

# Catholic Schools' Trustee Service

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Circular 191004: Trustee Policy on Shared Education

To: Chairs of Board of Governors

Principals of Catholic Managed Schools

Dear Colleague,

Please find attached the Trustee Policy on Shared Education for your information.

Yours Sincerely,

Fintan Murphy

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## Catholic School Trustee Policy on Shared Education

### A. Introduction

1. The Catholic School Trustees - comprising Diocesan Education Trusts, Religious Congregations and Lay Trust Bodies - are responsible for the defining Mission of their own schools within the world-wide family of Catholic schools. This responsibility is exercised in the context of the Gospel and of the specific ethos of their respective schools. Catholic Trustees are the legal owners of their schools and exercise responsibility in accordance with the terms or articles of the relevant Trust and in the interest of that Trust. Trustees have responsibility for decisions relating to all aspects of school property and buildings. They also have responsibility for oversight of the strategic direction, organisational nature and ethos of their respective schools.
2. Over many years Catholic schools in N. Ireland have been engaged in a wide range of both formal and informal contacts with schools in other sectors. In the early years this work was undertaken in a culturally challenging environment. We acknowledge that it was through the commitment and dedication of governors, principals and staff from all sectors, that such work was undertaken in the interest of the communities within which the schools were located.
3. The Trustees have always supported engagement and dialogue among schools. Indeed, such an openness to 'the other' is a basic principle of the Catholic vision of education. This principle has always applied to Catholic schools despite some criticism that Catholic Education was

divisive or exclusive or was, in part, responsible for the segregation of society. Thomas Groome said of Catholic Education; “The Catholic school must educate people to transcend ethnic and racial barriers, to be open to the ‘other’ and to forge solidarity with all people ... A truly Catholic attitude requires respect for people and religions that are different and being open to learn from them and share with them.” (Will There Be Faith? A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples: T. Groome, 2011).

4. It is important to note that Catholic schools are open to pupils of all faiths and none. In N. Ireland, and throughout the world, Catholic schools provide an education for people who have a wide range of beliefs but who chose Catholic education because of the quality of the education provided and because of the value base on which they are founded.
  
5. The need for, and value of this work was acknowledged and encouraged by the Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland when they stated, *“Our society in Northern Ireland has been characterised by profound conflict and those charged with the education of our young people have an important role to play in breaking down barriers of ignorance, misunderstanding and suspicion...  
..... Catholic schools are actively involved in a range of initiatives and local practices which seek to promote mutual respect, peace and reconciliation...  
.... We see our schools as being ideally placed to assist our society to*

*move beyond its deep-ingrained divisions into a new coherence and openness to the world at large”.* (Building Peace, Shaping the Future 2001).

6. It is clear that such work is complementary to the Catholic Ethos as set out in Catholic Education – The Vision (2006):

*Catholic Education takes place in communities inspired by the Spirit of Christ. Christ’s commandment to love God and neighbour inspires a caring ethos which is expressed in relationships within and beyond Catholic schools.*

*Catholic Education is person-centred. It promotes the dignity, self-esteem and full development of each person who is made in God’s image and uniquely loved by God.*

*Catholic Education is inclusive. It is respectful of, and engages with, people of all beliefs; it encourages the religious development of all in their own faith.*

*Catholic Education is rooted in the Gospel values of Respect for Life, Love, Solidarity, Truth and Justice; it aims to harmonise faith and culture, build a better society and pursue the Common Good.*

7. In its infancy, cross-sectoral engagement largely focused on providing opportunities to engage with and meet people from ‘the other side’. These engagements did assist many people in building relationships and in addressing issues of division and mistrust. It is important to note that the context was one where there were, and to a large extent still are, two different traditions and cultures within Northern Ireland. The existence

of these two cultures often results in attendance at different events, different sports and the expression of different religious beliefs. It was not, and is not, the intention of engagement with others to replace these cultures with one homogeneous culture. Engagement does however increase the awareness and understanding of other cultures and beliefs and in doing so encourages mutual respect and acceptance. This has become increasingly important as N. Ireland has become a much more varied, multi-cultural environment than was the case in the past. Indeed, it would be a retrograde step for us all, in such a pluralist society if opportunities for cultural, ethnic and religious expression were not nurtured, respected, encouraged and celebrated within our education system.

8. The understanding of the need for Catholic schools to be open to and to encourage openness toward others has its roots in the Gospel values of Christ where he states, “I give you a new commandment, love one another just as I have loved you. It is by your love for one another that everyone will recognise you as my disciple.” (John 13: 34-35)  
This theme is expanded upon in *Gaudium et Spes* which states, “Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them” (“*Gaudium et Spes*” 1965).

9. These principles are also encouraged through the words of Pope Francis from his visit to Sri Lanka;  
“It is my hope that interreligious and ecumenical cooperation will demonstrate that men and women do not have to forsake their identity, whether ethnic or religious, in order to live in harmony with their brothers and sisters” (Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall, Colombo, January 2015).

10. A wide range of interschool projects developed over the years with Department of Education funding, have facilitated schools wishing to participate in activities together. The initiatives were deemed to have had varying degrees of success, though it is difficult to quantify the success of such projects. This is due to the fact that significant and sustained changes in attitude cannot be measured in the short term. The projects did however allow school communities to positively engage with, and to increase their awareness of, others.

## B. Shared Education

11. In 2007 Shared Education was introduced by the Department of Education in NI as a new programme which supported the development of deeper collaborative relationships between schools across different sectors involving students, staff, governors and the wider community. Schools were able to use this programme to enhance their curricular delivery and, for many, it allowed them to meet curricular requirements

which they otherwise struggled to deliver without the collaborative work.

12. In 2012, John O'Dowd, Minister for Education, set up an advisory group on Advancing Shared Education and following their report in 2013 the Department of Education produced 'Sharing works: A Policy for Shared Education (2015).

13. In 2016 the Northern Ireland Assembly enacted the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. This legislation defined Shared Education as the education together of:

*(a) those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons; and  
(b) those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not, which is secured by the working together and co-operation of two or more relevant providers. The Act states that the purpose of Shared Education is:*

*(a) to deliver educational benefits to children and young persons;*

*(b) to promote the efficient and effective use of resources;*

*(c) to promote equality of opportunity;*

*(d) to promote good relations; and*

*(e) to promote respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.*

14. As Trustees we support the purposes of Shared Education as defined by the Act. Research on Shared Education has found that in Northern Ireland parents and educators were only willing to support collaborative initiatives if these aren't forced, and the ethos of the individual schools

protected. (“Education and a Shared Future: Options for sharing and collaboration in Northern Ireland Schools” O’Sullivan et al. 2008). The Trustees are clear that participation in Shared Education does not, and should not, result in the diminution of the school’s ethos.

15. Shared Education provides schools with opportunities to build on their ethos through engagement with other sectors. In addition, many Catholic schools have been able to use the work they are engaged in to enhance opportunities for pupils through expanding curricular opportunities, securing curricular choice, providing new experiences and challenges, encouraging and developing new friendships and increasing the awareness and understanding of other people. Such opportunities also benefit staff through professional development opportunities, increased sharing and dialogue with colleagues, opportunities to share good practice as well as facilitating the development of friendships with colleagues from neighbouring schools. Shared Education also provides opportunities to enhance experiences for governors and the wider community through joint meetings, the provision of access to training and events and through informal opportunities to meet with members of other school communities.

16. We are mindful that for some schools, who have long been engaged in co-operative inter-school projects, involvement in Shared Education is a natural progression but for others it is a new approach. It is understandable that the latter will wish to progress in a manner which is sensitive to the local communities they serve. Indeed, it is one of the strengths of the Shared Education programme that it has the flexibility to accommodate local circumstances and challenges and provides



schools with the opportunity to create tailor-made solutions for their school communities.

17. We are also aware that there are schools wishing to engage with other sectors which have been unable to identify partner schools within their geographical location. We hope that the programme can find ways around this difficulty through flexibility in the requirements of the initiative and by innovative methods of connecting communities.

### C. Shared Education Campus Programme

18. Another aspect to Shared Education is the Shared Education Campus Programme which was launched by DE in 2014. This Programme aims to provide capital assistance to schools to facilitate and deliver the following types of sharing:

- Shared educational facilities – where new facilities are built to allow for shared educational use by all schools within the model.
- Enhanced educational facilities – where current facilities are improved to allow for shared educational use by all schools within the model.
- Shared Educational Campuses – where schools are co-located and share infrastructure.

19. The Shared Education Campus Programme provides for closer co-operation between schools of different sectors through the provision of

enhanced facilities for the use of both schools, or in some cases the development of a new shared campus which will accommodate both schools.

20. The Shared Campus proposals aim to bring schools closer together while ensuring that they retain their individual identity and ethos. As a pluralist society, Northern Ireland has a diverse range of school types of which Catholic schools are one sector. All these school types exist because of parental demand and, as the Trustees of the Catholic sector, we fully respect and support the rights of parents to have choice as to the school sector which they believe best fits their needs and those of their children. The European Convention on Human Rights makes clear that, "... in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the rights of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical conviction"

We have a responsibility to ensure that Catholic education is available for all those parents wishing to avail of it for their children (currently 45.4% of the Northern Ireland pupil population attend Catholic schools). In supporting the concept of a Shared Campus, we are clear that such support is predicated on an understanding that this arrangement will not diminish the ethos and identity of the school as Catholic.

21. As Trustees we have clear legal responsibilities regarding our schools and these responsibilities do not change in the context of a Shared Campus. Going forward it is important, that schools, and others, recognise the pivotal role the Trustees play regarding the development of a Shared Campus incorporating a Catholic school. It is therefore essential, prior to entering any discussions with another school, that

Governors and Principals of Catholic schools seek and obtain approval from the school's Trustees for any proposal being considered.

22. Catholic school Trustees are already engaged in discussions on several Shared Campus projects, the best known of these being the Strule Campus in Omagh. In considering any Shared Campus proposal there are several factors which must to be considered prior to Trustees approving such a project.

#### D. Ethos and Identity

23. It is our responsibility to ensure that Catholic education is available for those parents who wish to attend a Catholic school. Therefore, the identity of the school as a Catholic school must be assured as, we accept that the identity of any partner school in a Shared Campus must be assured, if any proposal is to have the confidence of its community. In order that this is the case it is essential that the Governors, and Principal, working with the school's Trustees, ensure that any policies, procedures and practices being developed for a potential school campus are in keeping with the school's ethos. This will include how the ethos and identity of both schools can be expressed within any shared areas.

#### E. Community Support

24. The Department of Education guidance, has explicitly stated that "projects need to build on a foundation of existing sharing and have the support of the local community" ("Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education", DE 2015). The Trustees agree that prior to any Catholic school considering bringing forward a Shared Campus project they should be able to demonstrate that they have been engaged over a

sustained period in cross-sectoral work involving pupils, staff and the wider community which has been positively received by the school communities.

25.A Shared Campus should also only be considered when there is significant cross community support for the project. In some situations, schools have initiated the process of discussions around Shared Campus where the school population of both partners is vastly different, and this has impacted on the confidence of the ‘minority’ partner that their identity will be protected in any campus. The Department of Education guidance recommends that the minority community representation in any project should preferably be 30% and no less than 15% (Shared Education Campus Programme: Third Call Application Guidance DE 2016). The Trustees are of the view that a 30% minority partner minimum would be more appropriate.

#### F. Sustainability

26.A Shared Campus will be created from two or more schools who, while benefiting from shared resources, will retain their individual identity and autonomy. For this to be the case schools must be capable of operating in a sustainable manner within the Shared Campus. It will therefore be essential for those considering such a model that they reflect on the Department of Education Sustainable Schools’ criteria:

- quality educational experience
- stable enrolment trends
- sound financial position
- strong leadership and management

- accessibility
  - strong links with the community
- (“Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools” DE 2009)
- As Trustees we would expect that prior to entering such discussions schools will have reflected on how they can meet these criteria so that there is confidence that any Shared Campus has long term viability.

## 27. Core Values/ Guiding Principles

As part of a Shared Campus it is essential that all parties commit to the following core values and guiding principles:

- Inclusivity
- Respect for and promotion of, the core values and unique individuality and ethos of each school,
- Focus on meeting the needs of and ensuring the well-being of young people of all abilities and aptitudes,
- Focus on reaching out to and supporting marginalised or vulnerable young people
- Recognise, respect and embracing of the richness of difference,
- Promote excellence in educational provision and educational outcomes for all young people,
- Respond to the needs of and secure the confidence of the community,
- Support and enable each young person to have a strong sense of loyalty to and pride in their own school and simultaneously in the wider Campus.

28. As Trustees, prior to approving any Shared Campus project, we will need to have confidence that there is a commitment to these values and principles from all engaged in any proposed Campus project. Such commitment will ensure that young people have access to a quality education which will enhance that which is currently accessible to the community.

29. The Trustees commitment to the development of Shared Education is a demonstration of our commitment to a shared society based on mutual respect and understanding.