



**SUBMISSION FROM THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND
COUNCIL FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS
TO THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF EDUCATION**

MARCH 2022

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 the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to speak on behalf of PCI on matters of public policy, with the Council's State Education Committee carrying specific responsibility for education matters in Northern 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. PCI is also represented on the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) with colleagues from the Boards of Education of the Church of Ireland the Methodist Church in Ireland. TRC works closely with the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC), and engages regularly with the Education Authority, Department for Education, and other relevant education bodies on the provision of quality education for children and young people across Northern Ireland.
4. PCI recognises the significant work being undertaken by the Independent Review Panel which has been tasked with identifying barriers within the education system which inhibit positive outcomes for children and young people as well as explaining structural issues which lead to inefficiencies or ineffectiveness; and to provide a set of focused and strategic recommendations on how the Department and the Executive might improve outcomes for pupils, support to schools and the effectiveness of education administration.
5. There is so much to commend within our current education system: teaching is valued and respected in our community, leading to a cadre of wonderful, talented, successful, high-achieving young people who aspire to join the profession. This leads to a professional approach to teaching which goes the extra mile and sees great successes for children and young people.

Our system is also grounded in a solid values-base, with each of the main sectors having their foundations firmly in Christian ideals and beliefs.

6. On the other hand, whilst we have results at the top end which are the envy of many countries, our tail of underachievement is one of the worst in Europe. We have parents and pupils who engage fully in a selective system, whilst others don't value education because they feel less valued. We have more children having to wait longer for less support for their particular needs, and we have mental health issues which need addressed in a system not adequately equipped to do this. If provided with a blank page not many would come up with the education ecosystem that exists locally today. Or in the words of the old adage – if you're going there, you wouldn't start from here.
7. The Independent Review provides a significant opportunity for all those interested in, and involved with, education in Northern Ireland to reflect on their participation and roles. On 29th January 2022 the Presbyterian Church in Ireland hosted a morning called 'Let's Talk Education' to facilitate discussion within the denomination on these important matters. This included contributions from the Minister for Education, Michelle McIlveen MLA; Dr Irvin Scott (via video-link), Founder of the Harvard Institute for Leadership in Faith and Education; a panel discussion with Rev Robert Herron, PCI representative on the Education Authority, Dr Barbara McDade, Director of Student Recruitment and Community Engagement at Stranmillis University College, Leanne Dunlop, Field Ministries' Director at Scripture Union Northern Ireland and Mark Beattie, Principal of The Diamond Primary School. These contributions can be viewed at [PCI Talks Education Conference \(vimeo.com\)](#).
8. Let's Talk Education also provided an opportunity for PCI representatives involved in education to discuss some of the areas under consideration by the Independent Review. This submission to the Review Panel, while not responding to all the matters under consideration by the Review team, reflects some of the discussions which took place on the day.

History

9. PCI's engagement with education is part of its history and heritage across the island of Ireland for more than a hundred years. It is widely recognised that the vast majority of schools were originally established by local churches from the four larger denominations in pursuit of social justice and better quality of outcomes for boys and girls. As a consequent part of the significant changes which arose following the partition of Ireland and creation of Northern Ireland in 1921, the Protestant denominations transferred their schools to the control of the new Northern Ireland state on the understanding and acknowledgement that church representatives would continue to have a role with regard to school governance, the teaching of religious education, and the outworking of collective worship.
10. This arrangement and intersection between school and church continues across almost all schools within the NI system ensuring a holistic approach to the education of children and young people, recognising their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs.

Ethos

11. There is much discussion about the nature and value of “ethos” within the school system. Whilst the term ‘ethos’ is often confused with other terms such as climate, culture, atmosphere, spirit, etc., in essence, it can be defined as who we are, what we do, why we do it that way, where we want to go and how we intend to get there. Within the Controlled sector, in which PCI has particular interest, this has been articulated by the CSSC as schools which “are open to all faiths and none, in providing high quality education for children and young people to enable them to learn, develop and grow together, within the ethos of non-denominational Christian values and principles”. PCI commends the recent work undertaken by the CSSC in the development of its ethos self-evaluation tool, which has equipped controlled schools to more intentionally consider their ethos and how that permeates throughout school life.
12. Dr Olwyn Mark, Lecturer in Practical Theology at Union Theological College provided the following reflection with regard to the role and place of Christian ethos within schools as part of the Let’s Talk Education morning held at the end of January:

For education to flourish, it requires clear goals and a purpose, and it is impossible to exclude beliefs and values from the overall vision of a school. In the debates surrounding the role of the Church or religion in education, we should be clear that there is no morally neutral education. As Professor Trevor Cooling points out in [Doing God in Education](#), teaching is concerned with the meaning and significance of what we learn, the values that we hold to be important and the kind of people that we should be. It is based on an understanding of the world and our role and purpose in it. A vision for education will ultimately be grounded in the ethos of a school.

In considering the impact of a Christian ethos in a school, the analogy¹ of a dinner party is a useful one, in particular, reflecting on three components that are essential for a successful dinner party – the ambience, the menu, and the presentation.

The ambience is the felt experience of being part of the school – the welcome and hospitality that is received, the interactions between pupils and staff, the communal experiences and activities in the life of the school, including collective worship. It is essentially how the Christian vision and values are embodied and experienced in the day-to-day running of the school. Many aspects of this experience will be found in other schools, and shared values will be identified, but a Christian ethos will embed these values in the Christian story.

¹ A more detailed discussion of this analogy and an exploration of Christian distinctiveness in education can be found in Trevor and Margaret Cooling’s short book ‘Distinctly Christian Learning?’ (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2013) and Trevor Cooling’s report: [‘Doing God in Education’](#) (Theos: 2010).

The menu is the content of what is taught. A distinctly Christian education will not just give attention to what is taught in RE, or shared in a school assembly, but how the curriculum educates the whole person for all of life. In affirming the inestimable value and worth of every pupil, and the unique gifts and qualities that they bring to the world, holistic learning enables each one to gain knowledge and develop and flourish in their skills and abilities through a rich and varied curriculum. This will include giving particular attention to moral and spiritual formation.

The third component – the presentation – will give attention to the learning experience or pedagogy. A holistic vision for education will give attention to how learning and practices in the classroom contribute to the formation of character and a vision of a life well lived. This will be embedded in a particular vision of what it is to be human. Can a history lesson, for example, create the opportunity for pupils to explore how they can be agents of change in the world? Can a maths class be more than just mastering technical skills, but turned into a lesson on generosity? Can a science class inspire awe, wonder and curiosity about the natural world and the Creator? Can a French lesson be more about honouring our neighbour than finding our way to the train station? As James K. A. Smith notes in his book, [You Are What You Love](#):

‘A Christian education can never be merely a mastery of a field of knowledge or technical skills; learning is embedded in a wider vision of who I am called to be and what God is calling the world to be’.

13. We offer Dr Mark’s reflection to the Review Panel to aid its deliberations recognising that it also provides much food for thought for us in PCI. We commend Dr Mark’s early comment that there is “no morally neutral education” and place on record that non-denominational Christian values and principles continue to have a significant role in shaping and grounding the education system in Northern Ireland. Additionally as the Panel considers the role of education in supporting the mental health and well-being of our children and young people it is important that this recognises spiritual well-being.
14. The [appendix](#) to this submission provides two local stories – one from Ballymena and one from Bangor – as to how this ethos works out in practice.

A “single education system” for Northern Ireland

15. PCI notes that within the Review Panel’s terms of reference there is a specific focus in defining what a “single education system” means and would entail in practical terms, assessing the costs and benefits of such an approach. In a recent article for PCI’s denominational publication, [the Presbyterian Herald](#), Dr Andy Brown, Convener of the State Education Committee, made the following observation:

“...we have a system which divides and duplicates. Education in N Ireland receives more money per pupil than Scotland or Wales, but less of it goes into the classroom than the other regions. We have a plethora of employers, administrative organisations, trade unions, bodies and agencies, many of which have similar functions.”

16. It would be foolish and disingenuous to not recognise the strain on resources precipitated by the current arrangements. PCI notes that part of the rationale for creating the Education Authority was to reduce the financial burden of administrative support to schools. However, without significant investment supporting such structural change it will take much longer to realise those benefits with many areas, like school transport, still waiting to be streamlined.
17. It is important to acknowledge that there are some respects in which a single education system already exists, for example, with regard to the common curriculum and the common funding formula. However, across these islands, from Ireland to Scotland, England and Wales, there is no one single education delivery mechanism but rather a multiplicity of arrangements.
18. Significantly the current arrangements in Northern Ireland facilitate and provide for parental choice. Should that choice be removed by the creation of a “single education system” which did not allow parents to choose the ethos in which they wish their children to be educated, there is a risk that new informal sectors might be formed in response.
19. One of the benefits of our very “dispersed” system of education at the moment is that it provides for many different people from a variety of walks of life to be engaged in and support local schools. Another potential drawback of a “single education system” which might replace the current sectoral offering would be to remove such opportunities.
20. Children and young people should be central to the Panel’s considerations in this regard, whatever response it arrives at within this remit. PCI provides, for the Panel’s consideration and deliberations, some comments which arose during the discussion time at ‘Let’s Talk Education’ on this issue:
 - a. A “single education system” is one in which all schools:
 - i. equally meet the needs of all abilities and aptitudes of students
 - ii. provide equal opportunities for all irrespective of social class or background
 - iii. are recognised as being on a par
 - iv. have a common funding system
 - v. have parity of access to curriculum and resources
 - vi. have buildings and facilities which are fit for purpose
21. PCI would also encourage the Review Panel to consider how the success of Shared Education might serve as a model for better and more intentional collaboration between schools with regard to shared lessons and extra-curricular activities. Given the exponential use of technology and remote learning as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic how might such innovations be used to facilitate shared learning between schools which are not geographically close, providing greater curricular access?

Transition and transfer of children from primary school to post-primary school

22. The transition and transfer of children from primary school to post-primary school continues to be a perennial bone of contention within education discussions. As you can imagine in a denomination like PCI there are a depth and breadth of views, and there is a need for further internal debate and discussion on this matter.
23. Again, we offer some of the comments and observations that arose from discussions as Let's Talk Education for the Panel's consideration:
- a. The importance of a child-centred approach
 - b. The current system is blunt, taking into account only a limited number of predictors of future achievement, and tends to distort delivery of the curriculum from years 5 – 7 in primary schools
 - c. Selection at 11 disadvantages boys in particular
 - d. Understanding what value society places on education, and in particular academic achievement, with the suggestion that an academic route is more highly valued than a technical/skills-based route
 - e. The widespread use of private tuition within the current system providing those who can afford such support an advantage over those that cannot – this is a matter of social justice
 - f. The need for choice and flexibility
 - g. On a practical level it is observed that, in some areas, grammar schools have become increasingly comprehensive in their intake and where previously they may have selected around 20-25% of the cohort, now it is more like 35-40%. This reflects an attitude whereby a grammar school is considered to be the best option for a child to reach their potential, and so grammar schools are more able to fill their places. However, this also results in non-selective schools, and those who attend them, feeling increasingly like 'the poor relation'
 - h. There is a need to provide a curriculum at the appropriate pace and cater for different learning styles

Other areas

24. PCI recognises that there are other significant areas which this submission does not cover, but which are important to members of the denomination, including, but not limited to:
- provision for special educational needs;
 - the role of education inspection and school improvement;
 - the experiences of children and young people in education other than in school settings;
 - an over-reliance on data as a measurement of 'success';
 - a system driven by testing, with little time for teacher creativity;
 - mental health and wellbeing of pupils and staff;
 - changing situation of newcomer families to Northern Ireland;
 - the potential for education to become politicised.

Concluding comments

25. PCI recommends that the Review Panel takes the following into account during its deliberations:
- a. That the spiritual health and wellbeing of children and young people is just as vital as their physical and mental health and wellbeing, and there should be room for all within the parameters of a holistic education system.
 - b. That there is no such thing as a 'morally neutral education'
26. There is a well-known saying, often associated with African cultures, that "it takes a village to raise a child". Never is this more true than in the context of educating our children and young people, enabling them to reach their full potential, and preparing them to be responsible and conscientious citizens. PCI remains ready to play its part in supporting schools, educators and pupils for years to come, just as it has until now.



Rev Daniel Kane
(Convener of the
Council for Public Affairs)



Rev Trevor D Gribben
(Clerk of the General Assembly)

APPENDIX

“How can we help?” - Serving the Clondeboye Primary School Community

Rev Mark Johnston, St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Bangor

“How can we help?” Four words that have enabled the building of a strong relationship between the St Andrew’s Church family in Bangor, and Clondeboye Primary School, down through the years. The church building and school premises are located right beside each other, which has helped strengthen the links between the church and school, but the relationship goes much deeper than this, as we seek to be a gentle and loving presence for Jesus across the school community.

For decades now members of St Andrew’s have faithfully served as Governors in the school, and today the Clerk of Session and Minister are Chair and Vice Chair of the Board of Governors, bringing specific input with finance, staffing and pastoral support. An every member ministry is encouraged across St Andrew’s, with Christian parents equipped to be a rich aroma for Jesus at the school gate, and as they serve as part of the Parent Teachers’ Association. A team of faithful ladies from the church family called ‘Early Birds’ serve hot chocolate, juice and food to children and their parents every Tuesday morning from 8am to 9am, on their way to school. This has become a key part of children’s weekly schedules, and it provides a wonderful opportunity to build trusted relationships over a cuppa with parents and carers too.

In partnership with Scripture Union, we have a ‘Back to School with God’ Sunday Worship gathering at the start of September each year, where we regularly invite the Principal to chat about the joys and challenges of school life, and throughout the year we share updates at worship gatherings, as we encourage one another to pray for the school community. We help with Assemblies, as well as teaching classes, using Scripture Union’s ‘Amazing Jesus’ lessons for P4 and P5, and the ‘It’s your move’ resource for P7 pupils as they prepare to transition to Year 8. Scripture Union and Prayer Spaces in Schools Ireland have also helped us to host an annual Prayer Space for all the children and staff, over the last three years, as part of the RE curriculum - an interactive and creative space in the church building where pupils have the opportunity to explore prayer.

Following the first Prayer Space three years ago, learnings were shared with the Board of Governors, which encouraged the development of a Mindfulness Space in the school building, and prompted the beginning of a town wide initiative called ‘Bangor Cares’ that focussed on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

We deliver scones and buns from the local bakery into the staff room every other month, with a letter of encouragement, thanking the team for all they’re doing in the lives of the children and their families. Volunteers from the church make Christmas gifts every year for all the children and staff in the school, with a little message of hope to each one. Last year our Knit n Natter group in the church knitted 600 stockings and filled them with goodies for all the children. We work closely with the Principal, and Counsellors, to provide additional support to vulnerable families, in the form of emergency food parcels, and other practical help when needed. When we’ve been made aware of the financial burdens that some families were facing in recent years, and as this need was presented to the church family, some members of St Andrew’s were prompted to set up a Pre-Loved School Uniform stall, where second-hand school uniforms are provided by parents in the school and made available throughout the year in the basement of the church building for families. Some of our members also teach English to the parents of some of the international children who are part of Clondeboye Primary School. As the trusted relationship between the school and church family has built up over time, this has opened a door for us to be able to promote our Youth Ministries and Holiday Bible Club, and further

opportunities have subsequently emerged for us to share the love of Jesus with children and their families.

Going forward, we continue to greatly value the relationship the Lord has enabled us to have with the school. We do not take it for granted! As we've recently redeveloped our church building and added a new Welcome Centre, we're encouraging the school to consider making use of the church complex as part of their 'Clandeboyne Campus.' This has already begun to happen, with team building sessions for staff, and consultation meetings between staff and parents taking place in the Welcome Centre. Our church halls are freely used for after-school activities, so as to enable greater opportunities for development in the lives of the children. The Lord continues to provide ways for us to help staff, pupils and their families in many creative ways. It's a slow and steady work, as we continue to be a gentle presence in the school community, in ways that bring glory and honour to Jesus. And it often starts with us asking the question, "How can we help?"

Serving the Ballykeel Primary School community

Rev Martin McNeely, Ballykeel Presbyterian Church

Ballykeel Presbyterian has a very strong relationship with Ballykeel Primary School, Ballymena. This is expressed in two ways: formally and informally.

Formally, Ballykeel Presbyterian has two positions on the Board of Governors of the School. I (as minister) serve along with a member of our Church, who is also a community worker. This gives us regular input into the shape of school policy making and how it helps local children. Pre-Covid we were regularly invited by the Principal to share in Assemblies and SU. In turn, we invite the School community over to the Church for the annual School Carol service. Hopefully we will be allowed to resume these times of sharing soon. Given the proximity of the manse, I also serve as key-holder for any 'emergencies' out of hours. Because the Church and the community are so close physically and socially, I have also been invited in to minister to the School community during times of trauma - for example the bereavement of a child or in times of tension in the estate. I regularly work in partnership with the School as we liaise with wider statutory bodies and stake holders such as the community groups or local politicians. Myself and the School principal are often in communication about issues of pastoral concern and ways in which we can steer resources towards families in need.

Informally, Ballykeel Church has multiple links with the school, not least the hundreds of boys and girls down through the years who have spent time in both premises. Although we have children attend different schools in Ballymena, the majority of children (along with parents) have been to Ballykeel Primary. A good number of our members have worked in Ballykeel School as cleaners, caterers or classroom assistants. Practically, our buildings have been used as an 'overflow' for school musical practices and our car park reduces traffic congestion for the school children as they travel to Ballykeel.

The ethos of both School and Church is very much focused on caring for the parish area in which we serve. The history of both institutions is tightly interwoven. We have worked closely together in our estate context for the good of Ballykeel for nearly five decades. We are so thankful for the partnership we share and trust it will continue for many years to come.