

Board of management oversight of primary school ethos (Republic of Ireland): an examination of current practices, challenges, and implications

Amalee Meehan^a and Daniel O'Connell^b

^aSchool of Human Development, Dublin City University, St Patrick's Campus, Dublin, Ireland;

^bDepartment of Learning, Society and Religious Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Owing to historical legacy, the Catholic church is the largest provider of primary education in the Republic of Ireland. Governance of primary schools, including responsibility for upholding school ethos, falls under the legal remit of the largely volunteer school Board of Management (Board of Governors/School Board). This article examines Board of Management oversight of ethos responsibilities and practices within Catholic primary schools in Ireland. Drawing on findings from the GRACE (Ireland) research project entitled *Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools in Ireland, Exploring the Attitudes and Behaviours of Stakeholders*, it investigates the effectiveness of existing Board of Management structures in upholding the Catholic ethos. The analysis reveals significant challenges in the communication and training of Board of Management members, and accountability systems. Furthermore, a noticeable disconnect exists between the stated vision for Catholic education and its lived reality in many schools as illustrated by the provision for Religious Education. The article concludes by highlighting the need for increased investment in systemic supports for Boards of Management, more robust engagement between patrons and the Department of Education, and a re-evaluation of current oversight mechanisms to ensure the enduring vitality of Catholic education in a changing societal landscape.

KEYWORDS

Boards of management; Ireland; Governance; Catholic education; Ethos; GRACE project

1. Introduction

Primary education in the Republic of Ireland (henceforth Ireland) boasts a rich history, intricately linked with Irish society and the significant role of the Catholic Church. This connection traces back to a patronage system that emerged

after the national school system was introduced in 1831. Under British colonial rule, this system largely delegated educational authority to the main churches, primarily the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland. This structure continued even after Ireland gained independence in 1922 (Walsh 2016) with the Catholic Church's influence growing to the point where it was the patron for most primary schools by the mid-twentieth century (Coolahan 2017). During this period, primary schools in Ireland operated within a predominantly Catholic environment that largely supported their religious character and mission. These schools were crucial not only for basic education but also for the religious upbringing of young people across the nation (Ó Caoimh et al. 2024).

Despite increasing involvement from the Irish State in recent decades and considerable public discussion about school patronage, the Catholic Church remains the dominant patron, responsible for approximately 88 per cent of primary schools in Ireland today (Department of Education 2023). While these schools are largely funded by the state, they are managed locally by a largely volunteer Board of Management (BoM). The board acts on behalf of the patron, which is typically the bishop of the local diocese.

However, significant societal changes in Ireland in recent decades and the increasing pluralism of secular and religious views among the population, raise questions for Catholic schools. Over recent decades, Ireland has experienced a notable decline in religiosity (Breen 2017; Breen and Erbe Healy 2016; Kenny 2022). This increasing secularisation, coupled with changing migration patterns, has created a mismatch between Ireland's increasingly diverse population and its predominantly denominational primary school system (Faas, Foster, and Smith 2020; Ó Caoimh et al. 2024). Census data highlights this trend: the percentage of people identifying as Catholic dropped by almost 15 percentage points between 2011 and 2022, continuing a steady decline seen over the past sixty years. The data also shows a clear link between age and Catholic adherence, with older generations more likely to identify as Catholic. Conversely, the number of people reporting 'no religion' continues to rise. In 2022, this group made up approximately 14 per cent of the population, a significant jump from about 6 per cent in 2011, making 'no religion' the second-largest affiliation category (Central Statistics Office 2024).

Beyond Catholic identity, Christian religious practice in Ireland is also steadily decreasing, particularly among young people. For example, 26 per cent of those aged 16–29 report never attending a religious service (Bullivant 2018, 7). This move towards non-religious identification mirrors international trends in Western, once Christian-majority nations (Pew Research Center 2019). Consequently, Catholic educators in Ireland now find themselves operating in an increasingly secular environment that can, at times, even be unwelcoming to Catholicism in schools (O'Flaherty et al. 2018; Turpin 2022).

Both Catholic patrons and State leaders recognise the need for an educational system that reflects Ireland's growing diversity. They support a true

plurality of patronage across the country, aiming to ensure parental choice while allowing patrons to uphold their own ethos (Department of Education (DE) 2022a). The Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity Process, often called 'divestment,' seeks to establish more multi-denominational schools. This initiative aims to align with the preferences of families and school communities and is a key commitment in the Programme for Government. The process facilitates a change of patron, and thus ethos, in areas where there is demand for more diverse school options. While the Government has set a target to increase the proportion of multi-denominational primary schools from the current 5 per cent to roughly 13 per cent by 2030 (DE 2022a), and some transfers have occurred, progress on divestment has been notably slow. Parental reluctance is a key factor in this regard (Duffy et al. 2024). Furthermore, the GRACE Ireland project shows that Catholic schools are performing well as educational institutions and that generally management and staff are happy to continue with their current arrangements (Conway et al. 2024). Thus it remains the case that the vast majority of schools retain a Catholic patron and therefore a Catholic ethos.

Despite this extensive presence and commitment, concerns about a looming crisis in school patronage have been raised, attributed to declining Church influence, past scandals, and increased societal diversity (Connolly, Conway, and Duffy 2023). These factors pose significant challenges for patrons and trusts in maintaining a distinctively Catholic ethos. Legally, upholding the characteristic spirit (ethos) of a school is a duty of the Board of Management (Board of Governors/School Board) on behalf of the patron (Government of Ireland 1998, 15.2(b)). The question at the heart of this paper is, against this changing background, how does the Board of Management perform its duty as 'ethos upholders' and what are the implications of their current practices for the future of the (mostly Catholic) primary school sector? The paper delves into the roles and responsibilities of BoMs as key stakeholders in Irish Catholic education to assess the effectiveness of current governance and oversight mechanisms in supporting the Catholic ethos of schools. For this research, the terms 'ethos' and 'characteristic spirit' are used interchangeably to describe the interplay of Catholic vision, mission, values and relationships foundational to the school, as expressed in the contemporary context (O'Connell, Liffey, and Meehan 2021). The Catholic bishops of Ireland underscore that while the ethos of individual Catholic schools may vary, they are all expected to 'give expression to their characteristic spirit through the lens of Catholic faith' (Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) 2014, p.20). The term 'religious and educational philosophy' is also used as it is commonly employed as a synonym for characteristic spirit/ethos in State produced information, for instance, Citizens Information (2025).

The paper arises from the Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE) (Ireland) research project entitled *Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools in Ireland, Exploring the Attitudes and Behaviours of Stakeholders*.¹ While GRACE is an international research-based partnership (see www.graceireland.ie).

globalcatholiceducation.org/grace), the GRACE (Ireland) project focuses on current practices and future implications for Catholic education at primary and secondary levels in the Republic of Ireland. Upholding ethos is a key theme in this regard. The distinctive nature and independence are its focus on BoM members. In order to understand how they experience their role as upholders of Catholic school ethos and identity. An analysis of their responses sheds light on current practices, challenges and implications, which in turn allows patrons and policy makers to support them in upholding their responsibilities. Their experiences are also used to identify implications for Catholic primary schools into the future.

1.1. Primary education in Ireland

The Catholic Church is the largest provider of primary education in Ireland. The 2,760 primary schools with a Catholic patronage (Oireachtas Library and Research Services 2019) account for 88 per cent of all primary schools in the country and have an enrolment of 488,084 students (Department of Education 2023). While patrons may manage the school personally, they normally appoint a Board of Management with the following representation: (a) two direct nominees of the patron; (b) two parents elected from parents of children at the school; (c) the principal of the school; (d) one other serving teacher elected by vote of the teaching staff; (e) two extra members proposed by those nominees, described at (a) to (d) above (Department of Education and Skills 2019, section 3.1). A BoM is appointed by a four-year term, although members may serve for more than one term.

The board's main function is to manage the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the students and to provide an appropriate education for each student at the school. The board is accountable to the patron and the Minister for Education. The school principal is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school and is accountable to the board. Besides the principal, all members serve in a voluntary unpaid capacity; thus the effective management of the Irish primary school sector relies heavily on a very large cohort of volunteers. With seven voluntary members on every BOM (the principal serves as the eighth member), there are almost 20,000 BoM members involved in the management of primary schools across the Republic of Ireland. These volunteers act to ensure the delivery of the patrons' vision for the schools, as well as ensuring that the schools adhere to provisions of the *Education Act 1998* as well as other directives and circulars from the Department of Education. Rendering their services generously and gratuitously, this volunteerism represents an enormous financial saving to the State.

1.2. The role of the patron

The *Education Act 1998* specifies the patron of a school as the entity that establishes the school. The patron owns the school and normally exercises its role

through a BoM. In the case of primary schools, the patron is the local diocesan bishop. The bishop, as patron, has certain rights and responsibilities, particularly in relation to the appointment of the BoM, the appointment of chairpersons, the appointment of staff, enrolment/admission policy, insurance and buildings (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) 2016, 12). Crucially for this research, the patron is also responsible for ethos, which flows from the intention for which the school was founded. In the light of ongoing social and cultural change, these founding intentions have been reappraised and now find expression in the mission statement of the school. The mission statement reflects the aims and objectives set out in the religious and educational philosophy (ethos) of the patron and should be the culmination of dialogue involving patron/trustees, BoM, staff, parents and pupils.

1.3. The role of the board of management

The rights of patrons of faith schools are implicitly recognised in the *Education Act 1998*, which requires the BoM to

uphold, and be accountable to the patron (trustees) for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school. (Government of Ireland 1998, 15(2)(b))

The rules governing the management of primary schools are set out by the Department of Education and Skills in its publication *Governance manual for primary schools 2019–2023*. Although it was not the brief of this study to include the range of management and governance responsibilities that devolve to BoMs, it has to be acknowledged that it is becoming an ever more onerous responsibility. Evolving duties include but are not limited to:

- Publish school policies; for instance, the school's admissions and participation policies, and ensuring those policies comply with legal requirements and Ministerial directions, the school ethos and the constitutional rights of all involved
- Regularly consider the teaching and learning in the school and ensure appropriate targets are set
- Ensure a School Self-Evaluation Report and School Improvement Plan are prepared each year and share a summary of the plan with the whole school community annually
- Make efficient use of the resources provided by the State to help meet the needs of students with disabilities or special needs, including, if necessary, the adaptation of buildings or provision of special equipment
- Appoint the principal, the teachers and other staff.
- Have overall responsibility for the school's finances and legal obligations.

- Ensure that the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post Primary Schools are fully applied by the school.
- Comply with garda vetting requirements before employing, contracting or placing any person in contact with children or vulnerable persons (Citizens Information [2025](#))

In this article, only one aspect of the BoM's responsibilities is being observed, namely governance of the ethos of the school and being accountable to the patron for this. According to the *Board of Management Handbook* (CPSMA [2016](#)), citing *Share the Good News* (Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) [2010](#), hereafter SGN), it is expected that the BoM, principal, staff and parents engage in regular review of how the school community lives out its Catholic ethos. As part of that review, the BOM is to consider:

- (a) description of ethos
- (b) mission statement
- (c) connection with local parish(es)
- (d) RE policy
- (e) pastoral care
- (f) SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) and RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) policy
- (g) provision for liturgy and reflective space
- (h) in-service in these areas
- (i) Parents' Council (CPSMA [2016](#), 16).

According to Duffy et al. ([2024](#)), this responsibility is rendered challenging by the growing diversity of schools and further compounded by the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018. By the provision of this Act, if a school is over-subscribed, a Catholic child seeking to gain admission to a Catholic primary school may now be refused a place in favour of a child of another religion or no religion – a rule that does not apply to other religious denominations. These conditions inevitably create challenges for BoMs as they try to govern their schools according to a specifically Catholic ethos.

1.4. The catholic vision for education

Catholic education in Ireland operates within a rich historical and theological framework, aiming to provide a holistic formation of the human person grounded in faith. The vision for Catholic education, rooted in documents from the Second Vatican Council and the Congregation for Catholic Education, such as *Gravissimum educationis* (1965), *Global compact on education* (2019) and *The identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue* ([2022](#)), emphasises faith as the foundation of all school activities and a holistic approach to

education. This includes valuing reason, intellectual development, and all branches of learning while ensuring faith and reason are partners in the human quest for understanding.

Three Irish ecclesial documents emanating from these global publications underpin this vision as enculturated in the Irish context:

- The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference pastoral letter for Catholic schools *Vision 08* (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (ICBC) 2008)
- *Share the Good News – The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) 2010)
- *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) 2019).

In *Vision 08*, the Catholic bishops of Ireland outline a vision for Catholic education in which they state 'while they share many characteristics with other schools in offering a public service, Catholic schools seek to reflect a distinctive vision of life and a corresponding philosophy of education' (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (ICBC) 2008, 2). They go on to describe how

Catholic schools are distinguished by faith in the transcendent mystery of God as the source of all that exists and as the meaning of human existence. This faith is not simply the subject-matter of particular lessons but forms the foundation of all that we do and the horizon of all that takes place in the school. (p.3)

They speak of a holistic approach to education – one that provides 'a framework of meaning and a sense of direction for their lives in a time of rapid and often confusing cultural and social change' (p.3). They place a high value on reason – both intellectual and practical – and regard the intellectual development of the person as a precious value in its own right. In continuity with the earliest traditions of the Church, they regard education and the cultivation of intellectual life as precious in themselves. They appreciate the importance of science and technology, but without allowing these to reduce education to a mechanistic rationality, thus diminishing the dignity of the human person. They want to ensure that faith and reason are vibrant partners in the human quest for understanding and ultimate fulfilment that is pursued in Catholic schools.

SGN (IEC 2010, esp. pp.204–210) offers comprehensive and specific objectives and indicators of achievement for the governance and oversight of Catholic schools, against which their performance and effectiveness might be measured. From the comprehensive list of indicators of achievement outlined, the following are particularly significant for BoMs:

- (a) Initial training courses for BoMs will include a specific section on understanding Catholic ethos and its implications for decision-making.

- (b) The Catholic school, utterly respectful of everyone's belief system, will invite all those who participate in its education system to know, understand and honour the characteristic spirit within which it builds its education community.
- (c) The BoM of a Catholic school will take on the role of overseeing the provision of a clearly defined mission statement, codes and policies reflecting the Catholic ethos and characteristic spirit of the school.
- (d) The principal of a Catholic school will be employed on the understanding that he or she is delegated by the BoM and has responsibility to encourage, develop and promote the ethos associated with that Catholic school.
- (e) Religious Education and faith formation will be 'evident strengths of the schooling provided by a Catholic school' (p.209).

The most recent ecclesial document on school ethos, *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) 2019, 17–21), resonates with both documents outlined above and articulates key expressions of ethos of the Catholic primary school including.

- (j) The school is founded on a Catholic understanding of education including a deep sense of the whole person, life and reality as a whole in the context of a broad Christian philosophy of education;
- (k) Religious education is an integral part of the life of the school. As such, it 'receives its allotted time for each year' (19) and includes faith formation, prayer and sacramental experiences, and a growing awareness of being stewards of God's creation.

In short, BoM members are tasked with creating a learning environment that reflects this holistic vision. They should be aware of and able to promote the Catholic vision of education and invite other stakeholders including teachers into a similar awareness; delegate promotion of that ethos to the principal, and oversee the living out of that ethos through, for instance, clearly defined mission statements, codes and policies, and adequate RE provision. Together, these indicators provide a framework of ethos-related benchmarks for BoMs. A clearly articulated indicator, training courses for BoMs that include a specific section on understanding Catholic ethos and its implications for decision-making, is essential in order to perform this task.

Support services for BoMs are provided at a national level primarily by the Catholic Primary Schools' Management Association (CPSMA), which offers guidance on issues ranging from legal compliance to child protection. CPSMA also has a remit for leadership of Catholic ethos. Recently, it produced some ethos-related resources for BoM members, such as the video entitled *Living our ethos, How are we doing* (2024), and a check list to accompany this video.

Some patrons (dioceses) have also made efforts in this sphere. For instance, the St Senan's Trust – a joint initiative of the dioceses of Kerry, Killaloe, Limerick and Cashel & Emlly – offers short training for new BoM members (Meehan and O'Connell 2025).

To conclude, in light of the bishops' expectations of a BoM and the statutory responsibilities assigned to them by the *Education Act 1998*, there are very clear indicators for the creation of benchmarks and an accountability framework for BoMs. Duffy and Molloy (2022) describe accountability as the formal obligation to submit to a mechanism designed to achieve external scrutiny in explaining and justifying past conduct, actions or performance, with the possibility of resulting consequences. Fundamentally, accountability operates as an individual virtue. Where it is collective, as in government or board accountability, then any consequences arising apply to all members of the collective (2022, 548).

For accountability to be just and fair, it must be clear what one is accountable for, for instance specified initiatives, objectives or results. The person being held accountable must have the authority to make the decisions that are called for and the competence to carry out the tasks involved, whether personally or through the appropriate delegation to support staff. There must be clear policies in place with which one has to comply. This might entail the utilisation of resources including personnel, finance and property. Finally, the necessary resources must be available to facilitate the successful execution of the assigned tasks or mission.

2. Materials and methods

This paper reflects the quantitative dimension of the GRACE (Ireland) project whereby surveys were employed to collect numerical data from a sample of individuals. A large body of data was initially gathered by means of an online survey using standardised questions to statistically analyse patterns, relationships, or characteristics of a large population (Conway et al. 2024).

Survey questionnaires were distributed to four cohorts of primary school stakeholders including members of BoMs, principals (including deputy principals), teachers and other school staff (including ancillary, support, and administrative staff). For the purposes of this article, this allowed us to triangulate responses of BoM members with those of other cohorts.

Table 1 below gives a breakdown of the number of respondents.

Data were collated and analysed thematically by means of frequency tables and cross tabulations (Braun and Clarke 2006). During the primary data collection phase, the research team prepared frequency tables as the responses were coming in. Once the entire data set was available, the team generated a set of frequency tables and graphs (mainly bar graphs) for each variable. The frequency tables and associated cross tabulations were organised thematically.

Table 1. Number of survey respondents at primary levels.

Questionnaire Cohort	Primary
Members of Board of Management	1,162
Principal or Deputy Principal	1,111
Teacher	794
Other Staff	122
Total	3,189

Results are discussed below under the themes that emerged from this process: (a) Communication of Ethos and Training for Ethos Implementation, and (b) Upholding the SGN Indicators of Ethos.

2.1. Limitations of research

While using a basic questionnaire allowed us to reach a large and wide sample of BoM members, it comes with some important limitations. For instance, the closed-ended/simple questions can oversimplify complex attitudes or experiences and limit the researcher's ability to explore why participants respond in certain ways. Moreover, questionnaires also depend on participants' honesty, which can be problematic when studying complex issues, such as school ethos.

3. Results

A total of 1162 BoM members participated in the survey: 48 per cent identify as female and 52 per cent as male. In terms of age, 26 per cent of BoM members are in the 50–59 age range. 24 per cent are aged 40–49, and just 5 per cent are under 39 years of age. The largest group (29%) is aged between 60 and 69, with the remainder (c.16%) in the over 70 age group. These members predominantly identify as Roman Catholic (93%), with 68 per cent describing themselves as committed and practising. Just under a fifth are committed to Christian values but not as practising Catholics. 7 per cent described themselves as spiritual but not religious, with the remainder from another/no faith tradition.

3.1. Communication of ethos and training for ethos implementation

Patrons delegate the management and governance of their schools to the BoM, which in turn appoints a principal to oversee the day-to-day management of each school (McGraw and Tiernan 2022). To fulfil its responsibility on behalf of the patron to promote and protect the school's ethos, the BoM should be well informed about the patron's vision, expectations and indicators for ensuring the ethos. In the case of Catholic primary schools, section 1.1 outlines how the patrons' vision, expectations and indicators are set out in three key documents issued by the Irish Catholic Bishops. However, the data on board

members' familiarity with these documents reveals that at least 75 per cent of board members are unsure or have not heard of *Vision 08*; 78 per cent have not heard of *SGN*; and 74 per cent have not heard of *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school*. Whereas it is not assumed that one cannot uphold the ethos without being familiar with the documents, lack of familiarity with the documents raises questions. For instance, where is participant understanding of Catholic ethos coming from and how does it align with the content of the documents?

Overall, BoM members appear reasonably confident that their schools run in accordance with the religious and educational philosophy (the ethos) of the patrons (see [Figure 1](#)).

While 73 per cent of members of the BoM say that they ensure that the school runs in accordance with the ethos of the patrons to a large extent, it is difficult to see how this is done, given their lack of knowledge and familiarity with key ecclesial documents. However, this lack of familiarity is unsurprising given the lack of ethos related training offered to BoMs. The findings show that almost one third of BoM members did not receive any training from the patron to prepare them to serve on the BoM of a Catholic school. A total of 50 per cent described the training as 'once-off or less often than yearly'. Catholic ethos was covered in that training to some extent by 35 per cent and to a large extent by 20%. The remaining 45 per cent either did not receive any training or Catholic ethos was not covered in the training. A significant number of BoMs receive no training with respect to ethos. Just as there is a deficiency in the initial training of BoMs, there is also a lack of continuing professional development for the boards, with just 20 per cent describing the training as ongoing (at least once a year). This lack of training also emerges from the data on principals: just under half (46%) of primary principals have received continual professional development (CPD) from their patron/trust to 'encourage, develop and promote the ethos' of their school. The remainder, at 54 per cent, has had no such training.

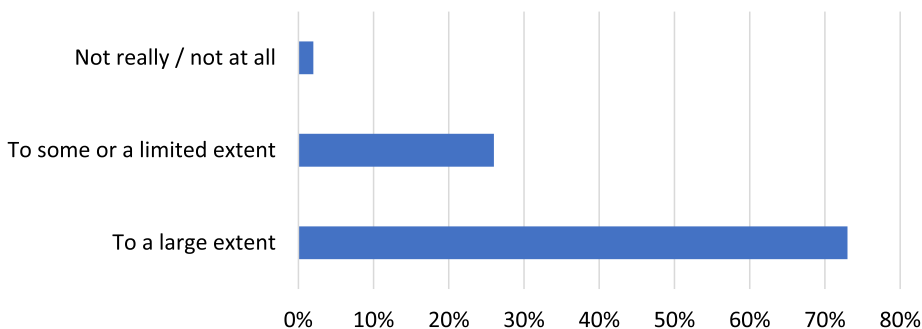


Figure 1. The Board of Management ensures that the school is run in accordance with the ethos of the patron.

The trickle-down effect is evident: for instance, just as BoMs were unfamiliar with Church documents on Catholic education, so were the primary principals. Among principals, 80 per cent are unsure or have not heard of *Vision 08*, and 86 per cent of principals are unsure or have not heard of *SGN*. Three-quarters of principals are also unsure or have not heard of *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school*, and of the quarter who have, 53 per cent have little to no familiarity with it.

This dearth of familiarity was even more pronounced among teachers: about 89 per cent of teachers are unsure or have not heard of *Vision 08*, and 87 per cent are unsure or have not heard of *SGN*. Again, 87 per cent of teachers are also unsure or have not heard of *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school*, and of the 13 per cent who have, 62 per cent have little to no familiarity with it.

The disconnect between the ecclesial indicators and the reality is stark. *SGN* (IEC 2010) expects the Catholic school, utterly respectful of everyone's belief system, to invite all those who participate in its education system (including teachers and parents/guardians) to know, understand and honour the characteristic spirit within which it builds its education community. The overall effect is clear: if BoMs, principals and teachers have not been sufficiently familiarised with the ethos documents, it is hard to see how the vision and indicators articulated in these documents can impact significantly on the life of the school. Some practical findings illustrate this reality. For instance, indicator (e) (see section 1.1) expects that faith development is a central educational aim of the Catholic school. At first glance, it appears that BoMs are achieving this indicator: 55 per cent of BoM members say they ensure to a large extent, and 37 per cent say they ensure to some or a limited extent that 'faith development is a central education aim of this school'. However, these figures are contested when triangulated with data from other stakeholders in the school community; for instance, as [Figure 2](#) demonstrates, only 18 per cent of teachers say that faith development is offered to them (Conway et al. 2024, 29).

A similar picture emerges regarding accountability structures between patrons, BoMs, and principals, regarding the delegated responsibility to uphold school ethos. For instance, in answer to the question 'as the BoM, do you report to the patron/trust on the faith life of the school?' the following results emerged (see [Table 2](#))

The reporting to the patron appears haphazard, with 73 per cent unsure or don't know if the board submits a report and 30 per cent sure that no report is submitted. For the minority who do submit reports, feedback from the patron is patchy (see [Table 3](#)), ranging from the 2 per cent of BoMs who receive patron feedback by means of an informal meeting to the 69 per cent who did not know or were unsure if there was any response at all from the patron.

This lack of systemic communication and accountability affects not only BoM practices and priorities, but also the ability of principals to encourage, develop

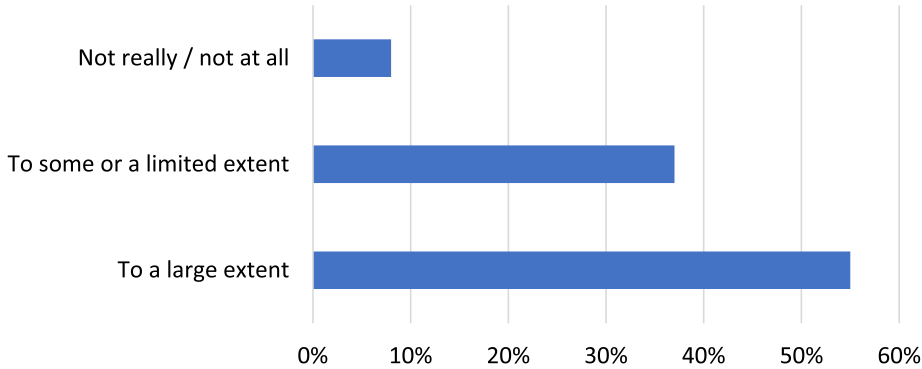


Figure 2. Percentage of staff who agree that faith development is offered to them.

and promote the ethos associated with that Catholic school (see Indicator D Section 1.1). Indeed, just 59 per cent of principals report that they are held accountable, to a large extent, for the implementation of the Catholic identity of their school.

Recent reports reveal that many principals feel at sea without clear lines of accountability. They see a substantial need for support both for themselves and for their teachers, identifying a significant need for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) around the Catholic identity of schools (Meehan and O’Connell 2025).

3.2. The board of management’s role in upholding key expressions of ethos

The consequences of this ethos (communication/training/accountability) support deficiency are reflected in responses to questions around the practical living out of ethos as advised in the documents. For instance, despite BoM responsibility for the mission statement and policies, only 59 per cent agree that the school has a mission statement based on Gospel values. Triangulation with data from other stakeholder cohorts reveals a discrepancy here: 89 per cent of principals say their school mission statement is Gospel-value based. This discrepancy may indicate that principals’ views are based on aspirations rather

Table 2. Do you, as Board of Management, report to the patron on the faith life of the school?

Responses	Percentage
Yes. We submit an annual report.	12%
Yes. We submit a report every very few years or so.	4%
Yes. We report informally to the diocesan advisor. ²	11%
We haven’t been asked / It didn’t come up.	25%
No.	5%
Don’t know/Unsure	43%
Grand Total	100.00%

Table 3. If you submit a report, do you receive feedback from your patron or trust?

Responses	Percentage
Yes. We receive a written report.	4%
Yes. We have a feedback meeting.	2%
Yes. The patron/trust gives feedback to their nominee(s).	8%
No.	17%
Don't know / Unsure	69%
Grand Total	100%

than realities or that BoMs are not entirely familiar with the mission statement of their schools. Findings also indicate that only 40 per cent of BoM members consider that the policy documents are linked to the mission statement. Either way, the result suggests a degree of misalignment with the SGN indicator that BoMs oversee the provision of a clearly defined mission statement that reflects the Catholic ethos and the characteristic spirit of the school.

A further SGN indicator, also articulated clearly in the CPSMA Handbook (2016), is that '[t]eachers will be employed on the understanding that they will commit themselves actively to supporting the ethos of the school' (#151). Although employment responsibility rests with the BoM, less than half (43%) of BoM respondents agree that their board ensures that all teachers employed uphold the Catholic ethos of the school. A closely comparable percentage (42%) leaves this to the school principal, and the remainder do not get involved or say this issue has not come up. Only 30 per cent of BoMs agree that their board ensures that the induction of new teachers includes the opportunity to focus on the Catholic character of the school. Half (50%) leaves to the school principal the responsibility for inducting teachers to the ethos of the school. While the pressures on schools to find any teachers to fill vacancies must be acknowledged, these data imply that many BoMs are either unaware of their employment responsibilities or delegate them without oversight to the principal. One way or the other, it appears that many BoMs take a somewhat hands-off approach to ensuring that teachers are well informed about the school's ethos. Even and perhaps especially, if a significant number of teachers may not identify or practice as Catholics, BoMs can be proactive, for example, by making representation to the patrons to ensure that such training is provided.

The final indicator (Indicator E) in this study relates to Religious Education (RE), identified as one of the key expressions of the characteristic spirit of a Catholic school (CSP 2019; IEC 2010). Catholic primary schools are required to ensure RE is taught five days a week and follows the curriculum and programme endorsed by the ICBC (Meehan et al. 2024). Whereas one-third of BoM members say they ensure that RE receives its allotted time and that the school follows the curriculum and textbooks approved by the ICBC, 50 percent generally leave this to the principal. The remainder (c.17%) either don't tend to get involved in this area, or it has not come up at BoM level (see Figure 3).

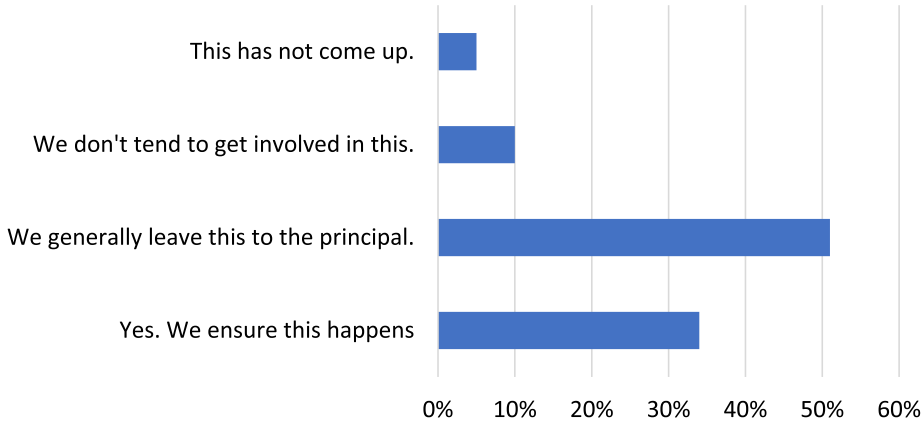


Figure 3. As a Board of Management, we ensure that Religious Education receives its allotted time for each year.

Again, triangulation of data with other cohorts suggests that even this level of RE provision may be aspirational rather than realistic. When teachers were asked a series of questions related to the teaching of RE (as part of the broader GRACE Ireland study), it was revealed that just 17 per cent of primary teachers teach RE every day. 18 per cent of teachers teach it on four days per week, 25 per cent teach it on three days per week, and 40 per cent teach the subject twice a week or less (see Meehan et al. 2024). These figures indicate that there is less than optimal oversight of the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools and that there is no indication that teachers failing to provide the statutory hours for it are being held accountable. In practical terms, many BoMs seem to be poorly informed about the actual practices in the classroom such as knowing to what extent the statutory time for Religious Education is being met.

Duffy et al. (2024) point out that it is the responsibility of the BoM to ensure that ethos expressions are properly overseen and provided for within the school setting. However, a system that expects patrons to hold their BoMs accountable for carrying out this task, and BoMs in turn to hold the principal responsible for ethos, must provide the necessary support, training, formation and oversight systems.

4. Discussion

The GRACE Ireland project shows that Catholic schools are performing well as educational institutions and that generally management and staff are happy to continue with their current arrangements (O’Connell et al. 2024). Parental reluctance when it comes to divestment shores up this finding (Duffy et al. 2024): overall, there is a great deal of satisfaction with Catholic schools. These schools rely on a host of nearly 20,000 volunteers who give selflessly and

without pay of any kind, and perform increasingly demanding tasks as members of Boards of Management throughout the length and breadth of the country.

However, the sustainability of this system comes into question when one considers how the schools are managed and led in terms of their Catholic ethos. The results of this study reveal a complex picture of ethos governance. A clear and coherent vision and policy for Catholic education is provided by the Irish Catholic Bishops through the three documents outlined in section 1.1. However, with scant training or formation available to BoMs to ensure that they are well informed about the Catholic vision of education, and very little investment in this work, there are low levels of awareness among them on policy documents, expected practices, and benchmark indicators of ethos.

Systems of accountability are lacking in several areas. BoMs do not consistently report to their patrons or trustees on how the ethos of the school is being upheld. There are few oversight standards in matters of ethos, for instance ensuring that the statutory time is given to RE on the timetable. Whereas the system suggests that patrons hold BOMs accountable, and BoMs delegate that responsibility to principals, it is an unworkable system without effective structured support and oversight of policies and practices.

The impacts of these findings lend support to the sense of looming crisis in school patronage referred to by Connolly, Conway, and Duffy (2023). For instance, less than half (43%) of primary BoM respondents agree that their board ensures all employed teachers uphold the Catholic ethos. Similarly, only 30 per cent of BoMs ensure that new teacher induction includes a focus on the Catholic character of the school. These results indicate a certain discrepancy between the professed vision regarding ethos and the lived reality in the school situation and an over reliance on the principal to attend to this critical area. Overarching challenges identified by this paper include.

- Communication Breakdown: poor communication of the Catholic vision from patrons to school BoMs.
- Investment in Formation: evidence demonstrating insufficient investment in training and formation for this stakeholder group.
- Accountability Deficits: accountability gaps observed across many areas of governance.

Some implications are clear: first, the ethos role of the BoM into the future. It is clear that attention has to be given to the proper formation, training and continuous professional development of BoMs on the importance and dynamics of Catholic ethos and its key expressions in the life of the school. This will require investment and robust engagement by patrons with the Department of Education to ensure sufficient resources to provide the necessary initial and ongoing formation for all concerned.

A second implication concerns the mismatch between primary school patronage and population demographics. 88 per cent of primary schools fall under the patronage of the Catholic Church, despite a steady decline in the numbers who identify as Catholic, and the age-related sliding scale described above. This gives rise to potential recruitment issues: with 2760 schools relying on c.20,000 volunteers, and with the changing religious identity demographics (see section 1), the ability of patrons to attract enough people willing and able to discharge ethos governance responsibilities is called into question. Despite agreement between Catholic and State leaders on the need for patronage diversity and government commitments in this regard, divestment remains stubbornly slow.

To address these challenges, a more proactive and structured approach to Catholic school governance is essential. This involves:

4.1. Support programmes

A clear need for ethos governance programmes that offer guidance and support, helping existing and potential BoM members to develop the necessary skills and confidence to govern ethos, emerges from this study. These programmes should focus on the vision of Catholic education and ethos indicators outlined in section 1.1, for instance developing a deep understanding of Catholic education principles, and the ability to integrate these principles into school policies and practices. Education around the ethos governance role might provide an opportunity for BOM members to take a proactive role, for instance:

- while acknowledging pressures to fill vacancies, ensuring teachers are informed about the school's ethos
- advocating for continuous professional development for the delegated ethos role of principals (54 per cent have received no ethos-related training from their patron) allowing for support and accountability systems for school/classroom practices
- overseeing practical aspects like adherence to statutory time for Religious Education (RE), and the quality of faith development.

4.2. Divestment

Continuing to engage with the State in the Schools Reconfiguration Process (divestment) to address the mismatch between school patronage and the changing demographics of Irish society. This partnership approach should also focus on introducing measures to alleviate the burdensome tasks of BoMs, thereby making time and space for school ethos.

To conclude, this research indicates the need for essential policy and practice developments to include support programmes for BoM members and a

practical approach to divestment. Further research into how this can be achieved in a feasible and timely manner would be helpful.

Notes

1. This research project is published as a series of six reports. See www.mic.ul.ie/GRACE.
2. The Diocesan Advisor is the representative of the bishop, responsible primarily for Religious Education.

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Institutional review board statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Mary Immaculate College, MIREC: A21-030, 5th May 2022.

Notes on contributors

Amalee Meehan is Assistant Professor with the School of Human Development at Dublin City University.

Daniel O'Connell is Assistant Professor of Religious Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

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