



Religious
Education
and the
*Framework for
Junior Cycle*

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INTRODUCTION

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (Department of Education and Skills, 2015) sets out a clear vision of how teaching, learning and assessment practices will evolve over the next number of years in first to third year of post-primary education in Ireland. The proposed changes being rolled out will have a very significant impact on how all subjects, including Religious Education (RE), are planned for, taught and assessed. This short booklet highlights the place and role of Religious Education within this new context for you and for your school. It outlines the approach to be taken in Catholic post-primary schools and provides a clear rationale for this approach.

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN JUNIOR CYCLE

This is an exciting time in education and it provides a significant opportunity to reimagine Religious Education for young people today. What has been achieved in schools since the introduction of the Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus in 2000 can be built on to strengthen the learning opportunities provided for in the new *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015). Reimagining the role and contribution of RE depends too on a realistic understanding of the needs of contemporary young people, on an appreciation of the opportunities and challenges they face in the secular world that dominates their lives and on the continuing willingness of the Catholic faith community to put its best resources at the disposal of the young.

The new Junior Cycle expects that through education the young person will be ready, willing and able to make a contribution in the world at large. The values that appear fundamental to this vision are equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom, democracy and respect for human dignity and identity. There is a clear affinity

between these values and those of all the major world religions, including Christianity.

Religious Education faces new challenges and opportunities in twenty-first-century Ireland. These include changing patterns of faith and unbelief, globalisation, the digital revolution in communications and the ongoing struggle to promote social justice and climate justice.

In responding to these challenges and opportunities, Religious Education seeks to be life-enhancing by promoting the freedom, dignity, equality and uniqueness of every student in the school irrespective of race, colour, sex and religious or belief stance. Religious Education promotes ecumenical engagement, inter-religious dialogue and ecological education not simply as options but as integral to the identity of the Catholic school.

In our contemporary world there is an increasing expectation that RE will equip students for responsible citizenship by helping them to cope with and engage constructively in a pluralist society. In Ireland, Christianity is part of our rich cultural heritage and has played a significant role in shaping our vision of ourselves, our world and our relationships with others. In these changing times, access to that tradition remains valid and vital. Engagement with other religious traditions and secular worldviews is also important. RE seeks to help students develop the necessary skills and attitudes to engage positively in this conversation, while at the same time providing them with an essential space for their own spiritual reflection and religious development. Respect for religious traditions and other worldviews is characteristic of Religious Education in a Catholic school, as is clarity about the spiritual, moral and religious contribution of the Catholic faith.

In addition, Religious Education has a positive role to play in supporting young people as they ask significant questions, begin to express their responses, and seek to formulate a caring and responsible way of living so that they can be at peace with themselves, with others, with creation and with God. In this way, RE provides significant guidance for young people in their exploration of important questions about their lives. It seeks to allow for a safe but challenging space where faith and reason can meet in a creative way to assist students in making sense of life.

Religious education opens individual students and teachers to the possibility of being more fully in touch with their own faith life. Such awareness may help them to take their religious understanding to new levels, not just of study but of commitment and responsibility.

Share the Good News, 107

Specifically, Religious Education provides opportunities for learners to tap into faith traditions as sources of wisdom when contending with and responding to ultimate questions. It provides Catholic students with the opportunity to engage with their experience of the Catholic faith community, to consider the effect of an encounter with Christ and his revelation of God's love for all humanity and to engage in critical reflection on what their faith tradition brings to the world in dialogue with all people.

Religious Education relates to many parts of the curriculum. RE can promote cultural literacy and understanding; for example, interpreting a stained-glass window or religious references in poetry. It can guard against ignorance in matters of religion and the political implications

of religious ignorance; it can contribute to moral development. RE defends the religious viewpoint as a legitimate way of reading and responding to the world – standing against both religious fundamentalism and any unhelpful forms of extreme secularism.

Increasingly, a positive experience of religion is recognised as an aid to mental wellbeing. In keeping with the vision of the new Junior Cycle, RE in a Catholic school emphasises the importance of personal wellbeing, good relationships and participating positively in community and society. RE is well placed, therefore, to contribute to meeting outcomes for young people associated with many of the principles, statements of learning and key skills outlined in the framework document.

PLANNING FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN YOUR SCHOOL

In light of the above, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference reiterates its position that in schools under Catholic patronage:

- Religious Education retains its current status as a subject (i.e. with a 200 hours provision).
- Religious Education is taught for a minimum of three forty-minute periods or two one-hour periods (two hours) per week for each of the three years of Junior Cycle.
- Religious Education at Junior Cycle will continue to follow the syllabus (or subject specification for the new Junior Cycle) as agreed by the Bishops' Conference and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).
- Religious Education will also continue to be taught in conjunction with the Bishops' Conference *Guidelines for the Faith Formation and Development of Catholic Students*.
- Religious Education should only be taught by teachers suitably qualified to teach Religious Education.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS A SUBJECT AND THE EIGHT PRINCIPLES, TWENTY-FOUR STATEMENTS OF LEARNING AND EIGHT KEY SKILLS ASSOCIATED WITH THE *FRAMEWORK FOR JUNIOR CYCLE (2015)*

At the heart of Junior Cycle reform lies the need to provide students with quality learning opportunities that strike a balance between gaining knowledge and developing a wide range of skills, attitudes and thinking abilities.

Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)

This kind of learning in the new Junior Cycle is informed by:

- Eight principles that inform the planning for, as well as the development and the implementation of, Junior Cycle programmes in all schools.
- Twenty-four statements of learning that are central to planning for the students' experience of and the evaluation of the school's Junior Cycle programme.
- Eight key skills that are required for successful learning by all students.

RE gives rich expression to the eight principles that underpin the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*. Through RE, schools provide spaces for students to be creative, to engage with their own learning and to learn to learn. Perhaps even more obviously, through RE, students are encouraged to take time to consider their own and others' wellbeing, in particular their spiritual and emotional wellbeing. There are also significant opportunities within RE for students to learn about other faith traditions. Through RE, schools can foster an education for all students that is inclusive.

The learning at the core of the new Junior Cycle is described in twenty-four statements of learning (SOL). RE engages with these twenty-four statements of learning in a diversity of ways; for

example, RE helps students to communicate effectively using a variety of means (SOL 1). It can help provide spaces for students to create, appreciate and critically interpret a wide range of texts (SOL 3). RE can also, of course, help students develop an essential awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision-making (SOL 5). RE will help students appreciate and respect how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which they live (SOL 6). RE helps form students as active citizens, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts (SOL 7) and through this develops the awareness, knowledge, skills, values and motivation to live sustainably (SOL 10). RE also helps students take action to safeguard and promote their wellbeing and the wellbeing of others (SOL 11). In addition, RE ensures students learn how to value the role and contribution of science and technology to society (SOL 19). RE also invites students to use technology and digital media tools to learn, communicate, work and think collaboratively and creatively in a responsible and ethical manner (SOL 24).

Finally, there are eight key skills required for successful learning across the curriculum and for learning beyond school. RE fosters all eight of these in a variety of important ways. Through RE, students develop skills around staying well and managing themselves. They also learn how to manage information and thinking. RE improves literacy and numeracy and encourages creativity. Through project work, group work and other classroom-based activities, students learn important communication skills and learn how to work well with others.



RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS A SUBJECT IN JUNIOR CYCLE

Students will, generally, study between eight and ten subjects to include English, Irish and Mathematics in their Junior Cycle programme. Schools may also offer students the opportunity to take a small number of short courses. The range of subjects and short courses to be offered in the Junior Cycle programme in individual schools will vary in accordance with the needs and interests of the students and the school's characteristic spirit.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) makes clear that it is not intended that short courses would replace existing subjects; therefore, RE continues to be provided as a subject, not as a short course. As well as providing for RE as a subject, however, the RE department in a school may become involved in devising and contributing to short courses that engage with additional religious, spiritual and philosophical themes.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) outlines how students will have the opportunity to engage with a range of other learning experiences in their Junior Cycle programme. These can play a critical role in ensuring that students are provided with a broad and balanced educational experience, in living out the characteristic spirit of the school and in nurturing the holistic development of students. RE and related learning experiences have much to contribute to designing and providing for other such areas of learning.

It should also be noted that Priority Learning Units (PLUs) will be included in learning programmes that provide for a small number of students with significant special educational needs.

According to Department of Education timelines, the specification for Junior Cycle RE will be introduced in 2019 for incoming first

year students. As with all other subjects, the NCCA, with education partners, will develop the subject specification for Religious Education. It will receive the same level of support by way of in-servicing as other subjects and will be allocated equal time for teachers to plan for and assess students' learning.



The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) provides for a new area of learning at Junior Cycle called Wellbeing. Wellbeing will extend over the three years of Junior Cycle and build on substantial work already taking place in schools in support of students' wellbeing. This area of learning will make the school's commitment to wellbeing visible to students (Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines [2017]).

From 2017, Social Personal Health Education (SPHE), Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Physical Education (PE), as well as provision for guidance, will be incorporated into Wellbeing. The definition of wellbeing offered in the NCCA Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines also offers scope for the inclusion of a wider range of learning and developmental experiences:

Student wellbeing is present when students realise their abilities, take care of their physical wellbeing, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging to a wider community.

Hence, schools will also choose to include many other areas in their provision. As with other subjects, undoubtedly, with careful planning, some aspects of spiritual and religious education and of the school's characteristic spirit might well be explicitly incorporated into a school's wellbeing programme. Such an incorporation will take place when there is, through the school's planning, a clear link made to the six wellbeing indicators (students as active, responsible, connected, resilient, respected and aware).

DESIGNING YOUR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMME

The principles, statements of learning and key skills of the new Junior Cycle provide a structure for schools to design their own Junior Cycle programme.

Schools have the flexibility and discretion to decide what combination of subjects, short courses or other learning experiences will be provided for in their three-year programme. The programme for RE designed by your school must be informed by the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015), the RE subject specification, the particular learning needs and interests of the students and must reflect the characteristic spirit of the school (Circular Letter 0024/2016). Characteristic spirit here refers not only to your school's mission and vision statements; it also refers to the living out of the school's founding intention and its re-articulation in a contemporary context by trustees, stakeholders and members of the school community. Wellbeing also provides an important lens through which aspects of RE might be understood and experienced.

In light of all of the above, all students, Catholic or otherwise, should be able to attend RE classes which investigate the spiritual and moral questions central to human living. Schools with a Catholic characteristic spirit, whose founding intention is based on and engages with the Catholic faith, have a right and a responsibility to provide RE in the Christian tradition, open to other faith traditions and none, using pedagogies and approaches appropriate to the *Guidelines for the Faith Formation and Development of Catholic Students* from the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.

The Education Act (1998) insists that schools 'promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students ... in consultation with their parents, having regard for the characteristic spirit of the school' (Government of Ireland, Education Act, 9[d]).

For many students and their parents, as well as for the school community, RE plays a significant role in fulfilling this responsibility.



A dual approach to assessment, involving classroom-based assessment across the three years and a final externally assessed, state-certified examination can enable the appropriate balance between preparing students for examinations and facilitating creative thinking, engaged learning and better outcomes for students. This approach seeks to recognise and value the different types of learning that take place in schools and will allow for a more rounded assessment of the educational achievements of each young person.

Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)

Following publication of the subject specification for Religious Education, the *Framework for Junior Cycle*'s assessment model might best serve RE in two possible ways. Firstly, RE, as a subject (as outlined above), could follow the overall assessment approach suggested by the *Framework for Junior Cycle*; that is, students present for two Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) in second and third year and for the externally assessed, state-certified Assessment Task and Final Assessment at the end of third year. In this way, learning in RE will be certified as part of each student's Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA).

Alternatively, schools and students may decide to have two CBAs in RE in second and third year but no externally assessed, state-certified examination at the end of third year. In this latter approach students will still be recognised for their work in RE as part of their JCPA under 'Other Areas of Learning'.



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