



Call for Evidence - Review of Religious Education (RE) in Northern Ireland

Written response submitted to the Department of Education (Northern Ireland)

Submitted by the Controlled Schools' Support Council

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Background

- As the support body for almost half of the schools in Northern Ireland, the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Religious Education Call for Evidence.
- The controlled sector is the largest education sector in Northern Ireland, representing 49% of all schools. CSSC supports controlled schools in Northern Ireland which include Nursery Schools, Primary Schools, Secondary Schools, Grammar Schools, Integrated Schools, Special Schools and Irish-Medium Schools. Additionally, 27% of children and young people who attend controlled schools are entitled to Free School Meals).

- As 38 of 40 Special Schools in NI are controlled schools and 32,729 pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are educated within controlled schools, CSSC recognises the vital role education plays in the community in Northern Ireland.
- Controlled schools are open to all, welcoming children and young people of all faiths and none. They are richly diverse and inclusive, reflective of and embedded in their local communities.
- The ethos of controlled schools emphasises the importance of providing high-quality education for all pupils within the local community, regardless of their religious background, ability or socioeconomic status. They strive to create welcoming and inclusive learning environments that nurture understanding, respect, and a sense of belonging.
- Today's controlled schools provide for a more pluralist society through a diversity of schools with individual characteristics, but with non-denominational Christian core values and principles. The modern controlled sector is therefore a large, diverse and distinctive education system which strives to be:
 - diverse in provision and governance
 - inclusive in making provision for children and young people from all backgrounds
 - aspirational in seeking to provide the best possible education.
- Many controlled schools have a number of Transferor governors that are nominated by a wide range of nominating persons and bodies from the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches that include local clergy/ministers, local churches, charities, education trusts, church area bodies, and central church boards. The Transferors Representative Council (TRC) has an oversight role in the nominations but does not make them.

Religious Education Curriculum

- Since the early 1990s, the religious education syllabus to be followed by all grant aided schools has been drawn up by a consortium of nominees representing the four principal Christian Churches—the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church, and the Methodist Church. The responsibility for developing the content of this common syllabus has therefore been delegated to the churches rather than educationalists, although, in actuality, the churches have ensured that their representatives have had educational experience. The responsibility for the inspection of religious education has also been assigned to clergy. Section 23 of the 1986 Order states that the Department of Education is not to inspect religious instruction unless specifically called upon to do so by a school's Board of Governors. The religious education syllabus was amended in 2007 in line with the introduction of the revised curriculum that was to be followed by all grant aided schools in NI.

- Looking ahead in the context of the review, the content of teaching and learning resources for religious education should be comprehensive; ensuring a wide range of world religions, faiths and belief mechanisms are incorporated.
- CSSC endorses the approach that RE is treated as an academic discipline, while promoting intellectual engagement and respect for diverse perspectives.
- CSSC would affirm the need to retain Christianity as a central focus in the RE curriculum, recognising its significance in Northern Ireland, while also ensuring a pluralist and inclusive approach that engages pupils with diverse religious and non-religious worldviews.
- Flexibility for teachers and pupils to discuss and comment on moral and ethical issues which may arise in the teaching of religious education is critical to a holistic educational experience for our children. There should be opportunities for Teacher Professional Learning specifically at a primary level and to involve engagement with the Initial Teacher Education colleges in NI in this work.
- It is important that teachers are able to handle discussions of contentious issues, rather than choosing instead to deal with difference by minimising it or avoiding interactions that would draw attention to it.

Parental Involvement

- Parents/carers should be informed about the specific nature and content of religious education. CSSC agrees and recognises that parents need to be informed in order to support and talk with their children at home. However, the term ‘informed’ is ambiguous. The precise level of detail to which parents should be informed will have a significant impact on schools and clear guidance is therefore essential. Guidance should be clear in respect of appropriate consultation with parents and the level of detail required in respect of content and resources. It is essential that there is a level of clarity in the guidance that will ensure consistency across all schools in their interpretation of what it means for a parent/carer to ‘be informed’.
- Clarity and consistency will be vital in minimising any potential legal challenges that schools might face if the guidance is ‘open to interpretation’.
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes at Article 14 the rights of the child ‘shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ and at Article 5 ‘the rights and responsibilities of parents and carers to provide guidance and direction to their child as they grow up so that they fully enjoy their rights. This must be done in a way that recognises the child’s increasing capacity to make their own choices.’ The Department’s guidance, when developed, should consider in such instances how schools balance the rights of both children and parents/carers in implementing the regulations.
- CSSC recognises the important role of parents in supporting and talking with their children at home. The Department of Education guidance, in considering how

schools balance the rights of both children and parents/carers in implementing the regulations, should provide very clear guidelines for schools. CSSC recognises that challenges are likely to arise from both children and parents/carers and therefore the guidance should include clear signposting for schools on agreed procedures when specific challenges arise.

- Pupils and parents/carers should have access to an overview of their school's religious education policy and planned religious education programme. As with normal school development planning procedures, CSSC would advocate for the involvement of both parents/carers and pupils in the development and regular review of a school's religious education policy and planned programme to ensure not only transparency in the process but that both the policy and programme would be aligned closely to the school's agreed statement of ethos.

Conclusion

- Overall, CSSC welcomes the Review of Religious Education in Northern Ireland. It is important that the Review team engage with a diverse range of stakeholders, and as an organisation we look forward to being an integral part of this.