



# CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

**DISTINCTIVE COMMUNITIES OF**

**FAITH, LOVE AND SERVICE**

**A Guide for the Framework for Self-Reflection**

**Down and Connor Catholic Schools' Support Service**

120 Cliftonville Road

Belfast BT14 6LA

T: 028 9049 1886

E: [dctrusteeservice@downandconnor.org](mailto:dctrusteeservice@downandconnor.org)

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## **Note for Governors, School Principals, Heads of Religion and RE Co-ordinators**

Over the past five years the Diocese of Down and Connor has encouraged its schools to actively engage with the diocesan Catholic Schools' Support Service (CSSS). In particular, the CSSS has assisted schools with their continuing development and fostering of the distinctive vision and ethos of Catholic education and how this is lived out in daily school life.

The *Framework for Self-Reflection* instrument is a welcome element of this process, and the CSSS is delighted with the positive response to this initiative in schools throughout the diocese. The CSSS is encouraged by the support and active engagement of school leaders and all members of the school communities. This will help our schools in their mission to be centres of Catholic formation, pastoral care, inclusivity and diversity, social justice and outreach to the vulnerable and marginalised, promotion of the common good and academic excellence.

Your CSSS link team member will have explained to you that the *Framework for Self-Reflection* will be revised and developed in line with our experience as partners in Catholic education through our meetings, ethos days and staff retreats. Throughout its engagement with schools, the CSSS has been listening very attentively to the wisdom, advice, suggestions, hopes and concerns of all with whom they have met, and is continually reflecting on the numerous wonderful examples of Catholic education which are taking place in all schools. This is indeed a truly 'Good News' story which should be shared throughout our entire family of Catholic schools, the diocese and wider Church and society in general.

We are pleased to share with you the revisions which have been made to the *Framework for Self-Reflection* in line with suggestions and requests from schools and developments within education and society over the past five years. These can be added to the school's copy of the *Framework for Self-Reflection*.

To aid school leaders and staff at your school as you continue to focus and reflect on your mission of Catholic education, the CSSS has produced this short guide or handbook. It broadly follows the structure and main sections of the original *Framework for Self-Reflection* folder with some additional explanatory notes and ideas.

## **The Framework for Self-Reflection**

The *Framework for Self-Reflection* is an instrument to help all those involved in Catholic schools to come to a better understanding of the gift of Catholic education. It is hoped that the framework will help develop a deeper understanding of how Catholic education is integrated throughout the school curriculum and school life. By extension then it helps schools to place education in the context of the modern world, so that our young people are able to experience God's love, become fully developed human persons in accordance with their God-given dignity, recognise God in everyone they meet and continue to live out and create the Kingdom of God as Christ taught his disciples to do. Engagement with the *Framework for Self-Reflection* should encourage all associated with Catholic schools – trustees, governors, school leaders, all members of staff, students and parents/guardians – as well as all others interested in the role which Catholic schools play in the formation of young people and in the promotion of the common good in society – to reflect on what Catholic education entails and how this is lived out in daily school life.

Catholic schools commonly experience that they are popular with both pupils and parents/guardians and, in many parts of the world Catholic schools are widely considered to be a remarkable educational success story. By a whole range of accepted universal educational and other criteria, Catholic schools can be seen as contributing greatly to the individual and the common good. Research from numerous studies throughout the world indicate that Catholic schools considerably 'out-perform' all other sectors in terms of academic results - often against a background of socio-economic deprivation and inferior resources. Catholic schools are also praised for their excellent pastoral care, promotion of tolerance and inclusivity and social outreach.

This is not the result of chance or accident. The positive outcomes of Catholic education spring from the gospel values, inspirational ethos and distinctive vision that underpin and energise Catholic schooling. Yet Catholic schools,

like all schools, stand in need of constant renewal if they are to serve their students and society to the best of their ability. It is important, therefore, that all of us involved in Catholic education take a step back and ask ourselves whether the education the children receive is actually in line with the vision and goal of Catholic education. This rests at the heart of the *Framework for Self-Reflection* in facilitating and encouraging schools to continuously and consciously reflect on the key elements and principles of Catholic education and consider how they are being lived out in the everyday life of the particular school.

The seven themes or areas we invite schools to reflect on are not 'tick-boxes' or 'paper exercises'. Catholic ethos is not something that is intangible or incapable of being perceived and evidenced. In fact, it must be the most real, evident and lived aspect of a Catholic school underpinning and animating daily school life. The Catholic ethos is the reason Catholic schools exist. No school is perfect nor any process of self-reflection complete. This *Framework for Self-Reflection* will help schools to recognise where their ethos is strong and where it can be developed and improved further.

The Catholic Schools' Support Service will be delighted to continue to be of service in helping schools in the ongoing process of self-reflection, and each school's designated team member can be contacted via email or telephone:

Joan Agnew  
Down and Connor Catholic Schools' Support Service  
120 Cliftonville Road  
Belfast BT14 6LA  
Telephone: 028 9049 1886  
Email: [dctrusteeservice@downandconnor.org](mailto:dctrusteeservice@downandconnor.org)

## The Worldwide Family of Catholic Schools

Catholic schools are not unique to Northern Ireland. We are part of a worldwide family of Catholic schools. Found in every continent throughout the world, Catholic schools are the single biggest education provider in the world today. There are currently more than 200,000 Catholic schools and



more than 1,000 Catholic universities and colleges throughout the world. Catholic education institutions can be found in eighty-eight countries world-wide including the USA and Canada, Europe, Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific countries, many countries throughout Asia and Africa and Ireland. Catholic schools exist and are celebrated in many countries including societies in which Catholics form a minority or have governments that are

hostile to the Catholic Church. From Nepal to Cuba, Sudan and Pakistan and many others besides, Catholic education is viewed and valued by many as being open and empowering and is sought after by parents, many of whom are non-Catholic. In entire regions in the Developing World, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the Catholic education sector comprises more than twenty-five percent of all education provision, and is particularly active in areas of extreme deprivation and need, and is found often in marginalised communities ignored by the authorities. Empowerment of the poor and gender equality are principles which underpin Catholic schools world-wide. *Catholic schools are open and welcoming to all – communities of faith, love and service.*

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## THE FRAMEWORK FOR SELF-REFLECTION

### MAIN AREAS

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The *Framework for Self-Reflection* document identifies seven principal areas for consideration in assessing and enhancing the distinctive ethos and mission of a Catholic school.

These are:

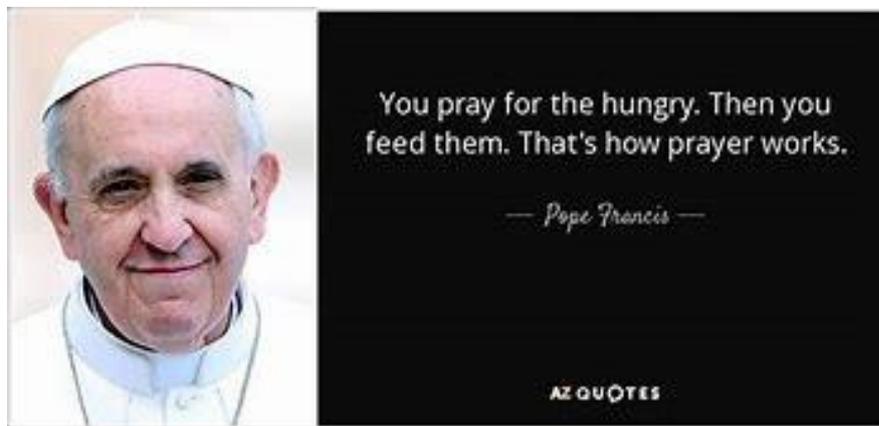
1. Mission
2. Religious Education
3. Catholic Leadership
4. Learning and Teaching
5. Inclusion and Diversity
6. Social Justice and Respect for the Environment
7. Partnership and Community Outreach

This section will explore what is meant by each principal area and how each is underpinned by a distinctive Catholic vision and gospel values. It will also offer suggestions to reflect upon when exploring the quality of provision in that particular area.

## MISSION

‘Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries’, but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples.’

*Pope Francis*



Catholic schools are unique and distinctive. They are an essential and integral part of the mission of the Church. In providing an education based on gospel values and a vision of humankind as created in the image and likeness of God, Catholic schools engage with the whole curriculum and make sacred the secular in a very real and meaningful way. Our schools must be authentic living communities that can challenge and enlighten.

Our schools must be centres of evangelisation and places where our young people encounter and recognise the living God in every aspect of their daily lives so that they will be encouraged to go into the world as living witnesses to the love and salvation of Christ. They are a panacea to the ills of secularism that reduces faith and ethics to the private and personal and to the shallowness and superficiality of relativism and subjectivity that disorients so many - and especially vulnerable young people (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 64).

Pope Francis encourages us to renew and re-energise our Catholic schools as he leaves us in no doubt about the unique and counter-cultural nature of what we are tasked to promote:

Education cannot be neutral. It is either positive or negative; either it enriches or it impoverishes; either it enables a person to grow or it lessens, even corrupts him. The mission of schools is to develop a sense of truth, of what is good and beautiful.

*Address with Italian school teachers, parents, educators, pupils and other workers*

## POINTS TO REFLECT ON

This is our mission - the creation and formation of disciples who would go into the world and transform it.

- In our school do we keep the mission of Catholic education at the forefront of our thinking and planning, or does the 'busyness of everyday school life' sometimes push our mission to the back of our thinking?
- How do we share the mission with all members of staff and other members of the school community?
- How is the mission expressed and promoted throughout the school?

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

*'Religious Education is the 'core of the core curriculum' in a Catholic school.'*

*Saint Pope John Paul II*



Religious Education is at the beating heart of a Catholic school. It is not a 'luxury' subject, an additional 'add on'. Rather it is a subject of necessity and increasing relevance to the student and to our society – all the more so in the world of moral confusion which our young people encounter today.

The study of Religious Education, accompanied at all times by a catechetical approach which focuses on giving the student opportunities to experience and share in a lived and living faith, will:

- enable pupils to deepen their religious and theological understanding and to communicate this effectively;
- present and articulate an authentic vision of the Church's moral and social teaching so that they can understand, critique and respond to contemporary culture and society; and
- raise students' awareness of the faith and traditions of other religious communities and other world-visions in order to respect and understand them.

Religious Education gives soul to the world and awakens in the student the mystery of what it is to be truly human and to discern the meaning of their existence. Without Religious Education, pupils would be deprived of an essential element of their formation and personal development which helps them attain that vital harmony between faith and life, and faith and culture and to deepen and enhance their encounter with God.

### POINTS TO REFLECT ON

Curriculum in Catholic schools is characterised by excellence, professionalism, innovation and support. Our students deserve the best and they get the best in terms of dedication and expertise of our teachers and support staff, attention to curricular developments and resourcing.

- Do we do likewise in relation to the delivery of Religious Education?
- Does our school prioritise and support the teaching of Religious Education in the same way that it prioritises and supports other subject areas?
- Does RE extend beyond the RE class?
- Is RE at the core of the Core Curriculum in a Catholic school or is it about simply teaching the Core Syllabus?

## CATHOLIC LEADERSHIP

‘No Catholic school can be effective without dedicated Catholic teachers, convinced of the great ideal of Catholic education.’

*Saint Pope John Paul II*



In most walks of life definitions of leadership are about preferred styles of management, strategic planning, assessing strengths and needs of the particular organisation and implementing policies and procedures to overcome obstacles in order to achieve corporate success – about ‘getting things done’.

Leadership in Catholic schools however, is about much more. It is about vision and mission. It is about being a ‘servant leader’ who has a strong sense of purpose and who looks outwards and puts the needs of others before one’s own.

Leaders in Catholic schools today are called to be witnesses to the vision of Catholic education, to be what Blessed John Sullivan SJ calls ‘Living Logos’, who ‘transmit meaning and values in all the seemingly mundane things they do’. As Saint Francis of Assisi instructed his followers ‘Preach the Gospel. Use words if you have to’.

To be effective, Catholic school leaders need to develop the capacity to reflect regularly so that they ensure the articulation and making real of a strong, clear vision. Such a vision must be relevant to the community in which they work, reflect the real world and acknowledge their own role and that of the school in the ongoing mission of the Church.

To this end, leaders in Catholic schools should take the time to nurture a strong, active personal faith and continually develop their knowledge and understanding of Church teachings and faith traditions. This will help them to nurture the Catholic faith, community and culture, and model a commitment to gospel values. In so doing, Catholic leaders build a shared vision for a learning community that is distinctively Catholic, ensuring high quality teaching and learning and nurture the call to love and serve as a people of faith.

### POINTS TO REFLECT ON

Sometimes leadership is confused with management and responsibility. It is seen to be about hierarchy and structure, yet true leadership in a Catholic school is about inspiration and empowerment. It is about recognising the talents and giftedness in all members of staff, and in the student population and having the trust, courage and vision to allow and encourage others to become leaders.

- Do we sometimes see leadership as a possession which must be jealously guarded and kept?
- Do our management structures empower or stifle shared leadership?
- Do we fail to see the leadership qualities and giftedness in those all around us in our school?

## LEARNING AND TEACHING

‘A good school provides a rounded education for the whole person. And a good Catholic school, over and above this, should help all its students to become saints.’

*Pope Benedict XVI*



All students in every school deserve high quality education. Schools are places where learning is valued, where excellent teaching is encouraged, where high expectations are rewarded, the dignity of the individual is promoted and a comprehensive curriculum is offered to all. However, in addition to being thoroughly professional, child-centred, inclusive and comprehensive learning and teaching must reach even higher – ‘over and above this’ – in a Catholic school if it is to be authentically Catholic.

Catholic education is fundamentally formative and a spirit-filled activity which aims at helping our young people to realise their full potential and come to know themselves as made in the image and likeness of God, and know their fellow men and women as brothers and sisters. This should be experienced in the learning and teaching which takes place in a Catholic school both in terms of practice and content. Every teacher in a Catholic school must be conscious of his/her role as a missionary and evangeliser who brings to each class professionalism and passion, expertise and joy, excellence and love. He/she must strive to draw that young person towards understanding, wisdom and truth.

Similarly the curriculum in a Catholic school should not be dictated by the needs and demands of society and popular culture, but is something infused and animated by the Gospel so that our knowledge is always at the service of others – encouraging the formation of people of competence and conscience; people of vocation. Pope Benedict calls on the educator through his/her teaching to be led by 'intellectual clarity' and to understand that the actual learning and teaching in the classroom is an act of love and discipleship.

*'All knowledge is sterile which does not lead to action and end in charity.'*

*Cardinal Desire Joseph Mercier*

### POINTS TO REFLECT ON

Sometimes education is regarded as 'value free' – the transmission of knowledge and skills which is 'neutral' and to be used according to the dictates of the market.

- Do we see learning and teaching as concerned with a subject or the person?
- Do we view the curriculum as distinctively Catholic, as something to be put in the service of others and the common good?
- Do we encourage all our teachers and other members of staff to see themselves as more than just professionals but as evangelisers and sharers of the Good News?

## INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

‘The greater the diversity,  
the greater the perfection.’

*Fr Thomas Berry, CP*



Perhaps one of the greatest and hurtful falsehoods about Catholic schools is that they are only for Catholics.

Catholic schools throughout the world, including Northern Ireland, are inclusive and welcoming to students from all faith backgrounds and none. Children from all backgrounds are welcomed and celebrated in Catholic schools. Catholicism, by its very essence, is about seeing each person – irrespective of faith, race or social background – as a brother and sister made in the image and likeness of God. Catholic schools do likewise. Inclusion and diversity are not simply about having some pupils and staff from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. It is about seeing diversity as a gift to be embraced.

Although central to Catholic education is inclusivity, this does not mean that the Catholic message and mission is diminished or diluted. Catholic schools are caring and inclusive communities precisely because they are Catholic. One of the great strengths of Catholic schools is its social inclusion. Catholic schools throughout Ireland have adapted to recent rapid demographic change, have led the way in integrating migrants into local communities. Catholic schools lead in areas such as social inclusion, special needs and Traveller education. The same is true in Northern Ireland where migrants and people from non-Catholic backgrounds are increasingly seeking out Catholic schools for their children's education, and we should welcome this.

We also should keep to the forefront of our thinking and practice the understanding that inclusion and diversity is not simply about other faiths, ethnicity and religious backgrounds. Children with special educational needs, those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, young people who suffer from emotional and health (physical and mental) challenges, and all other deemed by society to be in some way marginalised should be welcomed, included and celebrated in our Catholic schools.

### POINTS TO REFLECT ON

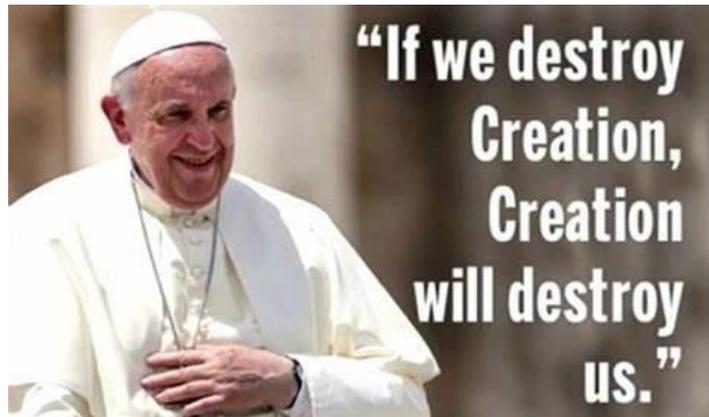
Today our schools are increasingly made up of students from many diverse backgrounds. No longer are schools simply of and for Catholics, we have new opportunities to welcome brothers and sisters from many traditions and cultures.

- Do we see difference as a challenge or a gift?
- Do we simply tolerate and pay lip-service to others or is our inclusion and diversity marked with celebration and joy?

## SOCIAL JUSTICE AND RESPECT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

‘The human environment and the natural environment are deteriorating together, and this deterioration of the planet weighs upon the most vulnerable of its people. The impact of climate change affects, first and foremost, those who live in poverty in every corner of the globe.’

*Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew*

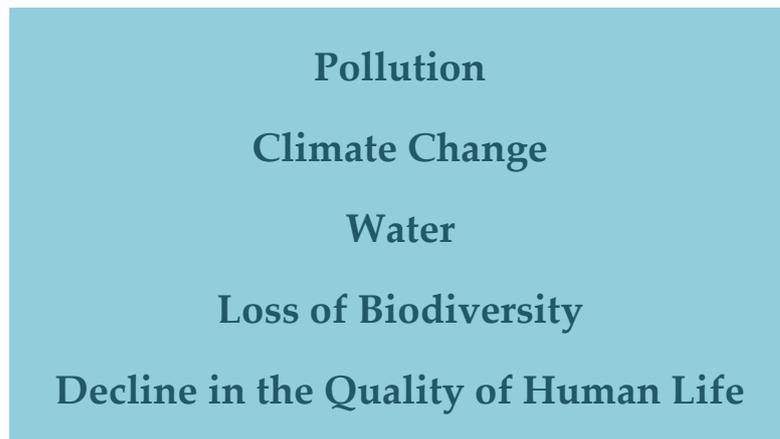


Catholic schools have long given witness to the Gospel imperative to reach out and help those in need. Indeed, compassionate action – inspired by the Christian values of love and service – defines Catholic schools. Through supporting a range of causes including St Vincent de Paul, Catholics Caring, Trócaire, homeless charities, the foreign missions and a host of other social justice activities, Catholic schools reveal themselves as centres of missionary outreach.

Over the past number of years schools, like the rest of society, have become more aware of climate change and how this affects all of us. In 2015 Pope Francis issued his second papal encyclical – *Laudato si'* (*Care for our Common Home*) – in which he discussed the damage being inflicted on the Earth by humans and called on 'every person living on this planet' to

make urgent changes to our lifestyles and how we consume energy in order to protect the planet.

It deals with many environmental issues including:



In his letter Pope Francis implored us to work together to create a better world for future generations and asked us to make the necessary changes in our lives in order to take care of, respect and value our 'common home'.

In particular Pope Francis pointed out that we are all connected and that the destruction of God's creation impacts on all of us – especially the poor. Indeed, Pope Francis pointed out that ***'the cry of the earth is the cry of the poor'***.

Catholic schools are called to play a leading role in responding to this crisis and to help protect God's creation in their particular school, local community and wider society.

## POINTS TO REFLECT ON

Activities in support of social justice and care for creation have taken place in schools in all educational sectors. Often, and especially in times of pressures of curricular demands and limited finance, these activities may not be viewed as essential to school life but as interesting 'add ons' – 'luxury activities' which may or may not be embraced depending on other priorities.

- What priority does social justice and care for God's creation have in your school?
- Do gospel values and Church teachings underpin your school's actions in relation to social justice and care for God's creation?
- Are we doing 'God's work' or simply 'good work'?

## PARTNERSHIP AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

it takes a village



to raise a child

As part of the Church, we place Christ and His teachings at the centre of our lives. The Church and the people involved in Catholic education have a responsibility to engage with wider society and to contribute to the common good of society and all of its people, especially those who are vulnerable or in need.

Catholic schools do not exist in isolation from the rest of society, but are very much part of the community to which they contribute so much. Catholic schools are justifiably proud of their outreach to the community. This takes many forms locally, nationally and internationally. The ancient Swahili proverb that 'it takes a village to educate a child' is very much evident and evidenced in a Catholic school. Parents/guardians and extended families are encouraged to play a leading role in a child's education and are supported in doing so by the school.

Our schools play a vibrant role in parish life as part of the home-school-parish link involved in the holistic education of each child. Catholic schools also seek to engage with many other bodies including sporting, cultural and business organisations as well as charities and those who care for the elderly, sick and vulnerable through active partnership and outreach programmes.

## POINTS TO REFLECT ON

Some schools may appear as a 'place set apart' – as distinct buildings in which children receive education and are separate from the wider community.

- Is our school viewed as inward looking or outward reaching?
- Do we see ourselves as at the centre of parish and community life?
- Do we provide opportunities for parents/guardians and the wider community to participate in the life of the school and the education of our young people?