



PCI Talks Education

A vision for the future in Northern Ireland

Saturday 29th January 2022

9.30am – 1pm

Assembly Buildings, Fisherwick Place,

Belfast, BT1 6DW

Attendee booklet

Dear attendee,

On behalf the Presbyterian Church in Ireland State Education Committee I would like to thank you for registering to attend *PCI Talks Education: A vision for the future in Northern Ireland* on Saturday 29th January.

We recognise that this is a very pressured time for everyone working in the education system here, not least because of the pressures caused by Covid-19, but also because these have only compounded existing challenges of budgets and resourcing, all of which impact on our ability to provide high quality education to all of our children and young people.

We are therefore especially grateful that you plan to take time out of your weekend to discuss important educational matters in light of the Independent Review of Education.

This short booklet provides some background information including a rationale for the role of the churches in education and some practical examples of where this is working well (and we know there are many others). A separate document includes statistical information which paints a picture of the education ecosystem here, and we are grateful to Mr Edgar Jardine for his assistance in compiling this. We recommend that you have a read through before you come on Saturday.

During the first part of our morning there will be opportunity to hear from those within the denomination who are involved in education at different levels, as well as Dr Irvin Scott, founder of the Harvard Institute for Leadership in Faith and Education. The second part of our time together will involve facilitated small group discussion. It is not the intention that each small group will necessarily come to a consensus, but that the views and experience shared will assist in informing PCI's engagement with the Independent Review Panel both in formal written submissions and presentations.

We look forward to seeing you next Saturday, and in the meantime if you have any questions or require more information please contact Karen at kjardine@presbyterianireland.org



Andy Brown, Convener, State Education Committee



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Programme

9am	Registration
9.30am	Welcome <i>Dr Andy Brown & Rt Rev Dr David Bruce</i>
9.35am	Opening Remarks <i>Miss Michelle McIlveen MLA, Minister of Education</i>
9.45am	Faith in Education <i>Dr Irvin Scott, Harvard Graduate School of Education and founder Leadership Institute for Faith and Education</i>
10.15am	Panel discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Rev Robert Herron, PCI Transferor Representative on the Education Authority❖ Dr Barbara McDade, Director of Student Recruitment and Student Engagement, Stranmillis University College❖ Mr Mark Beattie, Principal, The Diamond Primary School❖ Miss Leanne Dunlop, Field Ministries' Director, Scripture Union Northern Ireland
11.15am	Comfort break & move to breakout rooms
11.30am	Small group discussion <i>Please refer to your name badge which will indicate the group to which you have been allocated for the discussion time</i>
12.45pm	Final remarks <i>Dr Andy Brown & Rt Rev Dr David Bruce</i>
1pm	Close

Could do better?

Dr Andy Brown, Convener, State Education Committee

As we begin 2022 we are reminded again of the delicacy of many of the 'certainties' which we have taken for granted in our schools - face-to-face classes, social interaction, extra-curricular activities.

Despite all that is happening around us, or perhaps because of it, there has never been a more important time to reflect on the past and future, and on our own 'certainties' as they relate to our work in education.

In March 2021, when the former Education Minister, Peter Weir, announced an Independent Review of Education, there was a range of reactions within the tight-knit educational community. Given its remit to consider the educational journey of our pupils, how schools are supported and governed, and how the education system is designed and administered, anyone and everyone with an interest and involvement in schooling began the process of reflecting on how things are done and considering how to do them better.

The final part of the Review's remit will consider a vision for an education system fit for the 21st century, and a vision really should be the starting point for any introspection, as it colours the entire context for reflection. Yet perhaps we haven't always been good at this in education; perhaps much of what is done comes from a desire to maintain a status quo, rather than to begin from the position of what is best for children, young people and society.

If we were to start again with a blank sheet to design the most effective education system, would we really end up with what we have now?

There is so much to commend our 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.

Yet, 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. 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.

In the midst of this is the work we do and the role we play. For me, the involvement of the churches in education is non-negotiable. As those who transferred our schools into the control of the state a century ago, the *quid pro quo* of continuing involvement is ours by right, but nonetheless we are truly blessed to be able to play an active and influential role. As a denomination, we need to promote the positives of our work and to remind of the very many ways in which we have helped to improve educational opportunities for young people and the strategic direction of schools.

But we also need to consider alternatives. We need to consider the equity and social justice of our system and, if we see failings, to be the first to speak up; if the churches can't do this, then who can? We need to think about our vision for the future of education and what involvement should look like in a changing context.

Over the summer I was privileged to participate in a course with the Leadership Institute for Faith in Education at Harvard University. My thinking was challenged about the different ways in which faith organisations can support education at local, district or regional level, whether that is meeting particular needs or trying to change systems. There is so much that the church can do to support education, especially when we have clarity of vision.

As we reflect on the past, consider the future and question the certainties, one thing is sure: God is blessing our work. What we do, in His service, makes a difference to schools and colleges, and ultimately to the lives of those with whom we come into contact. Whilst we should reflect, consider and question, we do so in the knowledge that his plans will prevail. May God bless you all this academic year.

(Article written for the [Presbyterian Herald, Autumn 2021](#))

A Distinctly Christian Education?

Dr Olwyn Mark, Lecturer in Practical Theology, Union Theological College

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.

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.

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 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’.

Do we have a vision of the gospel and God at work in His world that is big enough to inspire a Christian contribution to education in our pluralistic culture? If we do, then we have a wonderful opportunity to clarify this as we positively affirm that a school with a Christian ethos has something distinct to offer, contributing to the flourishing of all of our communities.

Outworking Christian ethos in the primary context

“How can we help?” - Serving the Clandeboye 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 Clandeboye 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 Clandeboye 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 'Clandeboye 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.

Outworking Christian ethos in the post-primary context

Alan Rowan, Transferor Governor & former Vice-Principal

As a happily retired Vice-Principal of a controlled post primary school, and a transferor governor of both a controlled primary and post primary school, I believe it is vital that a transferor governor's influence provides (maybe instils) a strong Christian Ethos. Accordingly, core spiritual values support and inform teaching and learning, pastoral structures, behaviour and rewards, providing a strong identity with the local church and community that radiates Christ-like qualities.

The rate of change in social and cultural attitudes in the public square that affect school and society has been immense during recent years and there is often confusion for governors, school leaders, staff, parents, and pupils impacted by societal change that can challenge Christian ethos in schools. It is therefore vital that church representatives on schools' board of governors are prepared to challenge or debate anything that erodes, or attempts to derail, the Christian ethos in school. Transferor Governors or church representatives must not be perceived as the morality police; instead, they should be recognised as patient, grace-filled individuals who can be approached and trusted by all, from the principal to the parents, staff and pupils within a school.

Sometimes issues can range from family concerns about offensive language in literature to acting as a go-between when pupils or staff are at odds with ethical issues when advised by the Principal and Chair. When transferor governors and local clergy attend any school event or celebration they support whole-school Community and make a massive witness for Christ.

I remember on one occasion being visited by a local Presbyterian minister who asked if he could pray with the principal and myself after a young pupil died suddenly on the school premises. The visit was greatly appreciated and before the Minister left us he informed me that a Men's Prayer Group, who met in a nearby Presbyterian Church, prayed faithfully each week for the school. This visit gave me so much comfort and assurance when encountering the frantic nature of a typical school day.



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