

Education and Training Board (ETB)

# Guidelines on Religious Diversity and Inclusion in ETB Schools

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DRAFT 7

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## **ETB Guidelines on Religious Diversity and Inclusion**

- Michael Moriarty to write the introduction – rationale and context...  
refer to UL study in the intro: ‘Exploring and Expressing Characteristic Spirit in publically managed Schools in the ETB sector’.
- Status of circulars?

### **Introduction**

The new ETB Act (2013) heralds a new era for publically-managed schools and a timely opportunity to examine how ETB schools cater for different religions and worldviews in their schools. The history of the development of ETB schools is complex due to the strong influence of the Catholic Church on their ethos and the State’s requirements regarding the provision of religious instruction in these schools. [a1] These guidelines arise out of a need in the ETB sector for dialogue and guidance regarding how ETB schools accommodate different faiths and world-views on a practical level.

School populations have undergone significant change in the last decade. The 2011 Census records that 17 percent of the Irish population is from immigrant backgrounds, almost 50,000 residents describe themselves as Muslim and 6 percent of the Irish population claim to have no religion ([www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)). As well as the State becoming more religiously diverse, there is a significant growth in the level of secularism. This change and diversification has resulted in much change and challenge for ETB schools with schools under pressure to adopt more inclusive practices. Educational policy and provision, therefore, needs to address this reality.

### **Ethos and Characteristic Spirit[a2]**

It is important to acknowledge that catering for diversity in our schools does not solely focus on the religious and cultural dimensions of the student population. The characteristic spirit of a school is described in the Education Act 15 (2) (b) as being ‘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’. Real inclusion, therefore, caters to all forms of diversity – the socioeconomic, learning and aptitudinal needs of students. Furthermore, the issues of quality of service provision, good governance and accountability also need to be taken account of. For example, an inclusive ETB school ensures that:

- All children in a catchment area have an equal opportunity to enrol in the school – irrespective of religious affiliation, socio-economic status, ethnicity, language, etc.
- The school seeks to meet the educational needs of all students, irrespective of their beliefs, aptitudes, interests or special educational needs.
- The values of inclusion, fairness, justice and care all permeate the life of the ETB School.

These guidelines will specifically address the challenges and opportunities facing ETB schools as a result of the growth in both religious diversity and secularism. A significant challenge to the ETB sector is that its ethos or denominational nature and role in terms of the position of religion in the life of its schools, is unclear.

### **Historical Context: Religious Instruction in VEC Schools**

The 1930 Vocational Act introduced by the Minister for Education, John Marcus O’Sullivan, was the state’s first intervention in accepting responsibility for education provision (Clarke, 2012). Up until then, the government’s role in education had been one of minimal interference. It had limited power over national or secondary schools, which were under the control of clergy or religious orders and Catholic education had developed principally without state participation.

In 1931 the Department of Education provided the VEC sector with guidelines for religious education in VEC schools (Department of Education, Memorandum V.1). They directed Committees to provide facilities for religious instruction and to incorporate such instruction into the general class timetable. According to Memorandum V1, VECs were to approach the local ecclesiastical authorities with regard to the actual teaching of religion and a ‘reasonable’ proportion of time was to be set aside for this purpose.

A new set of guidelines was issued in 1942, known as Memorandum V.40. The values espoused in this memorandum were strongly theological. It directed that ‘...with due regard to the rights of parents’, all vocational school pupils should receive instruction in the fundamentals of the Christian faith and that ‘... the teaching of every other subject be permeated with Christian charity ...’ (Department of Education, 1942). The general purpose of Vocational schools according to Memorandum V.40 is:

...to develop, with the assistance of God's grace, the whole man with all his faculties, natural and supernatural, so that he may realise his duties and responsibilities as a member of society, that he may contribute effectively to the welfare of his fellow man, and by so doing attain the end designed for him by his Creator (Memorandum V.40).

In a memorandum in 1974 from the Minister regarding the setting up of Boards of Management in Vocational schools (Circular 73/74, 1974), the Board of Management of VEC schools is charged with ensuring that there is religious worship and instruction for pupils in accordance with the rites, practice and teaching of the religious denomination to which the pupil belongs. The Board was to see that 2.5 hours of religious instruction took place for each student, apart from those students withdrawn from religious instruction by their parents. While this clearly acknowledges a recognition and respect for different denominations and approaches to religious instruction, there was an assumption that there would only be few non-Catholics in a then relatively homogenous Ireland.

In 1979, another circular letter (7/79) was issued following agreement between the Department of Education, the IVEA (Irish Vocational Education Association), the CFO's association, the teachers' union and the church authorities.

This circular stated the following regarding religious instruction in VEC schools:

- A recommendation for **two hours religious instruction** per week on the VEC school timetable
- Representation for the appropriate religious authority on the selection board for the post of religion teacher
- The approval of the appropriate religious authority regarding the acceptability of a candidate for appointment as a religion teacher
- The transfer of a religion teacher to other duties should s/he cease to be regarded as suitable for that purpose by the catechetical inspectorate
- The inspection of the teaching of religion in Vocational schools – this to be the responsibility of the catechetical inspectorate.

The guidelines included in the 1979 circular, like those of the earlier guidelines, were not intended to assist schools to cope with religious diversity. Rather, they were intended to ensure that Vocational schools included what was considered to be an appropriate religious



education in a system which was not directly controlled by the religious authorities (O Reilly, 2011).

In many ways this system seemed to work in Ireland until the mid to late 1990s. The range of religious diversity to be managed in Irish schools was limited to the relatively small number of students from protestant families and an even smaller minority of humanist, agnostic or atheist families. These families occasionally drew attention to their need to have their religious or non-religious views taken into account in a school with a manifest Roman Catholic ethos and the solution was generally to respect the right of parents to withdraw their children from religious education class.

In the meantime, the social fabric of Irish society has changed greatly. The circulars have not been updated and predate the 1998 Education Act and the Vocational Education (Amendment) Act, 2001.

## **Part 2: Current Practice**

### **Types of ETB Schools: Defining Terms**

At present in Ireland there are 254 ETB schools including community colleges and 95 community/comprehensive schools. This accounts for approximately 48 percent of all second level schools. They are administered by Education Training Boards (ETBs) and while there are different names for the various schools, there are essentially two categories of ETB schools, with different approaches:

#### **Model Agreement (Designated) Community Colleges**

Designated Community Colleges are distinguished from ETB schools due to the signing of a model agreement with another trustee partner - the local diocese and/or a religious congregation or other recognised school patron. The majority of these schools are usually, though not always, the result of a merger between a voluntary secondary school and an ETB (formerly VEC) school. The Model Agreement, as well as giving the trustee partner representation on the school board of management and on staff selection panels also guarantees certain aspects of the school's characteristic spirit. Since the vast majority of trustee partners are either religious orders or the local Catholic diocese, the guarantee is usually ensuring a Catholic ethos in the school. Religious Education is provided for all

students in accord with their religious tradition, and a chaplain is employed ex quota. While Model Agreement (Designated) Colleges involve a trustee partner the ETB is the sole patron [a3]and therefore the ultimate managing authority for such schools.

Recently, Educate Together and An Foras Pátrúnachta have also come on board as trustees in the establishment of a community college. There are currently approximately 45 Designated Community Colleges in Ireland and the State funds the employment of chaplains in these schools. It is important to note that all ETB schools that use the title community colleges are not Model Agreement (Designated) community colleges.

### **Other ETB Schools and Colleges (Non-Designated)**

These schools all operate under the structure of the local ETB but have been providing Religious Education and formation in accordance with Circular 7/70, which states that R.E and formation is provided for all students for two hours per week.

Irrespective of whether they are called community colleges, vocational schools, post-primary school or institutes these schools do not involve a trustee partner. The ETB is the sole body influencing the management and ethos of these schools and their ethos is multi-denominational. The title ‘community college’ first came into being in relation to the designated community college but, over time, many ‘vocational schools’ adopted the title as it carried a certain cachet.

### **Characteristics of Multidenominational Schools**

The European and United Nations Conventions on Human Rights and the Rights of the Child and the Toledo Principles now steer the policy of state bodies in ways that were not taken account of in the 1970's. Multidenominational schools in Ireland can in fact be described as ‘common schools’. These are schools that are open to all students in a democratic society, regardless of religion, class, cultural or ethnic background (Alexander & McLaughlin, 2003). Common schools promote a shared sense of values and citizenship in their school communities and provide equal opportunities for all students. Characteristics of such a multidenominational or common school are:

- All students are educated together, regardless of their religion, language or ethnicity;
- There is a commitment to the shared values of justice, equality and rationality, based on a liberal, democratic state;

- Human Rights are the central tenets of the schools. There are equal educational experiences for all students regardless of their gender, religion, race, sexuality, social class or ethnicity.
- Differences and diverse ways of life are respected and celebrated, preparing students for a plural, multicultural society.

Publically-managed, common schools in Ireland are required to respond to these challenges at both policy and practical levels. A more accurate description of these schools is that they are multi-belief in nature rather than multid denominational. ETB schools must take into account how they cater for religious diversity and differing beliefs in their schools and what approach is taken towards religious education.

### **Religious Education in ETB Schools**

Religious education has always been a compulsory subject in ETB schools due to the 73/74 and 7/79 Circulars. If ETB schools are to be truly inclusive and multi-belief in nature, the way in which Religious Education is approached needs to be carefully considered.

Religious Education in ETB schools is an area of confusion and debate among religious educators, due largely to the lack of clarity regarding their characteristic spirit and ethos. The teaching of religion in Ireland has also become a matter of intensifying debate, not just in the Irish context, but throughout Europe. There is a need for clarity regarding the language and terms we use when referring to religious education. Historically in Ireland the term ‘religious instruction’ has been used in our constitution and legal documents. Religious instruction refers to:

...the educating ‘into’ religion structured as a timetabled subject in which pupils of a particular religious faith or tradition are brought together separately from other pupils in the school ... and are offered a programme based upon a curriculum defined by the relevant religious authority of their faith tradition and inspected by that authority (McGrady, 2013, p. 81).

The existence of the terms religious education and religious instruction complicates the argument in ETB schools today. The terms are not interchangeable and mean quite different things. As discussed earlier, DES circulars referring to VEC schools clearly refer to ‘religious instruction’ taking place during the school day. However, due to the growing secularisation of Ireland and the complexity of welcoming different religions into Irish

schools, most educators, particularly at second level, prefer to adopt the term ‘religious education’. This term implies a broader, more phenomenological approach to education *about* religions. This may be justified as a more inclusive practice in ETB schools however; the term ‘religious instruction’ does have legal and constitutional implications.

The NCCA Religious Education syllabus has been embraced by most ETB schools in Ireland and holds a set of aims that point to the possibility of a common programme being taught for all faiths and world-views in the classroom. However, the question remains regarding the requirements of Circular Letter 73/74. It requires ETB schools to provide religious worship and instruction for pupils in accordance with the rites, practice and teaching of the religious denomination to which the pupil belongs.

In 2013 the Minister for Education and Skills and the NCCA announced that the delivery of the Junior Certificate would be radically reformed over the coming years. This may include Religious Education and will involve students taking either long or short courses in Religious Education. ETB schools therefore, will need to be clear with parents about what approach will be taken to Religious Education and how it will be delivered during the full cycle of second level education.

This clearly points to the need for DES Circulars regarding religious instruction in ETB schools to be reviewed and re-written in light of the current realities and social fabric of a pluralistic Ireland.

### **Religious Education in Europe**

The question remains as to which approach to religious education is most suitable for publically-managed ETB schools in Ireland. It is helpful to look to our European neighbours regarding how they have negotiated religious education in their schools. In reality, the term ‘religious education’ is generally employed in public schools in Europe. It is a subject that is believed to have potential to promote democratic citizenship, the common good and mutual understanding (Council of Europe, 2006). In **Finland**, for example, where 80 percent of the population are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, religious education is a compulsory subject both in comprehensive schools and in secondary schools, mostly in the creed of the Lutheran majority. However, along with studying about other religions, every student can receive religious education according to his or her own religion if the

denomination is registered in Finland. Interestingly, religious education within a particular tradition will be organised if there is a minimum of three pupils in the school belonging to that tradition. Also, because religious education is a compulsory subject, pupils who do not belong to any religious group are taught ethics.

An intense and long public debate took place in Norway in the 1990s, where 86 percent of the population are Lutheran. The result was that confessional religious education was displaced by a non-confessional approach called ‘Christianity, Other Religions and Moral Education’ in 1997. The aim of the religious education programme is to enable students to deal with existing plurality while recognising Norway’s’ cultural heritage.

### **Ways Forward for Religious Education in ETB Schools[\[a4\]](#)**

The advent of the new Junior Cycle Framework provides an opportunity for ETB schools to review their approach to religious and ethical education and how they cater to religious difference. Schools need to decide how to meet the needs of their student population through the statements of learning and key skills. The following Statements of Learning from the Junior Cycle Framework may feed directly into courses on Religious Education:

The student:

5. Has and awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making
6. Appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and cultures in which she/he lives.

‘In our plural society, Religious Education must offer students the opportunity to identify and articulate concerns or questions about religion and religious difference. It can be a crucial space for students to develop skills and insights that can lead to a more harmonious, cohesive society.

Religious Education is part of the intercultural dynamics of the contemporary school...Since 9/11 religion cannot be considered a private issue, but is placed at the core of education, and must be considered as a part of intercultural dialogue”

(Roebben, 2008).

### **Multi-Belief RE and Community National Schools**

This approach to RE has been explored by the Community National School model and may be an approach that ETBs could also explore at second level.

Community National Schools (CNS) were established by Minister Mary Hanafin in 2007 with the Department of Education as its patron. They are publically-managed state schools with the ETB as the patron in waiting. In recognition of the diversity now present in many communities in Ireland, Minister Hanafin stated that this new model of schooling would be multi-denominational, ensuring that the schools cater for the diversity of religious faiths represented in the area served by the school. *"Provision will be made within the school setting for the religious, moral and ethical education of children in conformity with the wishes of their parents"* (Hanafin, 2007).

There were children in these schools of Catholic, Church of Ireland, Evangelical, Muslim, Hindu and no stated religious backgrounds. As the de facto patron was a State body, no one religion could be privileged over another. Parity of esteem and respect for all was paramount. As the de facto patron, the ETB also had to establish and ensure the ethos or characteristic spirit of the CNS model ran through the life of the school. This ethos was quickly established as one of inclusion with the overriding mission at all times of ensuring respect and welcome for all the children attending the school, no matter what their ability, socioeconomic background, culture or religion.

To date these schools are largely catering for minority ethnic communities in Ireland with 74 percent of parents being from different nationalities other than Irish (Department of Education, 2014, p.4). The ethos of the schools state that *"Everybody is valued and treated with respect and diversity is recognised and celebrated. Respect for plurality of faiths is seen as integral to the daily routine of the school"* ([www.cns.ie](http://www.cns.ie)).

The CNS model caters for children of all faiths and none and offers multi-belief religious instruction, according to the wishes of parents, during the school day. The schools are piloting an approach to religious education which seeks to nurture and support all children in their beliefs and worldviews through a common multi-belief programme known as '*Goodness Me! Goodness You!*' (GMGY).

### **Goodness Me Goodness You: Multi-Belief Programme**

The “Goodness Me Goodness You” programme is taught each day for the patron’s half hour.

The programme is based on the following Guiding Principles:

1. Community National Schools seek to nurture the development of the whole child, and they value all dimensions of the child’s family and community life, including beliefs and religions.
2. Parents are the primary educators of their children, and families and communities are responsible for passing on traditions, values and beliefs.
3. Respect for and celebration of the different beliefs of children is central to the ethos of a Community National School. This is mirrored in the GMGY programme and the facilitation of inter-faith/belief conversation.
4. The GMGY programme is developed with school communities in a process of engagement with partners.

Children are taught a common programme of religion that acknowledges the religious identity of each child in an age appropriate manner. This approach acknowledges the belief identity of pupils in a respectful and inclusive manner; informs children and parents about difference and commonalities and creates a school community that acknowledges all. This approach also seeks to foster religious harmony and understanding between groups, including those of a secular viewpoint.

For four weeks every year, the children are divided into their faith or belief groups to focus on religious instruction or formation within their own faith or belief tradition.



### **Part 3: Practical Guidelines for ETB Schools**

This section outlines recommendations for good practice in a multi-belief ETB school. Each ETB school is encouraged to devise their own policy to cater for religious/belief diversity that meets the needs of their own school.

#### **Ethos and Characteristic Spirit[a5]**

##### **Enrolment in ETB schools**

A lot of difficulty can be prevented if schools have a clear **Admissions Policy**. Schools should clearly state in their Admissions Policy that they are a multi-belief school and that students of all faiths and beliefs are equally welcome. This means that in such schools members of any belief group cannot be granted a priority in enrolment.

##### Suggestions for schools around enrolment:

- Parents or guardians of all incoming students could be sent appropriate literature about the school outlining its ethos and curriculum.
- If an evening for incoming parents is arranged part of the evening programme could be to discuss the ethos and how Religious Education is approached in the school. This can help ensure that parents recognise that their beliefs and worldviews will be respected in the school.

##### **Multi-Belief Programme / Religious Education**

2 hours per week?[a6]

RE programmes in ETB schools should view their obligations to respect and fulfil the right to freedom of religion by including the teaching of a range of belief systems within the RE curriculum and the wider school curriculum (Mawhinney, Niens, Richardson & Chiba, 2010, p.7). An audit of the different beliefs in a year group could be conducted each year and RE teachers could ensure that these beliefs and worldviews are represented on curriculum for that year group. However, parents or guardians have the right to withdraw their son or daughter from the RE programme, as is their constitutional right (see Appendix A).

##### **Withdrawal from Religion Class**

Students cannot be required to receive religious education against the wishes of the student's parents or against their own wishes once they turn 18 years of age. However, withdrawal



from religion class needs to be negotiated with school management and was hopefully addressed during their enrolment meeting.

Withdrawing students from class present the school with considerable logistical and supervision dilemmas. Schools are not obliged to supervise students outside of the Religion class or to provide another subject for the student as an alternative. However, our schools should make every effort to accommodate parent's wishes or the students', once they have turned 18.

### **Approaches to Managing Withdrawal from RE Class**

It is important that schools state that withdrawal from RE class is not a 'free class' to do homework. This is the allocated RE time on the timetable and students of all faiths and beliefs should be required to use this time to study material relating to their own religious tradition or belief system, for example, a sacred text. If a student is humanist or atheist there is relevant literature or philosophical texts that could be read during this time. This approach highlights the importance the school places on religious formation and education for *all* of their students.

However, merely allowing students to opt out of religious education does not constitute respect for the beliefs of students from a minority belief system. In 2010 a study on the views of students of minority belief backgrounds regarding their right to opt out of religious education was carried out through Queens University, Belfast (Mawhinney, Niens, Richardson & Chiba, 2010). Some of the key findings from this research tell us that the existence of the right to opt out of religious education does not necessarily lead to minority students feeling that their religion or beliefs are acknowledged or respected in the school. This finding is supported by Smyth and Darmody (2011) who conclude from their research that the ways in which schools address religious diversity is an important issue for ethnic minority parents and students. They also state that some ethnic minority students admitted to '...taking part in religious education class in order not to be singled out as different' (2011, p.137).

The Queen's Report acknowledges that while many students of minority beliefs feel supported by their peers and, at times, by their teachers, the lack of attention given to their beliefs in the RE curriculum causes them to feel that these beliefs are not valued or respected by the school, nor indeed more widely by the education system (Mawhinney, Niens,

Richardson & Chiba, 2010). Even when transparent policies and procedures are in place in schools regarding students' withdrawal from RE, the lack of consultation with students of minority beliefs led to a sense among many of them that their beliefs were not of interest or concern to their school.

In order for pupils to feel respected and protected in their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, young people expected schools to move beyond merely offering a poorly executed opt-out clause (2010, p.5).

This highlights the need for ETB schools to examine how they cater for students of minority beliefs within the RE programme. And what provision is in place regarding their moral and spiritual development should they opt out of the programme?

The Forum Report on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Coolahan et al, 2012), recommends that schools explore with parents of minority belief groups and their leaders how they might assist those who 'opt-out', for example, through the provision of appropriate materials for the students to use, supplemented by occasional visits from representatives of their belief system. It also recommends cooperation with the parent association regarding supporting minority groups in the school.

**In summary:**

- Parents / Guardians have the right to withdraw they son or daughter from RE.
- Students who have reached the age of 18 years have the right to withdraw from RE.
- Schools are not obliged to supervise students outside of the Religion class or to provide another subject for the student as an alternative.
- However, the school should make every effort to support the student and wishes of the parents.
- When a student withdraws from RE, they are required to use that time to study something from their own belief system. It is not a free class or a time to study another subject.

Question: What percent of a faith/belief community needs to exist in a school to be catered for?

## Religious Festivals and Times of Significance

An increasing number of students have less and less experience of ritual and prayer outside that which they are offered in the school context. However, despite the circular letters that exist instructing VEC schools to provide for the religious worship and instruction of all pupils in their schools, this seems to have become a very grey area.

In a publically-managed school, it is necessary that all beliefs are respected and no communal celebrations are in conflict with the constitutional, legal or human rights of the students. The report from the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (2012) recommends that:

“...Boards of Management should develop a school policy, supported by Department guidelines, on religious and cultural celebrations in their schools. Boards should ensure that celebrations are inclusive, educational and respectful of the differing traditions of the children in their school” (p.93).

The influence of Humanist and Atheist world-views regarding school rituals have resulted in opportunities for dialogue and common rituals being designed in some ETB schools. The solution is not to disregard religious celebrations or different times of significance for students, but rather to mark a number of appropriate times of the year that reflect the student population in the school. For example, a school may decide to celebrate **Christmas (Christians)**, **Eid-al-Fitr (Islam)**, **Diwali (Hindu)** and **Charles Darwin Day (Humanist)**. It is appropriate to display symbols of significance for these events around the schools during these times, *provided there is an equity and consistency in the approach to each festival or time of significance.*

### In summary:

- Religious and secular celebrations can be marked and ritualised in an ETB school;
- These should reflect the different beliefs of the student population of the school;
- There must be equity and balance in the time and level of celebration given to each religious festival or celebration.

## Religious Symbols

The solution to the accommodation of different religions and worldviews in some schools seems to have been the elimination of any religious symbols. The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism Report recommends that Boards of Management should develop school policy on

the educational display of religious and non-religious artefacts in the school. “Such displays ought not to be exclusive to any one faith or tradition but should have a balance, reflective of the beliefs of children attending the schools” (2012, p. 93).

In 2011, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the 47 member-states of the Council of Europe (including Ireland), are not violating anyone’s rights by displaying religious symbols like the crucifix in public places like the walls of State classrooms. Therefore, publically-managed schools do not have to remove religious symbols from their school environment to be inclusive but rather should ensure a fair representation of the various belief systems in their school.

**In summary:**

- Symbols from various religious and beliefs systems can be displayed in and ETB school;
- A fair representation of the various belief systems in their school must be ensured.

**Examples of how Religious Festivals of Times of Significance can be marked:**

**Celebrating Christmas in an ETB School:**

- A Christmas tree and a crib can be displayed.
- A Christmas concert could be held in the school with both religious and non-religious Christmas songs. The story and meaning of Christmas can be spoken about during this concert or during class time.
- Charity fund-raising to promote solidarity with people struggling during Christmas.

**Celebrating Eid-al-Fitr in an ETB School:**

- Eid art can be displayed around the school.
- The story and meaning behind of Eid can be explained in classes or at a school assembly.
- Charity fund-raising to promote solidarity with people struggling during Eid.
- A celebration of food could be arranged in class or year groups.
- A parent or member of the Islamic community could be invited to speak to classes.

### Celebrating Darwin Day in an ETB School:

Darwin Day is a global celebration of science and reason held on or around February 12th, the birthday anniversary of evolutionary biologist Charles Darwin. It is a day often celebrated by Humanists and different secular groups and the values of intellectual bravery, perpetual curiosity and hunger for truth are celebrated on this day. Possible ways to mark Darwin Day:

- Darwin Discourse: Invite a guest speaker to discuss the importance of intellectual bravery, perpetual curiosity, and hunger for truth. Topics might come from a wide range of fields including: science, ethics, literature, technology, art, or politics.
- Discovery Day: Display projects on natural history around the school.

### Celebrating Graduation in Sixth Year:

Traditionally, sixth year graduations have often been marked with a Catholic Mass. It is vital that the entire student population of the graduating class are together for their graduation and celebrate in a way that does not exclude any student on the grounds of religion or belief.

A creative celebration in ritual form, representing the different beliefs of the students in a year group could be organised. The following elements could be components of the ritual:

- Music
- Poetry
- Readings from sacred texts
- Silence/meditation/prayer
- Dance
- Blessings
- Art
- Reflections

The celebration of Eucharist for a Graduating class is only appropriate if the population of the graduating class are all Roman Catholic and they wish to have a Eucharistic celebration.

## Quiet Rooms

All students in an ETB school should be encouraged in their spirituality and practice. One way of doing this is to provide a space in the school that fosters quiet and reflection. All members of the school community are welcome in this space and encouraged to avail of it. It is best to keep a room of this nature free from any particular religious symbols. Images from nature and soft neutral colours may be an option.

### Possible uses for a Quiet Room:

- Inter-faith class services e.g. at a time of bereavement or exams.
- The room could be a space to practice yoga or meditation with groups.
- A space to sit in silence
- Different faith groups may wish to gather there for different reasons. For example, it may be where Muslim students might go to pray during prayer times in the school day. Some Christian groups may wish to meet there occasionally for Bible-study.

Pupils and staff of any tradition should be welcome to pray in the school's quiet room. Students of different faiths can also be encouraged in their use of the room through the provision of prayer mats, small cushions or meditation stools and shelves to leave their shoes outside the room should they wish.

## Religious Diet and ETB Schools

Another area for consideration in ETB schools is food. Muslims eat *Halal* food. They do not eat pork and only eat meat that has been slaughtered by people 'of the book', i.e. people from a monotheistic tradition; Judaism, Christianity or Islam. The only cutlery Muslim students can use is cutlery that is only used for Halal food. This can present a challenge for students who wish to use school canteens. The most sensible way around this seems to be to invite students to bring in their own cutlery from home.

Sensitivity needs to be shown to students who fast for religious reasons, for example, Muslims during Ramadan or Baha'is during the 19 Day Fast Period. Where appropriate, a school could offer a room away from the canteen during lunchtime for these students.

Improved communication between schools and faith groups need to be established regarding the issue of dietary requirements. A discussion of religious diets in the classroom could prove educational for teachers as well as pupils.

### **School Uniform**

No pupil or staff member should be prevented from wearing a religious symbol or garment in accordance with their tradition, for example, the hijab for Muslim girls or the turban for Sikh boys. Freedom of religious expression is a basic human right and is in keeping with a multi-denominational approach to education:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (UDHR, Article, 18).

However, the school can request that the colour of a hijab or turban is in keeping with the colours of the school uniform. In the case of a full veil over a girl's face (*Niqab*), this is a more challenging issue. The wearing of the *niqab* in Irish schools is a rare occurrence. However, daily activities in school life presents various situations where a full veil may cause difficulty on either health or safety or pedagogical and examination grounds.

The following governmental recommendations regarding school uniforms were issued in September 2008:

No school uniform policy should act in such a way that it, in effect, excludes students of a particular religious background from seeking enrolment or continuing their enrolment in a school. However, this statement does not recommend the wearing of clothing in the classroom which obscures a facial view and creates an artificial barrier between pupil and teacher. Such clothing hinders proper communication.

## **Curricular Challenges for Some Muslim Students**

### **Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE)**

The concern most Muslim parents have in the area of sex education is not whether sex education is taught or not, but rather they are concerned with the moral framework or context in terms of methodology and content, and the assumptions that may underpin the teaching of it.

Islamic parents prefer to provide guidance about sexual behaviour and the way in which men and women should relate to each other to their children at home and often rather they do not attend Sex Education classes. Schools should inform parents when Sex Education is to be taught and to provide an opportunity for parents to view all the resources to be used or withdraw them from class.

### **Music**

Participation in Music class is seldom a problem for Islamic pupils. There is a great diversity of opinion regarding music amongst Muslims. These are often influenced by local cultures and varying religious interpretations. Traditionally, music is limited to the human voice and non-tuneable percussion instruments such as drums.

The concern from Muslims is often about ‘modern’ pop music that may include obscene language, encourage or promote sexual or violent behaviour or encourage the consumption of intoxicants and drugs. It is important to explain to Muslim parents who wish to withdraw their son or daughter from Music class that such pop songs are not part of the music syllabus. The Music course is very varied, teaching composition, the history of western music, different musical styles and genres, performance and Irish music. Students do not necessarily learn pop songs and for their practical exam (musical performance), there is no reason why a Muslim student or group of students cannot sing some Islamic texts and use a drum.

### **Physical Education (P.E.)**

Generally speaking, girls are not encouraged to partake in sports that involve physical contact with the opposite sex. It is acceptable for boys to partake in sports that involve physical contact (e.g football, basketball) but not against girls.

Concern also arises around swimming and the P.E. uniform for girls. If a short skirt is worn for sports, some Muslim girls may wish to wear a tracksuit underneath the skirt, in the



interests of modesty. Swimming can cause much concern. Muslim girls would be concerned about wearing bikinis and sometimes even a swimsuit. The Islamic Cultural Centre suggest a short wet suit as an alternative for girls and request that girls and boys do not swim together. They also feel strongly that security cameras should be switched off to guarantee the privacy of the women.

While hijabs could be considered unsafe to wear for certain sports, a sports hijab is a safe alternative.

### **Curricular Challenges for Jehovah's Witnesses**

**Halloween** causes difficulties for Jehovah's Witnesses and some evangelical groups that place strong emphasis on Scripture. They consider Halloween to be a pagan ritual that promotes false worship. In Deuteronomy 18:10-13 the Old Testament is very clear that the faithful should avoid 'bad spirits' and 'spells and omens'.

**Birthdays** are also deemed to be a pagan practice for Jehovah's Witnesses therefore they do not celebrate birthdays. They believe it to be a secular custom that has no mention or foundations in the Bible. Parents of Jehovah's Witnesses prefer to buy gifts for their children during the year rather than celebrating the day of their birth.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate **Christmas**. Jesus' birthday is unknown and was set as December 25<sup>th</sup> during the 4<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, this was the date of the winter-solstice festival called the 'Birth of the Sun' because the sun appeared to grow stronger again as the days became longer once again. This day was chosen to replace the pagan festival with the celebration of the light that broke forth into the world through Christ and the symbolism of the *Sol Invictus* was transferred to Christ.

However, the early Christians did not celebrate Christmas and there is no Biblical evidence for it. Therefore, Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate Christmas or accept presents on this day. It is understood as a secular custom.

## **Funerals and Commemorations of the Dead in Different Faith Traditions<sup>1</sup>**

When there is a death in the school community, it would be usual to contact the bereaved family to express the school's condolences and to discuss the most appropriate response for the school. This is very important when the deceased is from a tradition the chaplain may not be familiar with. The following offers some insight into how some traditions approach the commemoration of their dead.

### **Hindu Funerals**

Hindus believe in reincarnation and view death as the soul moving from one body to the next on its path to reach Nirvana or heaven. Death is a sad occasion, but Hindu priests emphasise the route ahead for the departed soul and a funeral is as much a celebration as a remembrance service.

Hindus cremate their dead, believing that the burning of a dead body signifies the release of the spirit and that the flames represent Brahma, the creator.

Family members will pray around the body as soon as possible after death. People avoid touching the corpse as it is considered unclean. The corpse is usually bathed and dressed in white, traditional Indian clothes. If a wife dies before her husband she is dressed in red bridal clothes. If a woman is a widow she will be dressed in white or pale colours.

The funeral procession may pass places of significance to the deceased, such as a building or street. Prayers are said here and at the entrance to the crematorium.

The body is decorated with sandalwood, flowers and garlands. Scriptures are read from the Vedas or Bhagavad Gita. The chief mourner, usually the eldest son or male, will light some kindling and circle the body, praying for the wellbeing of the departing soul.

After the cremation, the family may have a meal and offer prayers in their home. Mourners wash and change completely before entering the house after the funeral. A priest will visit and purify the house with spices and incense. This is the beginning of the 13-day mourning

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<sup>1</sup> This information has been adapted from <http://www.staffspasttrack.org.uk/exhibit/ilm/default.htm>

period when friends will visit and offer their condolences.

Often, a garland of dried or fake flowers is placed around a photograph of the deceased to show respect for their memory.

'Shradh' is practiced one year after the death of the person. This can either be an annual event or a large one-off event. This is the Hindu practice of giving food to the poor in memory of the deceased. A priest will say prayers for the deceased and during this time, usually lasting one month, the family will not buy any new clothes or attend any parties. Sons are responsible for carrying out Shradh.

### **Humanist Funerals**

Humanists do not pray to or believe in a god. Humanist funerals, therefore, mark the passing of a loved one by balancing the sadness and the sense of loss with a celebration of the life that was lived and is now ended. This is achieved with thoughtful reflections from family and friends interspersed with music and appropriate, well-chosen words from the celebrant. These ceremonies can take place wherever the family decide, for example, in a community centre, a person's home or in a crematorium.

### **Islamic Funerals**

Muslims bury the body of the deceased within 24 hours. The deceased is placed with their head facing the Muslim holy city of Mecca. The body is then ritually washed. Muslims prefer this ritual to be performed by family or close friends rather than by hospital staff or undertakers. Male relatives will wash male bodies and female relatives will wash female bodies.

After the ritual washing, the body is wrapped in a shroud that is usually white. The salat for the dead, 'salat ul janaza', is then performed. This takes the form of the usual Muslim daily salat prayers with some special additions which specifically relate to death. The ceremony usually takes place in the family home and is led either by someone the deceased chose before their death, a close relative or the family Imam.

It is forbidden to cremate the body of a Muslim. Muslims are buried with their face turned to the right, facing Mecca and may be removed from the coffin when placed in this position in the grave. Members of the funeral party throw a little earth onto the grave while reciting "*We*

*created you from it, and return you into it, and from it we will raise you a second time"*  
(Qur'an, Surah 20:55).

Gravestones are kept simple, marked only by the deceased's name and date of death. Many Muslims will spend money on the poor rather than on an elaborate memorial stone. Official mourning lasts for 3 days and includes a banquet to remember the deceased. On the third day relatives visit the grave and recite extracts from the Qur'an.

### **Jewish Funerals**

Jewish people are buried in the ground. If possible, a handful of dust from Israel is placed in the grave or coffin. The funeral service consists of psalms, speeches praising the deceased, prayers for the repose of the soul and the final recital of the Kaddish, a hymn to praise God.

After the funeral the mourners eat a simple meal prepared by friends or neighbours. In orthodox families the next of kin will tear their upper garments and remain indoors for seven days (the shivah) sitting on low stools.

Mourning can last for one month or one year. These stages of return to normal life of the mourners reflect the soul's gradual progress to the afterlife.

### **Sikh Funerals**

Sikhs view death as a separation of the soul from the body and is considered part of God's will. Sikhs believe that the soul moves on to meet the supreme soul, God. Death is seen as a time for praising God in accordance with the teachings of code of conduct, the Rahit Maryada. After someone dies, if the body is on a bed it should not be moved and no light should be placed next to it. Prayers are said which acknowledge that the death is an act of God.

Sikh scriptures state that relatives should not indulge in wailing and anguish, although this is, naturally, hard. Hymns are sung in preparation for the cremation of the body. The family read the Holy Book continuously for 48 hours or in stages which must be completed within one week and end on the day of the funeral.

Cremation is the accepted form of disposal of the body. The body is bathed and dressed in fresh clothes. Hymns that induce a feeling of detachment are sometimes sung on the way to the crematorium to aid the family in not showing their grief. At the crematorium the prayer known as the 'Kirtan Sohila' is often recited. Ardas, or 'general prayers' are often said before cremation as well. These seek a blessing for the departing soul. A member of the family then lights the funeral pyre or pushes the button for the coffin to disappear.

Men wear black headscarves to the funeral and women wear pale coloured or white headscarves. Ashes are collected and scattered in running water or on the sea. Sikhs do not hold any river as holy but may deposit the ashes in a place of sentimental value. After the cremation guests return to the family home and readings are given and hymns sung. Everyone must bath as soon as they go home to cleanse themselves.

The mourning period lasts between two and five weeks. On the first anniversary of the person's death, the family gather and undertake 'Barsi' prayer. They then have a meal. This is not a sad occasion but is seen as a way of remembering the deceased and celebrating their life.

## Conclusion

These guidelines are designed to assist ETB schools to establish confidence regarding their identity as public schools within the State and to provide for all pupils, regardless of their faith or worldview. The concept of the publically-managed school in Ireland requires some transformation and there is a need for further research and dialogue in this area. It is crucial that ETB schools continue to provide a forum for open and respectful sharing and debate rather than seeking consensus among all groups. Fielding and Moss concur with this view stating:

...the essential tasks of the school in radical education are to expose children (and parents) to diversity and otherness, to enable them to think for themselves, and to equip them to live in a democracy of plural values, multiple identities and diverse ways of life...The aim is to reconcile individuals and ways of life honouring conflicting values to a life in common. We do not need common values in order to live together in peace. We need common institutions in which many forms of life can coexist (2011, p. 133).

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## APPENDIX A

### Sources Pertaining to the Right to Withdraw from Classes in Religious Instruction

The following sources pertain to the rights of parents, or students over 18 years, attending state funded schools, to withdraw from classes in religious instruction:

#### Irish Constitution - Article 44.2.4 and Article 42.1

- **Article 44.2.4** – guarantees that children attending publicly-funded schools may not be compelled to attend religious instruction classes.
- **Article 42.1** - recognises the inalienable rights of parents to provide for their children's religious and moral education.

#### Education Act 1998 – Section 30

- **Section 30 (2)(e)** – provides for a parent to withdraw their child from any subject being provided by a school, as part of the curriculum, that is contrary to the conscience of the parent or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student.

#### Non-Designated Community Colleges - Circular Letters 73/74 & 7/79

**Circular Letter No 73/74** – Establishment of Boards of Management of Vocational Schools  
Religion

- **10(a)** *'In exercising its general control over the curriculum and conduct of the school, the Board shall ensure that there is religious worship and religious instruction for the pupils in the school except for such pupils whose parents make a request in writing to the Principal that those pupils should be withdrawn from religious worship and religious instruction.*
- **10(b)** *'The religious worship by any pupil at the school and the religious instruction given to any pupil shall be in accordance with the rites, practice and teaching of the religious denomination to which the pupil belongs. At least 2 ½ hrs. Religious instruction shall be given to all the pupils in the school (except those who are withdrawn from religious instruction in accordance with the provisions of sub paragraph (a) above) in each week in which the school is in session.'*

**Circular Letter No 7/79 – Religious Instruction in Vocational Schools**

*1.2 ‘..... Vocational Education Committees should, therefore provide facilities for religious instruction .... Such arrangements would of course, be without prejudice to the rights of parents to request in writing that their children be withdrawn from classes in religious instruction.’*

**Designated Community Colleges – Deeds of Trust**

*Section 10 of Circular Letter 73/74 entitled ‘Religion’ is built directly into the Deed of Trust.*

**The Handbook for ETBs and Boards of Management of Schools and Community Colleges**

The Handbook provides that the arrangements to be made by the Board of Management for the Religious Worship and Instruction in school, *shall be in accordance with DES Circular Letters 73/74 and 7/79 or as so amended.*