

Post-Primary Diocesan Advisor

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Dear Principal, Religious Education Teachers and Chaplains,

As, once again, you find yourself at the beginning of a new school year, I would like to take this opportunity to wish you every success and fulfillment in all that you will be called to undertake in the coming months.

I trust that you, the teachers and students, are happy with the outcome of the Leaving Certificate results and that this will serve to energise you to take on the task of beginning again.

I am conscious of the new and challenging circumstances facing Post-Primary Education in our country today.

We live in a time of increasing secularism, of social and economic uncertainty and change. There is an ever increasing pressure to remove the very heart and soul of education and make it responsive to a constantly evolving business model. There is a strong force, amongst some politicians, to remove the spiritual dimension of education. Education must always concern itself not alone with academic achievements and outcomes but with the holistic understanding and development of students. The pressures arising from ever increasing workloads, with an enormous amounts of paperwork and many other competing priorities, can make in increasingly difficult for a school to fully achieve these key objectives.

Today, more than ever, Post-Primary schools must commit to making adequate allowance for Religious Education when scheduling their timetables.

Schools managed by Vocational Education Committees, are directed to provide Religious Education "of the order of two hours per week". Likewise, the typical Deeds of Trust and Articles of Management for Community Schools and Community Colleges refer to the provision of two hours Religious Education per week, in accordance with the rites and practices of the religious denomination to which the student belongs.

In its guidelines the Irish Bishops' Conference states:

'In non-examination classes religious education should be allocated a minimum of two hours per week. It is not acceptable, for any reason, that this requirement be reduced in schools where the education of Catholic students takes place. Boards of Management and principals should do all in their power to prevent the erosion of this small number of hours on the timetable.'

In addition to class hours, time must be allowed for regular class, year and school based liturgies as well as an annual retreat or pilgrimage. In this way, God is experienced as a living presence as well as understood from a theoretical perspective.

In recent years, the school curriculum has come under increasing constraints with the introduction of additional subjects and activities. In particular, Social Political and Health Education (SPHE) and Civil, Social and Political Education (CSPE), because they overlap with Religious Education in some ways, have encroached on the provision of time for Religious Education. While related to Religious Education, these subjects are quite distinct and should not be counted as time spent in Religious Education. In schools where Religious Education is not provided as a State examination it is more tempting to sacrifice Religious Education in favour of purely academic subjects. Students deserve preparation for the spiritual as well as the economic realities of their lives.

As a Post-Primary Diocesan Advisor, working on behalf of Waterford and Lismore Diocese, I recommend that:

- all teachers on a school staff be made fully aware that Religious Education is a fundamental component of the school curriculum. It is not concerned with indoctrination or teaching a person a religious way of behaving. Rather, it involves showing a person how to use words and concepts so as to understand a field called religion. It is no different from the teaching of any other subject e.g. English, Geography or Mathematics.
- Religious Education must never be considered in terms of an optional extra to the school curriculum. For example, in the senior cycle, Religious Education must never be positioned against other subjects as an option rather than as a core subject.
- Religious Education, in line with other subjects, must be be allotted two hours or a minimum of three class periods per week. Anything less deprives students of the necessary continuity necessary to engage with the subject material and establish a rapport with the Religious Education teacher.
- Religious Education be given an appropriate place on the timetable. First period or last period of the day is not recommended especially for Senior Students.
- all schools have a Religious Education policy statement and a subject plan.

I am looking forward to meeting with you over the coming months. I propose to make two formal visits to each school. The first visit to take place between October and December, 2014 and the second visit between February and May, 2015. In the first visit I will be focusing on the area of Chaplaincy, Religious Education policies and subject planning.

Finally, a reminder that the Annual Seminar for Religion Teachers will take place in Hotel Kilkenny on Tuesday the 7th October, 2014.

I commend you for the energy, commitment and enthusiasm you bring to maintaining a strong Catholic Education in your Post-Primary school and for the support you give to each other to stand strong despite the difficulties surrounding you.

It has been a privilege and a blessing for me to come among you in the past twelve months, to experience your friendliness, good humour and the warmth of your welcome.

Please be assured of my continued support and do not hesitate to contact me at any time you see fit.

As you begin the first week of the new school year, may the following quotation from Oscar Romero inspire and invigorate you with fresh belief in your role as principal, teacher and chaplain:

'We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.'

May God guide and support you in your onerous but privileged role of shaping and guiding young peoples' lives both now and into the future.

Kind regards,

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