

Catholic Schools Partnership



A PROCESS FOR UNDERSTANDING, SUPPORTING AND TAKING
OWNERSHIP OF THE CHARACTERISTIC SPIRIT
IN A CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL



FOREWORD

The Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) is pleased to present *A process for understanding, supporting and taking ownership of the characteristic spirit in a Catholic primary school*. We hope that this process will enable schools to reflect on their life and ethos through affirming the good work that is characteristic of so many schools and through developing new ways of giving expression to their Catholic identity.

The development of this process has been a work of partnership over two years. The CSP collaborated with parents, pupils, teachers, principals, boards of management and parish pastoral councils in looking to the future of Catholic schools. One outcome of this collaboration was the call to enable schools to reflect on their Catholic ethos at a more local level. The process detailed in this document is the response of the CSP to this request. The process draws on the wisdom, experience and expertise of many people involved in and committed to Catholic schools. In particular, a debt of gratitude is owed to a working group which included Fr Michael Drumm, Chairperson CSP; Mr Seán Hourihane, Education Executive with the Catholic Primary School Management Association; Sr Úna Collins, Holy Faith Sisters; Mr Brian Flannery, Education Officer with the Irish Jesuits; and Fr John McDonagh, Parish Priest of Sandymount, Dublin.

This process is a resource that will support all who are committed to the future of Catholic primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. It is available as a printed booklet and it can be downloaded from www.catholicschools.ie.

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A PROCESS FOR UNDERSTANDING, SUPPORTING AND TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THE CHARACTERISTIC SPIRIT IN A CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

BACKGROUND

Those associated with Catholic primary schools often say that they know they are Catholic but are not good at explaining what it entails. They can point to their Catholic ethos but find it hard to articulate what exactly it is. Today, all schools find themselves in difficult circumstances due to enormous social, cultural and economic changes. In an age dominated by media and information technology, significant new pressures are brought to bear on children, on family structures, on religious practice, on employment and, not least, on behaviour in the school classroom. In this new cultural context every Catholic school needs to reclaim its identity so that it is not just reacting to the latest trend or fashion but that it can truly articulate its self-understanding. The process presented in this document is intended to help you as a school community to do exactly this.

Self-evaluation is now part of the life of every school. The Department of Education and Skills has published guidelines on such self-evaluation in schools. The process detailed in this document is different as it facilitates a school in understanding, supporting and taking ownership of its characteristic spirit. Such a process is an important part of the overall development of the school and can contribute in various ways to school self-evaluation.

THE PROPOSED PROCESS

The CSP proposes the following framework for understanding, supporting and taking ownership of the Catholic characteristic spirit of your school. This is not an exercise undertaken by outside experts. Rather we invite the school community to articulate its own identity in light of the vision of Catholic schools as expressed by the CSP. The process includes staff, pupils, parents, members of the board of management and the broader parish community of which the school is a part. The key focus is on pupils, their welfare and education, and how these might be improved through reflection on the school's characteristic spirit. This process is not intended to be bureaucratic or mechanical; it is a shared reflection on the part of all members of the school community on what really is the characteristic spirit of your school.

It is intended that when you have completed this process you will be better able to articulate your identity. This will be very helpful when speaking about your school both internally and externally. It will also enable you to undertake a process of further development.

ENGAGING WITH THE PROCESS

This process is intended to be life-giving and supportive so you should not find it in any way threatening. It will be led and guided by your school community and it will be characterised by honesty and open dialogue. You can consult and seek assistance from the diocesan co-ordinator as required. You are invited to share your findings with the co-ordinator so that s/he can help you in looking to the future.

WHAT THE SCHOOL NEEDS TO DO

The board of management appoints a facilitator to oversee this process. This person will normally be a teacher in the school. This facilitator will devote seven hours to the process (two hours for a training meeting, two hours completing the documentation, two hours meeting with parents and one hour reviewing the final documentation).

The principal, the chairperson of the board of management and a representative of the parents' association devote three hours to the process (two hours completing the documentation and one hour reviewing the final documentation).

Other time given to the process will be at scheduled meetings of the board of management and the staff.

The process is explained in this document. The minimum time required is a period covered by three regular meetings of the board of management. The first of these meetings launches the process; the second reviews the documentation; and the third approves the document and brings the process to a close. It is of course possible that these three meetings are not consecutive. Experience suggests that the six steps of the process are best covered over a period of about twelve months. There is little value in rushing through these steps as the aim is to foster conversations across the whole school community.

WHAT OTHER SCHOOLS SAY

Many schools have completed the six steps. Their response is overwhelmingly positive. Most say that it is easier than anticipated; that it begins a series of interesting conversations; that it affirms the good work happening in schools; that it contributes to a holistic understanding of what it is to be a Catholic school; that it opens the door to other developments in the future.

THE PROCESS

If this process is to achieve its aims then it is very important that your school follows all six steps.

STEP 1

At the request of the patron the board of management launches the process in the school and appoints a person to oversee it. It is expected that this will be a teacher working in the school. S/he will have an empathy with the ethos and be respected amongst the staff. In this document s/he will be called the facilitator and s/he will be invited to attend an evening seminar (two hours) organised by the diocesan co-ordinator where the process will be explained. The facilitator will liaise with the diocesan co-ordinator who will provide support and answer any questions that arise.

STEP 2

The principal, the chairperson of the board of management, a representative of the parents' association and the facilitator meet together to complete this document. This should take no more than two hours. Five key characteristics of Catholic schools are detailed in the text with eight indicators under each characteristic. The group should tick one of the boxes under each of the forty indicators. Remember that this is a first response to these indicators and the judgment might change in light of further reflection and consultations within the school community.

STEP 3

The contents of the document are discussed as part of the agendas at the next scheduled staff and board of management meetings. Suggested changes to the indicators should be noted and communicated to the facilitator. Pupils in senior classes will be engaged in the process through conversations on the story of your school and some of its key characteristics. The facilitator discusses the indicators with senior pupils and they complete the document in groups.

STEP 4

(Note: this step will vary considerably from one school to another depending on size.) The facilitator invites parents to a discussion group. If insufficient numbers (minimum of six) do not volunteer then the facilitator invites parents individually to join the group. Care should be taken that there is a cross section of parents in the group. The group meets for ninety minutes, working through some of the key indicators, especially those most pertinent to parents. Suggested changes to the indicators should be noted by the facilitator.

STEP 5

After the previous four steps have been completed the principal, the chairperson of the board of management, a representative of the parents' association and the facilitator meet to revise the document in light of the various conversations that have taken place. They identify at least one indicator under each characteristic to which the school will give further attention.

STEP 6

At the next scheduled meeting of the board of management the process is brought to a close. If the members of the board approve the document then it is made available to all members of the school community and the diocesan co-ordinator.

LOOKING FURTHER INTO THE FUTURE

In each succeeding year the chosen indicators in need of further attention are reviewed at scheduled meetings of the board of management and the staff. The list of indicators can be used to develop an ongoing plan for improvement. Advice will be available from the diocesan co-ordinator on how best to develop the indicators that the school itself has identified as needing further attention. Thus it is intended that we will have an ongoing method for understanding, supporting and taking ownership of the characteristic spirit in a Catholic school but one that is embedded in scheduled meetings of the school. Once a school has completed the process detailed in this document then the school community will have a template to continue reflection over years to come.

THE FIVE KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF A CATHOLIC SCHOOL ARE:

- A. WE ARE CALLED TO BE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST
- B. WE HAVE A CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF EDUCATION
- C. THE SCHOOL IS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY
- D. THE SCHOOL IS AN AGENT OF PERSONAL GROWTH AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
- E. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE LIFE OF THE SCHOOL.

The CSP has identified these five key characteristics of a Catholic school. These are statements of vision, of what the school would ideally like to achieve. Under each of these five characteristics eight indicators are provided on the following pages. The long list of indicators is very deliberate as this will allow you to profile your school in terms of its Catholic ethos. A school that suggests that virtually all indicators are 'very true of our school' has achieved the ideal! This is unlikely in daily school life. Remember that the five characteristics are statements of vision – what we are called to be; what we would be in an ideal situation.

The indicators are not vision statements; they are statements of fact and so you can make a judgement upon them. The more honest you are, the better. A school which finds under each characteristic that 3–4 indicators are 'very true of our school' and 2–3 indicators are 'true of our school but we can do better' would be doing very well. It is almost certain that all schools will find that, concerning some indicators, 'we are weak on this issue' and/or they 'have never been part of our school'. This honest appraisal will prove useful as the CSP will provide, through the diocesan co-ordinator, pointers and support for the further development of these indicators.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR SCHOOL AS A CATHOLIC SCHOOL

A. WE ARE CALLED TO BE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST.

The vision that underpins all aspects of school life is that the human person is made in the image of God and is called to share in God's own life forever. All Christians who are part of the school are invited to constantly rediscover what it is to be a follower of Christ and to give witness to the centrality of the Gospel. The school continues the mission of Christ entrusted to the Church to go and teach.



INDICATORS – PLEASE ✓	THIS IS VERY TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL	THIS IS TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL BUT WE CAN DO BETTER	WE ARE WEAK ON THIS ISSUE	THIS HAS NEVER BEEN PART OF OUR SCHOOL
1. The school has a mission statement clearly rooted in the mission of Christ.				
2. All members of the school community are cherished and valued as Christ would welcome them.				
3. At regular school assemblies there is ongoing reflection on the Christian way of life.				
4. Members of staff are provided with opportunities to develop their understanding of Jesus Christ.				
5. Children are introduced to and experience a variety of ways of praying including guided reflections, periods of silence and participation in liturgy.				
6. The seasons of the Christian Year are highlighted by appropriate and relevant spiritual celebrations to which all in the school community are invited.				
7. There are Christian symbols (such as the crucifix, art works) in each classroom and place of gathering in the school.				
8. Copies of the Bible are available for use in senior classes and the Bible is always treated with respect in the school community.				

OUR SCHOOL WILL GIVE FURTHER ATTENTION TO INDICATOR NUMBER

B. WE HAVE A CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF EDUCATION.

The school values a broad curriculum and co-curricular activities in order to foster a deeper sense of the whole person. Staff and pupils seek excellence, including academic achievement, in the context of a broad Christian philosophy of education. The school seeks to nourish the mind, body and soul through a varied academic curriculum, involvement in the arts, physical education and sporting activity, and a commitment to moral development and personal responsibility. In a more multicultural society Catholic schools welcome all that is positive in this new diversity and instill an attitude of respect for the good of the other.



INDICATORS – PLEASE ✓	THIS IS VERY TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL	THIS IS TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL BUT WE CAN DO BETTER	WE ARE WEAK ON THIS ISSUE	THIS HAS NEVER BEEN PART OF OUR SCHOOL
1. Education is written and spoken about by the principal and the teachers as something broad and holistic; as embracing the academic, physical, social and spiritual development of the child from a Christian perspective.				
2. School policies seek high standards in all areas of school life. Excellence is an ideal to which we aspire while acknowledging that it must be understood, written and spoken about not as an absolute measure but as the best that each individual child is capable of attaining.				
3. The school makes explicit mention – in its literature, statements and oral communications at key events – that the spiritual development of pupils is a central educational aim.				
4. The school consciously attends to the moral development of the pupils in its policies and planning.				
5. Pupils of other faiths and those of more humanist and secularist beliefs who are members of the school community are welcomed into the life of the school.				
6. The Board of Management, principal and staff are aware of the importance of ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue in Catholic education and attempt to give expression to these in the life of the school.				
7. Values inspired by the Gospel are integral to decision making within and on behalf of the school.				
8. The school works in close partnership with other Catholic primary schools in the same geographical area.				

OUR SCHOOL WILL GIVE FURTHER ATTENTION TO INDICATOR NUMBER

c. THE SCHOOL IS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

Schools are communities made up of pupils, parents, staff, board members, patrons/trustees and others associated with the school. Parents are the most important educators of their children. Catholic primary schools are rooted in parish communities where they are an important part of local life and foster a sense of shared responsibility for Catholic education.



INDICATORS – PLEASE ✓	THIS IS VERY TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL	THIS IS TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL BUT WE CAN DO BETTER	WE ARE WEAK ON THIS ISSUE	THIS HAS NEVER BEEN PART OF OUR SCHOOL
1. Issues relating to the Catholic identity of the school appear frequently on the agenda for Board of Management meetings.				
2. Meetings within the school (Board of Management, Staff, Parents' Association etc.) usually begin and/or end with prayerful reflection.				
3. The contribution of parents to the life of the school is encouraged and welcome.				
4. The school is active and visible in parish and local community events.				
5. Catholic pupils are prepared for the sacraments through a partnership of home, school and parish.				
6. The school is a safe and caring environment for its employees and supports are provided for individual members of staff to foster their deeper development.				
7. The members of staff of the school are confident in articulating its Catholic ethos.				
8. There is a real rather than a notional link between the school and the local Catholic parish community, which in turn supports the school.				

OUR SCHOOL WILL GIVE FURTHER ATTENTION TO INDICATOR NUMBER

D. THE SCHOOL IS AN AGENT OF PERSONAL GROWTH AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION.

The school community is committed to growth in moral awareness and to the search for justice, integrity and care for the earth. There is emphasis on pastoral care and student support not least for those who are educationally disadvantaged. A dialogue between faith and contemporary culture is fostered in an age-appropriate manner.



INDICATORS – PLEASE ✓	THIS IS VERY TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL	THIS IS TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL BUT WE CAN DO BETTER	WE ARE WEAK ON THIS ISSUE	THIS HAS NEVER BEEN PART OF OUR SCHOOL
1. Our pupils, in a spirit of mutual respect and trust, can approach staff, share concerns and feel listened to.				
2. All school planning and policy development is clearly linked to and inspired by the school's mission statement.				
3. Visitors to our school experience an atmosphere that reflects the values of justice, forgiveness, integrity and respect for the needs and rights of pupils, parents and members of staff.				
4. The school has a living link with a school in a developing country.				
5. The school participates in and supports justice and peace initiatives such as Trócaire's Lenten campaign.				
6. Our school is involved in programmes such as the 'Green Flag' programme, promoting an appreciation of and respect for the environment.				
7. Pupils receive an age appropriate introduction to media studies as they learn to critique what they see on their TV and computer screens (e.g. how cartoons and advertisements work; the models of 'success' and 'happiness' being promoted).				
8. Given that pupils inhabit a world of information technology, members of the school community are invited to reflect on the uses, influences and dangers of modern means of communication: Internet, Facebook, Twitter, mobile phones.				

OUR SCHOOL WILL GIVE FURTHER ATTENTION TO INDICATOR NUMBER

E. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE LIFE OF THE SCHOOL.

The Religious Education programme includes faith formation, prayer and sacramental experiences, and a growing awareness of being stewards of God's creation. There is support for staff, principals, pupils, parents and members of boards in opening their hearts and minds to the presence of God, as religious education is not just a school subject but embraces the whole journey of life.



INDICATORS – PLEASE ✓	THIS IS VERY TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL	THIS IS TRUE OF OUR SCHOOL BUT WE CAN DO BETTER	WE ARE WEAK ON THIS ISSUE	THIS HAS NEVER BEEN PART OF OUR SCHOOL
1. There is a policy statement in the school on religious education which includes faith formation, prayer, sacramental experiences and awareness of the stewardship of God's creation. This is stated as a developmental, year-by-year policy and integrated with relevant policy documents across other aspects of school life.				
2. The religious education programme receives its allotted time for each year and the school follows the curriculum and textbooks approved by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.				
3. The principal or the RE Representative work with class groupings in planning the work for the year and this is clearly stated and communicated to parents, staff and the local parish as a basis for mutual understanding and a partnership approach.				
4. There is a place of prayer/sacred space suitably situated and maintained within the school, which is open to all in the school community.				
5. At the beginning and end of each school day and at other specified times during the day, there is time devoted to prayer.				
6. There is a developmental and inter-disciplinary programme in the school on environmental and ecological education, which is inclusive of religious education.				
7. In partnership with the parish and other bodies, opportunities are provided to staff and board members for adult spiritual support and growth.				
8. The religious education and faith formation programmes of the school are being reviewed and renewed in light of the guidelines and vision of the National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland – Share the Good News.				

OUR SCHOOL WILL GIVE FURTHER ATTENTION TO INDICATOR NUMBER

