

Board of Education (NI) Report – Church of Ireland General Synod 2026

Rev Catherine Simpson

I am pleased to propose the adoption of the Report of the Board of Education by the General Synod and, in making this proposal, highlight the activities of the Board of Education for Northern Ireland during the past year.

You may have heard on the news the recent report which states that 91% of teachers, including principals, are stressed, anxious, and near burnout. The Board of Education remains deeply concerned for the welfare of principals, teachers, staff, and governors due to the state of funding in education in Northern Ireland.

The current political system means education in Northern Ireland has largely become a political football. Teachers find themselves overburdened, with a number of concerns including paperwork, parental expectation and challenging pupil behaviour. Workload, special educational needs, and extremely limited funds are putting immense pressure on those running our schools. Add to that the social media world we live in, which is impacting young people and their parents alike, and our schools are in a fragile position.

The Board is concerned by the increasing issues of mental health affecting all those connected with our education system, from headteachers to the youngest pupils. We therefore ask clergy to use their unique role to support their local schools as much as possible, and to encourage their church communities to support in a variety of ways. There are a number of churches supporting literacy, numeracy, after-school projects, and offering mental health and counselling services.

Yet despite all these issues, our schools continue to produce world-class education, both academic and pastoral.

JR87 saw the rights of a child, and how religion is taught in schools, tested at the highest level in the Supreme Court in London. The Board was disappointed that the Department of Education lost the case, but we are actively working on the issues raised in the outcome of this case.

The Education Minister has set up a review process of the Religious Education curriculum, and we ask you to pray for all those involved in this process, especially Dr Hamill as he represents the Church of Ireland on the Consultative Group for churches.

Clergy currently have privileged access to schools to deliver assemblies and other religious activities, and we ask you to cherish this privilege and ensure your parish has strong links with its local school.

The Board welcomed the publication of a Charter from the Transferor Representatives' Council which gives clear guidance to visitors on taking assemblies and classroom lessons and outlines what schools should expect from those visiting from churches, or other Christian agencies. We wish to encourage all stakeholders in

our schools including clergy, youth and children workers and all who volunteers in school to read this again and ensure your local school is working to these guidelines.

Church representation on the Education Authority also provides a particularly important input to decision-making in the context of the Transferors' right to appoint governors to Controlled schools. Over 1,500 governors are appointed to individual school Boards and play a pivotal role in the governance of these schools, while also providing an opportunity for the maintenance of a Christian ethos.

As a Board, we acknowledge the hard work of many clergy and parishioners who serve as volunteers on their local school Boards of Governors. Thank you to the many of you who give tirelessly of your time and skills. We recognise this can be both a rewarding and challenging role at times.

We have for many years held a privileged and valued place within our education system, and in recent years it is obvious that there are some in society who wish to undermine the excellent support given by churches. Indeed, there are those who are actively trying to remove Christianity from our schools. It is vital that we remain an integral part of our local schools and ensure that at all times our work and witness reflect the love of Jesus.

It was with great sadness that during this year The Drelincourt School closed. This school had provided education for the people of Armagh since the 1830s and was the idea of Lady Drelincourt, the wife of the then Dean of Armagh Cathedral.

The school provided an excellent education until it closed, but sadly in recent years it had become financially unsustainable. We thank the staff of the school, and in particular the Principal, Mrs Eileen Trew, for their dedication and service.

The Board is delighted at closer links with Seagoe Primary School, the last remaining Church of Ireland school in Northern Ireland. Dr Hamill has been actively supporting the school and the Principal, Mrs Cathy Poots.

The Education Board NI has a small fund, created by parish donations over the years. The Board was delighted to open this fund for applications. All six applicants were awarded grants, and they were:

- St Mark's (Portadown)
- Kilroot and Templecoran (Carrickfergus)
- Moneyreagh Parish (Belfast)
- Mullabrack and Kilcluney Group (Armagh Diocese)
- Shankill Parish (Lurgan)
- Willowfield Parish (Belfast)

Areas of work with parishes working closely with their local schools included: P7 transition, book projects, self-esteem, mental health, healthy choices, and understanding risk.

In October we were pleased to host the Annual Theological Lecture at Queen's University Belfast. The lecture was delivered by Professor John Wyatt on *Autonomy*,

Suffering and Human Dignity: Theological and Medical Responses to Assisted Dying. This was well received by the large audience who attended.

A number of the Board of Education serve on other boards that bring educational stakeholders together. For example, Mr Ray Gilbert represents the Church of Ireland on the Education Authority. It is a difficult role in a tight financial climate. With ever-increasing demands and minimal funds to deliver services, the Education Authority is constantly battling to adequately provide vital support for our schools.

Bishop Andrew, Mr Gilbert, Dr Hamill and I sit on the Transferor Representatives' Council. Bishop Andrew is the current chair of the TRC. This committee, formed in 1937, represents the three largest Protestant churches in all matters of education.

We work closely with our brothers and sisters in the Presbyterian and Methodist churches. The TRC has engaged with key stakeholders across the education landscape, including the Education Minister, Permanent Secretary for the Department of Education, Chair of the Education Authority Board, and a range of political parties.

The TRC has produced the Schools Charter mentioned earlier and will soon be launching research showing how well our churches interact with and support our local schools.

Key to the Board of Education NI is this partnership work with the other churches. Please pray for the work of the TRC and be assured we are actively involved in education policy and work in our schools. Our goal is always to stand up for our Christian faith and ensure the ethos of our schools is protected. The Education Board NI, as part of the TRC, is working hard to protect Christian values and ethos in our schools.

We also work closely with the Catholic Trustee Support Service and provide a united front when dealing with sensitive issues.

In summary, the Board wishes to thank colleagues at General Synod for their support and interest over the last year. We value your continued assistance through prayer and encouragement.

In conclusion there are many challenges but lets us not miss the wonderful stories across Northern Ireland of how pupils are flourishing in our local schools, of how churches are supporting their locals schools from Moneyreagh to Kilroot, from Londonderry to Portstewart, Armagh to Enniskillen. Whilst we live is challenging season many teachers teach because they have a vocation. So our thanks to all stakeholders in our schools that despite all the issues our children and young people are receiving superb nursery primary and secondary education.