

General Synod Board of Education

Report to General Synod 2025

The aims of the General Synod Board of Education are to:

- Define the policy of the Church in education, both religious and secular and, in promotion of this policy, to take such steps as may be deemed necessary to co-ordinate activities in all fields of education affecting the interests of the Church of Ireland;
- Maintain close contact with Government, the Department of Education and Skills, Diocesan Boards of Education, and other educational and school authorities with a view to ascertaining the most efficient and economical use of resources including funds, transport facilities and teachers;
- Study any legislation or proposed legislation likely to affect the educational interests of the Church of Ireland and take such action with respect thereto as it may deem necessary;
- Deliberate and confer on all educational matters affecting the interests of the Church;
- Make such enquiries as it shall deem to be requisite and communicate with government authorities and all such bodies and persons as it shall consider necessary.

A. Board of Education (Republic of Ireland)

AIMS

- Shall have the power to represent the Board of Education of the General Synod in all educational matters applying solely to the Republic of Ireland.
- Will advise the General Synod of developments in educational policy in the Republic of Ireland and will represent the Church as an education partner with the Department of Education and Youth and other educational bodies.
- Support, through the *Follow Me* programme, religious education in primary schools under Protestant management.
- Provide support, training and advice to primary level patrons and boards of management.
- Undertake the processing of garda vetting applications for non-teaching employees and volunteers in Church of Ireland primary schools and employees and volunteers in parishes and other Church of Ireland organisations.

Executive Summary:

1. Personalia
2. Follow Me RE Curriculum Developments
3. Board of Management Training (Primary)
4. Conferences and External Engagement
5. Advocacy on Issues
6. Education Policy Development
 - 6.1 Code of Behaviour and Revised Child Protection Procedures
 - 6.2 New 'Working Together' Procedures
 - 6.3 Revised Guidance and Information on Church of Ireland Primary Schools
7. 'Small Schools' Administrative Cluster Initiative – Action Research Project
8. Second Level Schools Matters
 - 8.1 SEC – Annual Report
 - 8.2 Second Level School Leadership Appointments
9. Ukrainian Humanitarian Crisis and Schools
10. School Management Support and Advice
 - 10.1 Garda Vetting Numbers
11. Church of Ireland Centre, DCU – Update 2024
12. Conclusion

Appendix 1 - Membership for Triennium 2025-28

1. Personalia

The Board wishes to extend its thanks and best wishes to Ms Norma Foley, TD. on the conclusion of her term as Minister for Education and wishes her well for the future. The Board looks forward to working with her successor in Office Ms Helen McEntee, TD.

The Board wishes Mr John Irwin well on his retirement as General Secretary of the Association for Community and Comprehensive Schools and congratulates Ms Aine O’Sullivan on her appointment as the new General Secretary of ACCS.

The Board welcomed Mr Luke Hawkins as an ‘ex officio’ member of the Board on his appointment as CIYD Officer (RI).

The Board also welcomed Dr Rebecca Stevenson as the invited representative observer to the Board from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

The Board wishes to record its thanks to RCB staff members Mr George Madden and Mr Gladstone Ogbonna for their assistance with technical set up support for Board meetings over the past year.

2. Follow Me RE Curriculum Developments

In 2023 the Board established a sub-committee, chaired by Rev Canon Professor Anne Lodge, to evaluate the ‘Follow Me’ RE curriculum and to determine what was required in terms of the renewal of the programme, which was first introduced in 2001 with the final books launched in 2008 with a revised infant’s book being launched in 2010. Dr Jacqui Wilkinson and Ms Carolyn Good were invited to join the sub-committee, and the Board wishes to record its grateful thanks to the members of the sub-committee for undertaking this project in such a focused manner. The sub-committee reported back to the Board that, having reviewed the existing programme, their recommendation was that the content of lesson plans continued to be pedagogically sound, and that the curriculum did not require a ‘rewrite’. Instead, the sub-committee recommended that the programme be redeveloped and renewed. The Board endorsed this recommendation.

Throughout 2024, the sub-committee has worked on the redevelopment of ‘Follow Me’. A new website was developed, with a new logo and a ‘new look’ style of presentation. The new website www.followme.ie is designed to provide practical support for teachers in Church of Ireland primary schools in their provision of the Patron’s Programme (Follow Me) and school assemblies. This content is regularly created and updated by Dr Jacqui Wilkinson. The second phase of the website will be a home for the digital slide decks for the teaching of the Follow Me programme. The sub-committee invited teachers, from a variety of primary schools under Church of Ireland Patronage, along with recent graduates from the CIC, DCU, now teaching in schools, to assist with the creation of lessons content into digital format; and the Board wishes to record its thanks to them for this work.

Work on this project continues into 2025. The first two books (3rd and 4th class) will be available in digital format for schools in September 2025.

The Board is also grateful to the teachers who have assisted with this project.

The redeveloped Follow Me RE website will be launched at General Synod 2025.

3. Board of Management Training – Primary Level

Training to Boards of Management in primary schools was rolled out across the dioceses in 2024. Starting in Kilkenny in January and concluding in May in Greystones, sixteen in person training sessions were delivered. Modules delivered included: Working Together: The Board of Management as a Corporate Entity. Recruitment and Appointment Procedures for Boards of Management and Child Protection Procedures in schools. Training was also provided in two dioceses for Patron Assessors who sit on interview panels.

A wide range of other school management topics are available to view in webinar format or in podcast format online. The links to online and podcast training topics was circulated to all schools in December 2024.

In January 2025, a very successful ‘Welcome Day’ for newly appointed primary principals was held in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, which begun with Morning Prayer, led by Dean Dermot Dunne, with a reflection by Archbishop Jackson. The first two sessions were provided by Dr Ken Fennelly and Mrs Susan Ellis on ‘your relationship with your school Patron’; School Management Matters. The third session was provided by Rev Canon Professor Anne Lodge regarding the role and resources the Church of Ireland Centre, DCU can provide schools and by Dr Jacqui Wilkinson (Assistant Professor, CIC, DCU) who briefed participants on the development of the Follow Me curriculum and the Certificate in Follow Me which Dr Wilkinson delivers in CIC, DCU. Ms Sarah Richards and Mrs Margaret Brickenden participated on behalf of the Board. The Board wishes to record its grateful thanks to the Dean of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, Very Rev Dermot Dunne, for both hosting the event and for including participants in Morning Prayer on the day.

4. Conferences and External Engagement

The Board was represented or members participated in a number of educational conferences in 2024. On Easter Monday, the secretary represented at Board at the annual Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) conference in Killarney, Kerry and at the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) in Galway. Mr Andrew Forrest attended the Joint Managerial Conference for Secondary Schools (JMB), along with the secretary. The deputy chairman of the Board, Rt Rev Michael Burrows attended the Education Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) conference in Galway. The Chairman, Archbishop Jackson, participated as a panellist in a ‘shared island dialogue’ event, hosted by DCU, at the invitation of the Department of the Taoiseach. Also, on behalf of the Board, Rev Canon Professor Anne Lodge participated in a number of consultation events organised by the Department of Education in regard to the DEIS scheme.

In reviewing school leadership, the Board noticed that the last number of years had seen a significant number of appointments of new principals. In this regard, a seminar and welcome day for newly appointed primary principals was planned in late 2024 and held at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin in early 2025. The Archbishop of Dublin, as chair of the Board, began the day with a reflection during morning prayer. Three sessions were held for the attendees on ‘your relationship with your school patron’, delivered by the secretary and the second was on ‘School management issues’, delivered by the education advisor Mrs Ellis. The third session was delivered by Rev Canon Professor Anne Lodge regarding the Church of Ireland Centre, DCU, accompanied by Dr Jacqui Wilkinson, associate professor, CIC, DCU who briefed attendees on the updated and redeveloped ‘Follow Me’ RE curriculum. Feedback from attendees was that it was a useful and enjoyable event.

The Board is a participant in ‘World Wise Global Schools’ (WWGS) which is Ireland’s national **Global Citizenship Education (GCE)** programme for post-primary settings. WWGS was set up in 2013 as the key channel through which Irish Aid support for GCE in post-primary settings is to be coordinated. The aim of the programme is to increase the number of post-primary settings engaging in quality global citizenship education by providing a comprehensive range of supports. Mr Andrew Forrest, board member, represents the Board at the WWGS steering group and participated in their online deliberations in 2024. In that connection, Irish Aid and WWGS held a symposium in May 2024 which outlined how schools can introduce Global Citizenship into teaching and learning in schools here in Ireland. Mrs Margaret Brickenden, board member, participated in the symposium on behalf of the Board. Further information is available here:

<https://www.ireland.ie/en/irish-aid/what-we-do/global-citizenship-education/>

The Board is a longstanding member of the Inter-European commission on Church and School and the International Association for Christian Education (which is also in partnership with the Conference

of European Churches - CEC). The secretary participated in online meetings of the IECS, which was concerned with winding up that organisation and refocusing its work into the International Association for Christian Education (IACE). The secretary was elected a member of the Board of the IACE at its General Assembly in Bratislava in November 2024. Through this involvement, the Church of Ireland is now connected to CEC in two respects and makes the involvement of the Church of Ireland more influential in the work of these organisations.

The Anglican Communion created a new network for education across the Communion in 2023. Archbishop McDowell appointed the secretary, Dr Fennelly, to the Anglican Communion Schools Network to represent the Church of Ireland on the network. The first meetings of this new network were held in London in January 2024 and online during the remainder of 2024. The network is chaired by Archbishop Kay Goldsworthy, Archbishop of Perth, Australia. The network aims to share understandings and explore Anglican ethos in a school context and to act as vehicle to strengthen and develop the understanding of how education is mediated in an Anglican context. The network is also developing plans to look at how ‘best practice’ can be shared with regard to RE, school assemblies, resources and for opportunities to bring an awareness to school communities of the global nature of Anglicanism and the church. The network intends to develop a strategic plan in 2025.

Reáchtáil An Foras Pátrúnachta a chomhdháil bhliantúil sa Chabhán i bhfómhar na bliana 2024 agus tá an bord buíoch den Dr Rita Kelly as ionadaíocht a dhéanamh ar an mbord ag an gcomhdháil.

5. Advocacy on Issues

The Board engages in an ongoing manner with the Department of Education through its participation in the ‘Primary Education Forum’. Ms Sarah Richards and the secretary attend the ‘Forum’ on behalf of the Board and Church of Ireland primary schools. The Forum is an opportunity to engage directly with Department of Education officials regarding all aspects of policy development and policy implementation. While the representatives advocated on a range of specific issues over the course of the year; the issue that was consistently raised was the need to slow the pace of initiatives and development. It was highlighted to the Department that in 2024, nearly 100 Circular letters had issued to schools (some of which were highly technical) and that this created an impossible level of communications for busy principals and for voluntary boards to maintain awareness of policy developments. Representations were also made in relation to teacher redeployment, highlighting, as has been consistently done since the passing of the Education (amendment) Act 2012, that the system of teacher redeployment hinders Boards of Management from selecting suitable teaching staff for their own schools. The consistent position of the Board has long been that the ‘supplementary’ panel is unnecessary, and it was again put to the Department that the supplementary panel should be abolished.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) announced the implementation of the new primary level curriculum. This is a hugely significant development at primary level. The last primary level curriculum was introduced in 1999 (previously 1971). On behalf of the Board, the secretary and Dr Jacqui Wilkinson met with representatives of the NCCA in relation to ensuring that the new curriculum retains appropriate provision for the Patrons programme (in the case of Church of Ireland Schools, this is the ‘Follow Me’ RE programme). A written submission was also made to the NCCA on the same issue. Having viewed the published curriculum framework, the Board is satisfied that the new curriculum provides for adequate time for the teaching of the ‘Follow Me’ curriculum. In addition, Mr Aidan O’Shea, principal of Greenlanes NS, Dublin, attended implementation consultations with the NCCA in late 2024.

In Autumn 2024, Inspectorate of the Department of Education invited representatives of the Board to participate in consultations on School Self Evaluation. Ms Daphne Wood, principal of St Andrew’s NS, Bray, Co. Wicklow and board member, participated in a number of meetings on this issue the Inspectorate and also engaged in consultations among her principal colleagues in order to represent their views more comprehensively.

Funding and resources were a major challenge for schools in 2023/24 school year. The Board, through its advisory and support service to schools, received various representations from schools outlining how rising costs of insurance, electricity, heating and fuel, teaching resources, maintenance and ancillary staff costs were all contributing to an extremely challenging financial environment for many schools. In advance of Budget 2025, the Board published a submission to the Department of Education seeking a significant increase in funding and resourcing for schools. The Board joined with other school management and education bodies to advocate in the strongest terms for an increase in funding to schools. Budget 2025 announced an increase in capitation levels for schools and a reduced pupil teacher ratio, along with increased funding around special needs. The Board wishes to record its thanks to the Minister for Education and Government for listening to and reacting to the concerns raised on behalf of schools. However, schools still face financial challenges, and the Board will continue to advocate for increased funding and resources into the future.

In making a submission on Budget 2025 to Government regarding primary education, the Board took the opportunity to raise again the anomalous situation of those second level schools under Church of Ireland patronage who are technically outside the ‘free scheme’. The Board explained in its submission that this situation has arisen as the vast majority of Church of Ireland secondary schools remained outside the free education scheme, at the instigation of the Department of Education in 1968, but that through the receipt of capitation funding through the SEC ‘block grant’ would be treated by the Department of Education as ‘analogous’ to those schools which entered the free scheme. This arrangement was undone in 2009. All ancillary grant funding, capitation and capital funding and resourcing is not available to such schools. The Board again called on the Minister for Education to revisit this decision and to explore the possibility of opening a new equitable funding model for those schools which now find themselves in a position whereby they are precluded from receiving grant funding due to agreeing to a scheme put forward by the Department of Education some fifty-six years ago.

6. Education Policy Development

As a recognised ‘education partner’ and school management body, the Board is routinely invited by the Department of Education to involve itself in specific policy development in the form of membership of working groups, advisory or reference groups. The significant policy that came to publication in 2024 was the ‘Bí Cinéalta’ revised anti-bullying policy. The publication of this policy follows on from the publication of ‘Perspectives on Bullying’ (2023) and informs the work on redeveloping school anti-bullying procedures. There were 18 meetings of the ‘Bí Cinéalta’ advisory group in 2024 and the Board was represented by Mr Enda McGorman, education policy developer with our partner organisation the CPSMA. Discussions at the advisory committee gave close consideration to the terminology used in the document and the definitions and understandings of forms of bullying which were to be used in the final published procedures. The Minister for Education approved the finalised policy in June 2024. The implementation framework included a one-day cpd day for two school members and a training module for Boards of Management members. The new policy is published as part of the Wellbeing Promotion curriculum in schools and aligns to its five wellbeing pillars. Further information, including the full policy is available from the Department of Education website.

6.1 Code of Behaviour and Revised Child Protection Procedures

In March 2024, Minister Foley advised Dáil Eireann that the existing ‘Developing a Code of Behaviour, Guidelines for Schools’ (2008) would be revised by the TUSLA Education Support Service. Stakeholder consultations commenced on this issue in 2024 with a view to publishing revised guidance in 2025. The Board is grateful to colleagues at the CPSMA for their engagement on the detail of these deliberations.

6.2 New Working Together Procedures

The Board, in its capacity as a school management body at primary level, was a party to discussions among the INTO and education partners in the drafting of new procedures in relation to staff relations at primary level. The new procedures were approved by the Board and having received approval from the boards of the other management bodies, were promulgated for use in all primary schools from September 2024 (replacing procedures in place since 1994). Entitled ‘Working Together’, the published document contains three separate procedures for use with school staff:

1. Staff Relations Difficulties
2. Bullying and Harassment
3. Grievance Procedure

6.3 Revised Guidance and Information on Church of Ireland Primary Schools

As part of an ongoing project to provide renewed and updated information on Church of Ireland schools, the Board produced an information document aimed at being of use to prospective parental applicants to schools. This information booklet is available on the Church of Ireland website and will be publicised to schools for use at school admissions times. The Board also approved a reflection guide on school ethos for use by primary school Boards of Management. Further guidance and advice on various topics relevant to schools will be published online in the secure education section of the Church of Ireland website by the Board in 2025.

7. ‘Small Schools’ Administrative Cluster Initiative – Action Research Project

Support for smaller primary schools (with four teachers or less) has been an aim of the Board for many years. In furtherance of this aim, the Board has supported and engaged with the Department of Education funded and OIDE co-ordinated ‘small schools administrative cluster’ initiative. This project is in its third year and involves five clusters of primary schools around the country, which are in: Donegal (comprising of schools under the patronage of the Bishop of Derry and Raphoe), Gort and Connemara, Co. Galway, Wicklow and Kerry. Since the launch of the project in July 2021, a range of new developments have emerged in each cluster which have brought both efficiencies and synergies to the day-to-day management in the primary schools involved. The most recent development has been the granting of funding by the Department of Education and Youth to enable the recruitment of a shared administrative and management support officer for each cluster. The aim of making such appointments is to seek to reduce the workload on each school principal in the clustered schools. It is hoped that this initiative will have a wider impact across the primary education system and, in due course, mitigate against the challenges and pressures involved in the role of school principal.

The Board wishes to express its thanks to the Irish Primary Principals Network for their support in co-ordinating and supporting the establishment and development of the cluster of schools in Donegal under Church of Ireland patronage. The also wishes to thank Mr David Brennan of OIDE, national project co-ordinator for the ‘Small Schools Cluster Project’ for his work in this regard and for providing briefings to the Board.

8. Second Level Schools Matters

8.1 SEC

The SEC is an independent company which is fully funded by the Department of Education through an agreement relating to the payment of capitation funding dating back to 1968 and continues to provide financial support to second level students who are of a Protestant denomination. Over sixty Protestant denominations are currently recognised for grant eligibility purposes. In 2023/24 €5.942 million in grant support was paid to approximately 1,285 recipients. 52% of recipients are in band 1, meaning that those recipients have an income of €20,000 or less. The members of Committee are nominated by the Church of Ireland, Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) and elected to serve as directors of the SEC (clg) at the AGM of the SEC.

Having served six years as Chairperson of the SEC, Ms Hazel Corrigan, resigned as chairperson in March 2025, while remaining a director of the SEC, and was succeeded by Mr Gavan Woods. Dr Fennelly also serves as the Company Secretary of the SEC. The SEC staff are: Mrs Claire Enright (Grants Manager) and Ms Vivienne Rowntree (Operations Manager); assisted by two-part time seasonal staff to assist with means testing of applications.

The reporting requirements of the SEC changed in 2019. The annual report of the SEC is provided to the Department of Education and is published on its website at www.secgrant.ie in July each year.

8.2 School Leadership Appointments – Post Primary.

The Board congratulates the following on their appointments as Principal/school head in 2024:

- Mr Alan Cox on his appointment as principal of Rathdown (Senior) School, Dublin
- Ms Deborah Crean on her appointment as principal of Temple Carrig School, Greystones, Wicklow
- Mr Brian Moore on his appointment as headmaster of Wesley College, Dublin.
- Mr David Bane on his appointment as principal of Mount Temple Comprehensive, Dublin.

9. Ukrainian Humanitarian Crisis and Schools

The war in Ukraine continues to impact on schools in Ireland. While figures are not available on a school patronage basis, general figures available from the Department of Education give a clear indication of how the Irish education system has played its part in assisting in the humanitarian consequences which the Russian invasion of Ukraine has created. Up to December 2024, 15,625 children and young people were enrolled in Irish schools at primary and post-primary level with 10,141 at primary level and 5,484 at post-primary level: with 1,514 primary schools and 580 post primary schools making those enrolments. Over 5,000 of those students travel to and from school on Bus Éireann; which has secured school bus routes for many rural primary schools. Clergy associated with Church of Ireland schools have reported that the influx of significant numbers of Orthodox Christians into various parts of rural Ireland has been an ecumenical ‘learning curve’ for all involved.

10. School Management Support and Advice

The education office at Church House, Rathmines, Dublin 6 provides a support and advisory service to school Board of Management chairpersons and principals to over 190 primary schools across all dioceses in the Republic of Ireland. This service is provided by the secretary, Dr Ken Fennelly and Mrs Susan Ellis, education advisor, who fielded over 2,000 enquiries from schools (by phone, email and in person) over the course of 2024. The service is augmented by further support available from the panel of education advisors at the CPSMA helpline.

In 2024, the ‘secure area’ on the education section of the Church of Ireland website was developed as a repository for information and materials frequently sought by primary schools, such as template employment contracts, training resources and guidance documents. Work continues as on the development of this resource.

10.1 Garda Vetting numbers

The Board of Education/Safeguarding Office carries out Garda Vetting in respect of ancillary staff and volunteers in Church of Ireland primary schools. In 2024, 2,905 applications were vetted in respect of schools. The Board wishes to thank Ms Christine Cody and Mr Alex Kinch for their work in the Garda Vetting Unit. This work is part funded by the Department of Education and Youth, and the Board expresses its thanks to the Department of Education and Youth for this support.

11. Church of Ireland Centre, DCU – Update 2024

The core work of the Church of Ireland Centre, DCU is concerned with the Bachelor of Education programme. The Centre delivers key components on the B.Ed to the Centre’s students including the teaching of the RE Certificate in Teaching the Follow Me programme, delivering Religions, Ethics, Morals & Values modules, the Small Schools specialism and additional supports in Irish. Students on

the CIC B.Ed pathway undertake the majority of their placements in schools under Church of Ireland and other reformed Christian patronage. The Centre also supports programmes for post-primary religion teachers and chaplains.

Twenty teachers completed the RE Cert course (Follow Me) with Dr Jacqui Wilkinson in 2024. The course was a combination of afternoon/evening online sessions and attendance at three webinars. The course is again planned to run in 2025. Three webinars for schools were also held in 2024 on the themes of the new Primary Curriculum Framework and Religious Education, World Religions and RE, and Critical Incidents in the school. The Critical Incidents webinar was co-facilitated by Dr Jacqui Wilkinson, Rev Suzanne Harris and Ms Susan Ellis (CPSMA).

The new Follow Me website (www.followme.ie) went live in November 2024. It provides online resources for all Church of Ireland primary schools in terms of RE and school assemblies. The launch of this site is the first phase of the Follow Me redevelopment project and will host slide decks of lessons for teaching the programme. The 3rd and 4th class books in the programme will be available for teachers from September 2025. Dr Jacqui Wilkinson and Ms Carolyn Good have been leading this project and a team of practising teachers worked as part of a slide development team. This project is ongoing.

The Director of the Centre reviews all applicants for the Centre's B.Ed pathway to check eligibility for entry in line with the requirements of the derogation to the Employment Equality Act. The Centre produces information for post-primary schools and deals with many enquiries about the pathway. In September 2024, a new cohort of 1st year students commenced the B.Ed programme with the Centre. These students come from all around the Republic of Ireland. The Church of Ireland Centre, DCU, liaises with primary schools under Church of Ireland and other reformed Christian patronage through school placement for its students, as well as the provision of supports, participation in research and sharing of a biannual Newsletter.

During 2024, the Centre hosted a six-month project to study and archive historical materials held in Mount Temple Comprehensive. Some of these materials belong to Mount Temple, some to the older schools that amalgamated into Mount Temple in the early 1970s, with the majority forming part of the historical archives of 'The Incorporated Society for the Promotion of Protestant Schools in Ireland' which was founded in 1733. This project completes the consolidation of the archive material of the Incorporated Society, thereby creating a complete historical education archive from 1733 to 1973, and is therefore, one of the most important archives of schools' and patronage in Irish education. The Centre hosted an Advent Carol Service in the DCU All Hallows' Chapel for eight primary schools from the Dublin area and plans to expand this in the coming year. Detailed reports on these events can be found on the Dublin and Glendalough diocesan website and the Church of Ireland website. Rev Canon Prof Lodge and Dr Fennelly presented a paper at the Educational Studies Association Ireland (ESAI) conference on the Protestant Comprehensives to fill a gap in the history of education which they had identified.

12. Conclusion

The Board wishes to highlight to General Synod that 2025 marks 50 years since the introduction of Boards of Management in the Irish education system in 1975; replacing the 'single manager', with a move to a more democratic form of school governance that reflected the community of the school. Boards of Management received a legislative basis 25 years ago with the passing of the Education Act (1998). The move to a democratic form of school governance was one of the most significant developments in the Irish education system in modern times. The Board is considering several initiatives to mark this important anniversary and looks forward to reporting on this matter to General Synod in 2026.

In presenting this report to General Synod, the Board is conscious that much of the content the report reflects developments at a ‘systems level’. However, the Board wishes to take this opportunity to recognise how school communities – staff, pupils and Boards of Management – continue to deliver the work of teaching and learning and do so in a dedicated and professional manner. In 2024, there were over 30,000 children and young people enrolled in primary and post-primary schools under Church of Ireland patronage. It is obvious that the formational impact that schools play in the lives of all these children and young people will have an inestimable influence in Irish society, for generations to come. This impact and influence should be valued by the community of the Church, in every diocese, which is an important element in the outworking of the mission of the Church.

In making this report to General Synod 2025, the Board wishes to note that it is entering into a new triennium for its members (2025 to 2028) and wishes to thank those members who served during the last triennium for their input and involvement in the work of the Board.

Board of Education NI - General Synod Report 2025

AIMS

The current aims of the Board of Education NI are, to:

- Develop, in conjunction with other churches, a clear and shared vision of education shaped by core values of the Christian faith.
- Advise the Synod of developments in educational policy in NI and represent the Church as an educational partner to the Department of Education and other educational bodies.
- Liaise with other churches within the Transferor Representatives’ Council (TRC) in promoting the interests and safeguarding the rights of transferors.
- Facilitate the nomination of transferor governors to controlled primary and post-primary schools.
- Make submissions to relevant government departmental consultations.
- Engage with the Education Authority, the Controlled Schools Support Council and other sectoral bodies.
- Engage with Institutions of Higher Education regarding the future preparation of teachers for the Controlled sector.
- Seek, in conjunction with other churches, continued curriculum support of the RE core syllabus in schools.

Report

1. Current Issues

The Board of Education (NI) remains deeply concerned of the stress and weariness among Principals, teachers, governors, and other staff in our current education system. Staff are dealing with increasing demands both physically and emotionally. The Board would ask synod members to pray for all schools and for clergy to be present in their local schools as support for Principals and their staff.

The Board of Education (NI) is still concerned by the voices in the media, politics and society which might question the role of faith in education. The Board believes that a school is best served by a non-denominational Christian ethos open to those of all faiths and non.

The Board of Education (NI) continues to support the TRC in their pursuit of a revision to the Religious Education curriculum in Northern Ireland. The Board of Education (NI) endorse the position that Collective Worship is a Christian act and is vital in the retention of a Christian ethos in all Controlled and Church of Ireland schools. The Board is encouraged by the Minister delivering a strategic review of the NI Curriculum and hopes this will lead to a detailed content review in the near future.

The Board of Education (NI) is actively supporting the final stages of the reconstitution of the boards of governors and encourage all those who appoint governors to do so prayerfully and with wisdom.

The Board wishes to thank all clergy who have nominated themselves and many other representatives to boards of local schools.

The Board wishes to thank its secretary, Dr Peter Hamill, for his ongoing service and commitment to the Board.

2. Education Authority (EA)

The Rev Canon Amanda Adams has served as representative on the Board of the Education Authority (EA) since its formation in 2015. Canon Adams was due to complete her term of appointment on the same date but, due to her level of experience and her various roles on the Board, she was requested by the Chair of the EA to remain for another year until she reached the maximum statutory limit for Board membership which cannot exceed 10 years. During this final year Canon Adams welcomed the opportunity to liaise with Mr Ray Gilbert who was nominated, following an open selection process, to replace Canon Adams from 1 April 2025. Following a lifetime career in Education as a teacher and then as a senior Board Officer, Mr Gilbert will bring his own considerable expertise and experience to the Board. His appointment will ensure that the direct involvement of the Church of Ireland in the work of the Education Authority remains an effective and practical expression of the church's concern for the moral, social, spiritual, intellectual, physical, and mental development of the next generation.

Established under the Education Act (NI) in 2014, the EA is a non- departmental public body, sponsored by the Department of Education (DE), and as such is responsible to DE for ensuring that efficient and effective primary and secondary education services are available to meet the needs of children and young people. It is the employing authority for all staff in Controlled Schools and for non-teaching staff in Catholic Maintained Schools and is the funding authority for Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools. Since its inception, EA also has statutory duties relating to the facilitation and promotion of Integrated Education, Irish Medium Education, Shared Education and the Community Use of Schools. EA also provides and delivers Youth Services in Northern Ireland, both directly and indirectly through its support of the voluntary sector.

Since its establishment in 2015 the EA has faced considerable challenges. Underfunding has made it difficult to recruit and retain senior officers for what is, after Health, the largest and most complex organisation to run. During 2024, the EA's Chief Executive, Ms. Sara Long, resigned to take up another post. Ms. Long made a considerable contribution to the effective restructuring of the EA and her resignation was received with regret. The role of CEO has been filled temporarily with the secondment of Mr Richard Pengelly who, as an experienced senior civil servant, has ensured that the work of transformation has continued unabated and that the EA remains focused on meeting the needs of over 340,000 children and young people who depend on receiving excellent educational provision. The EA Board plays an important challenge function and exists to hold officers to account on behalf of all the stakeholders who engage with EA and school services.

In common with other countries and jurisdictions, Northern Ireland has experienced a significant rise in the number of children presenting with special needs over the last 10 years. This increase has been evidenced not only by the growing numbers of children being identified with special needs but also by the increasing complexity of those needs. The Department of Education has been undertaking an End-to-End Review of special needs provision and policy but as the results of this have been published, the EA has greatly expanded the availability of special needs places through the provision of supported special needs placements in mainstream schools and in maximising places in Special Schools where the profound and complex needs of children require these specialist placements. Whilst additional capital funding was secured, the effort and cross directorate working of staff must be commended so that despite tight timelines, every special needs child was offered an appropriate placement at the commencement of the school year. However, it must also be recognised that special needs provision continues to place an immense pressure on the overall education budget. The Board has therefore

concentrated on supporting Officers to make the most effective use of resources as measured by their beneficial outcomes for children and young people and their families.

Financial pressures also underpinned a long period of Industrial action by teachers and non-teaching employees. Whilst some significant resolution was achieved during the year in respect of pay and grading, industrial relations are still in a precarious state. Despite this, the EA has continued to listen and engage with staff and stakeholders and to encourage their participation in the co-design of improved services. Key to these improvements have been the advances made in the development and delivery of digital services. The Education Information Solutions (EdiS) programme has already provided a number of benefits from the extension of wireless connectivity to Nursery Schools for the first time to the provision of digital portals making admission applications easier for parents and time saving for staff. Human Resources support for schools has also been enhanced through various digital solutions. EdiS has provided other significant enhancements and improvements and will continue to do so.

In a brief report such as this, it is impossible to convey the breadth and scale of the work of the EA. The Church of Ireland representatives have worked tirelessly to ensure that, despite the complexities involved, the outcomes for children and young people are being realised as intended and that when service occasionally falls short, remedial action is quickly and effectively taken. The EA does not set educational policy but it is the duty of the EA Board to ensure that educational policy and procedures are implemented fairly and effectively and to influence policy improvement where appropriate. Board participation is an essential ministry of service.

Transformation, increased cost effectiveness, and efficiency are also underpinned by improved services. The Education Information Solutions (EdiS) Programme launched in 2021, is the largest such programme in Europe. A ten-year programme will, when fully implemented, support a dynamic educational environment and delivery of digital services. Significant progress has been made during the year allowing parents easier access to services as well as improved access for schools to HR, payroll, and other administrative functions. All of these have yielded high levels of user satisfaction.

Unfortunately, the EA continues to face huge financial pressures. EA began the 2022/23 financial year with an underlying, recurrent opening deficit which had built up over the preceding years from unfunded, inescapable demand pressures and unfunded pay and price

inflation. The funding gap increased during 2023, and EA faced demands to further reduce expenditure by more than £200 million. There is no question that such a reduction will negatively impact every child in Northern Ireland with a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable and those from socially deprived areas. It was against this background that EA had to make provision for increasing numbers of children with special educational needs. EA staff, and schools are to be commended on how they have worked collaboratively and with innovation to meet the needs of children in these circumstances. The EA Board also faced very difficult and challenging decisions and will continue to do so unless and until education in Northern Ireland is properly funded.

During the coming year the EA will proceed with the reconstitution of Boards of Governors in all schools. The importance of having all Transferor posts filled in Controlled Schools cannot be overestimated as this will ensure that the church can continue to work for the benefit of children and young people in local communities to help them to discover and fulfil their God given potential.

The Board wishes to thank Canon Adams for her steadfast and wise work as a member of the EA Board.

3. Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC)

TRC has held meetings with a range of key stakeholders in the education sector including the Minister of Education, Education Authority, Stranmillis College, Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC), Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Catholic Trustees Support Service, and Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education. The TRC has also engaged with local political parties to ensure they keep education at the forefront of their policies.

The TRC continues its role at all levels of Area Planning including: the Department of Education Area Planning Strategic Group (APSG); the Area Planning Working Group (APWG); and the Area Planning Local Groups (APLG). Dr Hamill is the TRC representative on APSG, APWG, and APSG (southwest) and Mr Ian Bell is the TRC representative on the East APLG,

The TRC continues to work with representatives from the Catholic Church to agree the conditions required for creating Jointly Managed Church Schools. The working group have agreed on an ethos document, a guide to creating such a school and minimum conditions for consideration of such a school. They are currently working on a joint Scheme of Management document and look forward to a real project to work on.

The TRC will be supporting all church nominators of Transferor Governors through the current process of reconstitution. The TRC would encourage all clergy and nominators to ensure that all Transferor Governors positions are filled with the best persons to serve our children and the schools they attend.

The TRC is chaired by Dr Andrew Brown (Presbyterian representative) and the four Church of Ireland representatives are Bishop Andrew Forster, Rev Amanda Adams (Vice-Chair), Rev Catherine Simpson, and Dr Peter Hamill.

4. Controlled School Support Council

The Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) is the advocacy body for Northern Ireland's controlled schools. Established in September 2016, it is gone from strength to strength and more than 95% of controlled Schools are members.

Dr Hamill is the Church of Ireland TRC representative on the CSSC Board. CSSC continues to raise the profile of the Controlled Sector, and the Board of Education (NI) is delighted the impact CSSC makes on schools and wider education issues. CSSC supports schools facing changes and comments directly on the individual development proposals published by the Education Authority.

The Minister of Education commissioned a report submitted in December 2024 to look at the way forward for the support of Controlled Schools. In January 2025 he announced the potential formation of a unit within EA to support the Controlled Schools with the aim of creating a standalone body in the future.

5. Church of Ireland Schools

The Board of Education NI has been active in the support of Seagoe Primary School in Portadown and The Drelincourt School in Armagh. The Board has been working closely with the governors of The Drelincourt to support them in submitting a Development Proposal for potential closure.

APPENDIX 1 - MEMBERSHIP

THE GENERAL SYNOD BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMBERSHIP (from 31st March 2025 – 31st March 2028)

THE ARCHBISHOPS AND BISHOPS (Ex Officio)

THE HONORARY SECRETARIES OF THE GENERAL SYNOD (Ex Officio):

Rev Canon GV Wharton

Mr K Gibson

Ms H Corrigan

Rev Canon M Kingston

Elected members: 2 from each diocese (one clerical and one layperson):

Armagh

Rev Canon M Kingston

Mr T Flannagan

Clogher

Rev L Capper

Ms R Barton

Derry and Raphoe

Rev Canon H Gilmore

Mr D West

Mrs A Reid

Down and Dromore

Rev C Simpson

Mrs D Cheshire

Connor

Rev P Jones

Mr R Gilbert

Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh

Very Rev N Crossey

Vacant

Tuam, Limerick and Killaloe

Rev S Cousins

Mrs M Brickenden

Dublin and Glendalough

Rev S Hanily

Mr J Aiken

Meath and Kildare

Rev Canon JDM Clarke

Mr T Smyth

Cashel Ferns and Ossory

Rev Canon H Oxley

Mrs M Jacob

Cork, Cloyne and Ross

Vacant

Mr P Stobart

Co-opted members: (including 9 representatives of teachers) along with NI Board nominees:

1. *Vacant (CIPSMA)*
2. Very Rev N Sloane (Sunday School Society)
3. Rev Canon Prof A Lodge (Third Level)

4. Dr E Gash (ISA)
5. Mr N Barrett (ISA)
6. Mr A Forrest (ISA)
7. Mr K Sparling (ASTI)
8. Mrs S Hall (ASTI)
9. *Vacant (TUI) - pending*
10. Ms S Richards (PSCICE)
11. Ms R Frazer (PSCICE)
12. *Vacant (PSCICE) - pending*
13. Mr L Hawkins (CIYD)
14. Mr S Henry (CIYD)
15. Rev A Adams
16. Mr M Johnston
17. Miss F Boyd
18. Mr R McLoughlin, OBE.
19. Mr I Bell
20. Prof Purdy, OBE

Observers:

Dr R Stevenson
(Presbyterian Church in Ireland)
Ms D Wood
(Methodist Church in Ireland)

In Attendance:

Dr K Fennelly, Secretary
Dr PJ Hamill, Secretary NI
Mrs S Ellis, Education Advisor

**GENERAL SYNOD BOARD OF EDUCATION - EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
(2025-26)**

Archbishop of Armagh
Archbishop of Dublin
Hon Secretary NI
Hon Secretary RI
Rev C Simpson
Mr T Flannagan
Mr R McLoughlin, OBE
Ms S Richards
Mr A Forrest
Mrs M Brickenden

In Attendance:

Dr K Fennelly, Secretary
Dr PJ Hamill, Secretary NI

BOARD OF EDUCATION (REPUBLIC OF IRELAND) (2025-28)

Ex officio members:

The Archbishop of Dublin (Chair)
Honorary Secretaries – Rev Canon GV Wharton, Ms H Corrigan

Elected by House of Bishops:

Bishop of Tuam, Killala and Achonry (Deputy Chair)

Bishop of Clogher.

CIYD representative:

Mr L Hawkins

Sunday School Society:

Very Rev N Sloane

Diocesan Representatives (elected):

Vacant, Mrs M Brickenden.

Post primary representatives:

Mr A Forrest, Mr K Sparling

Third level representatives:

Rev Canon Professor A Lodge, *vacant*

Primary representatives:

Ms S Richards, Rev Canon H Gilmore

Co-options GS BOE: *two at the discretion of the Board from among GSBOE members*
None as of 31 March 2025.

Observers:

Dr R Stevenson

(Presbyterian Church)

Ms D Wood

(Methodist Church)

In Attendance:

Dr K Fennelly, Secretary, Board of Education (Republic of Ireland)

Dr P Hamill, Secretary, Board of Education (Northern Ireland)

Mrs S Ellis, Education Advisor

BOARD OF EDUCATION (Northern Ireland) (2025-2028)

Ex-officio:

The Archbishop of Armagh (Chairman)

The Bishop of Derry and Raphoe

Rev Canon M Kingston (Clerical Hon. Sec)

Mr K Gibson (Lay Hon Sec)

Elected Members:

Armagh:

Rev Canon M Kingston

Mr T Flannagan

Clogher:

Mr P Thompson (Board of Education only)

Miss I Knox

Connor:

Rev A Campbell (Board of Education only)

Mr R Gilbert

Derry:

Vacant

Mrs A Reid

Down:

Rev C Simpson

Vacant

Co-opted Members:

Rev A Adams
Mrs R Forde
Mr M Johnson
Miss F Boyd
Mrs E Trew
Prof N Purdy, OBE
Mr I Bell
Mr R McLoughlin, OBE
Mrs D Cheshire

CIYD Representative

Mr S Henry
Honorary Secretary Board of Education NI – Vacant
Honorary Treasurer Board of Education NI – Mr M Johnson
Secretary to the Board of Education NI – Dr PJ Hamill

In Attendance:

Dr PJ Hamill, Secretary
Dr K Fennelly, Secretary RI