

The Irish Episcopal Conference

The Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education and Formation



Minister Richard Bruton, TD.
Minister for Education and Skills,
Department of Education and Skills,
Marlboro Street,
Dublin 1.

11 March 2018.

Dear Minister,

We write to you on behalf of the Commission for Education and Formation of the Irish Episcopal Conference, of which the Council for Education is a member, in connection with the recently published Circular Letter 13/18.

You will be aware that individual bishops, as well as religious congregations, are joint Trustees of the Community schools referred to in the Circular Letter. That trustee role is outlined and safe-guarded by the Deed of Trust. In addition, they share the management function of Designated Community Colleges through the Model Agreement. Both the Deeds of Trust and the Model Agreement outline the provisions for the teaching of religion on the school curriculum and, critically, have always provided a mechanism for opt-out of religious education. While it is true that many pupils who took that option were not able to avail of a curricular alternative, that unfortunate situation was and is a matter of resources rather than intention.

It is of note that many of these Community Schools and Designated Community Colleges have arisen from the amalgamation of Catholic voluntary schools. In such contexts, the religious trustees believed that the Deeds of Trust and Model Agreements were robust enough to allow their ethos continue into the new community school or college. We are mindful too that the Attorney General has previously advised that a Minister cannot change the provisions of these documents unilaterally. In the light of this, the publication of Circular Letter 13/18, without consultation or notification, is surprising and seems to disregard the role of the Patron / Trustee, as outlined in the 1998 Education Act. It is also disappointing that the Council for Education of the Episcopal Conference had to write to your Department on the afternoon of Monday, February 19th to obtain a copy of the Circular after hearing of its publication on the national media.

We are aware that many others in the educational sphere have written to you expressing alarm at the Circular Letter. We support those who have so written. We believe strongly in the positive, and indeed essential, contribution that the teaching of religious education makes to students and society.

The Most Reverend Brendan Leahy, Chairman of the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education and Formation,
Rev. Dr. Tom Deenihan, Acting Executive Secretary to the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education and Formation,
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It has also been overlooked that the religious education curriculum being taught in the Community Schools and Designated Community Colleges is not religious indoctrination but is the syllabus devised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, an agency of the Department. Many of the students in such Community Schools and Designated Community Colleges take Religious Education as an examination subject which illustrates the role of the Department in the actual syllabus.

It is critical that students are exposed to the religious interpretation of life. Such education is essential in respect of understanding our cultural heritage and in terms of harmony and understanding in what is becoming a multi-cultural society. While we are not involved in the management of non-designated Community Colleges, we believe that students in such schools should also be offered courses on either Religious Education or other classes that allow them to gain an appreciation of the religious interpretation of life. This is entirely in keeping with the responsibilities of patrons in relation to moral and spiritual education as outlined in the 1998 Act. It is also critical in terms of preparing students for an increasing multi-cultural, multi-denominational and multi-faith society.

While we are respectful of the wishes of those who opt out of religious education (the Model Agreements and Deeds of Trust have always allowed for this provision), we are equally clear that those who continue to take religious education should not be disadvantaged in terms of the examinable curriculum by offering those who do not take religious education additional classes in an examinable curricular subject or by offering them another examinable curricular subject. Students must not be disadvantaged for taking religious education.


As co-trustees, we are concerned, because in the 1998 Education Act, responsibility for the moral and spiritual education of students is a matter for the trustees. There is a compelling case for those who are not taking religious education to be offered a course in religious heritage and values as well as ethics. It goes without saying that such a subject should be resourced adequately for school management.

The religious co-trustees take their responsibilities seriously and believe that the provisions of Circular Letter 13/18 deal with matters from which, at a minimum, trustees cannot be excluded.

In the light of the above, we ask that you consider withdrawing the Circular and, in the meantime, we are willing to engage with your department and the other stakeholders on this critical issue.

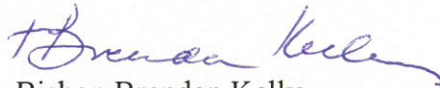
Wishing you every blessing in your important work,

Yours sincerely,


Bishop Brendan Leahy

Chair,

Commission for Education and Formation.



Bishop Brendan Kelly.

Chair,

Council for Education.

The Most Reverend Brendan Leahy, Chairman of the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education and Formation,
Rev. Dr. Tom Deenihan, Acting Executive Secretary to the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education and Formation,
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