parents when external providers are delivering sessions to their children. To this end external providers should be obliged to inform a school of the topics that will be covered in the content of their lesson, including the learning outcomes, and this information must be passed on to parents.
18. Parents should be provided with relevant information about external organisations coming into schools to deliver RSE, so that they are able, if they so wish, to find out more details about the ethos and values of the organisation, and what material will be covered in the class.

19. Parents should be assured that a teacher will always be present when an external provider is delivering content to ensure that what is delivered is in line with what was agreed and corresponds with the aims, values, ethos, moral and ethical framework of the school.
20. It is important to recognise that external providers may cover prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion as part of a wider programme of delivery. This could create challenges for schools in managing delivery if the right of withdrawal only applies to a particular part of the programme.

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Question 3. **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** includes at Articles 1-3 and 12 the rights of the child to **‘express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously’** and at Article 5 **‘the rights and responsibilities of parents and carers to provide guidance and direction to their child as they grow up so that they fully enjoy their rights. This must be done in a way that recognises the child’s increasing capacity to make their own choices.’** The Department’s guidance, when developed, should consider in such instances how schools balance the rights of both children and parents/carers in implementing the regulations.

#### **NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE**

##### **Additional Comments:**

21. Young people have a right to education and have the right to express their views on all matters pertaining to their education. However, it remains the responsibility of the political, policy and school leaders to shape the content of what is taught. This should be done in consultation with school management authorities and parents/carers.
22. It is recognised that there are some aspects of RSE which are important for children and young people to receive in order that they might engage in healthy, respectful relationships of all types, not only with their peers but also with adults and those who are younger than them. For example, it is important that students understand matters like ‘consent’, in order to keep themselves safe, and also to ensure that they are treating others well.
23. Earlier in this response we recognised that the teaching of RSE begins in the home, whether or not parents and carers are intentional about doing so. Behaviours, attitudes and words will be modelled by the adults in the home, with the potential for replication by the children who live with them. It is therefore essential that parents and carers are equipped to have healthy conversations about these issues with children and young people in the home.

24. The balancing of the rights of children/young people with the rights of parents/carers should never lead to a situation where the adults are not informed about what is being taught.

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Question 4. Pupils and parents/carers should have access to an overview of their school's RSE policy and planned RSE programme.

**AGREE**

**Additional comments:**

25. In line with current guidance, every school should have in place its own policy on how it will address the delivery of RSE. The policy should be developed under the leadership of governors, in collaboration with parents or carers and pupils, as well as teachers and other educational and health professionals. Among other things, this will set out the aims and objectives of RSE and how teaching will support the school's ethos and reflect the moral and religious principles held by parents/carers and school management authorities. As is current practice a school's RSE policy should be made publicly available on the school's website. The planned RSE programme should also be made available to pupils and parents/carers.



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