



# **Catholic Schools Partnership**

## **Catholic education at second-level in the Republic of Ireland**

### **Looking to the future**

#### **Executive summary**

##### **Introduction**

The future of Catholic secondary schools has been a matter of concern for all those involved in Catholic education over recent years. The Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) in co-operation with the Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools (ATCS) and the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS) present this paper on the future of Catholic education at second level. We invite all stakeholders in post-primary education to engage in a conversation on the important issues raised in this text.

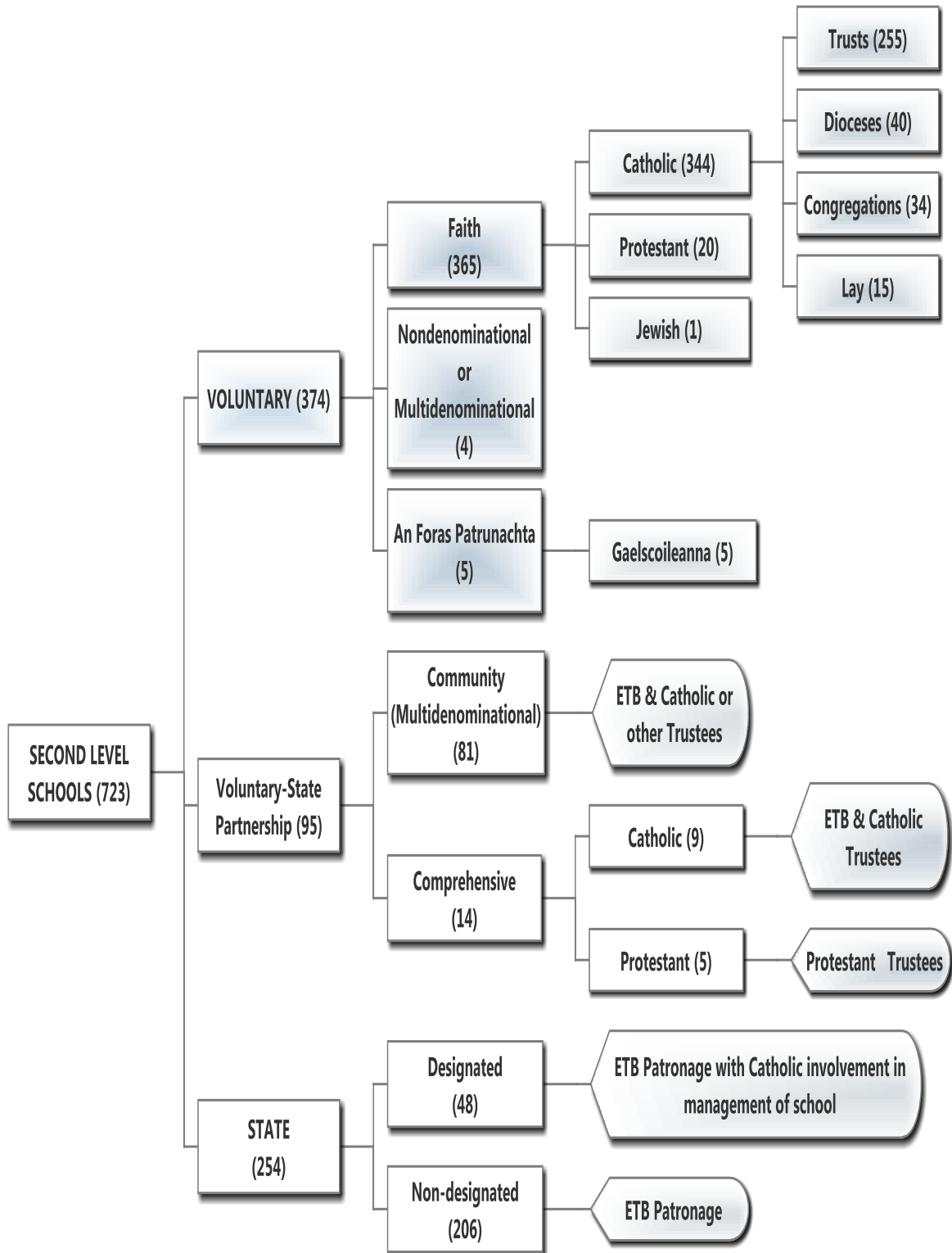
##### **The second-level school system in Ireland**

There are three different categories of schools in the Irish second-level system: voluntary schools, state schools and schools based on a partnership between the voluntary and state sectors. The language of private and public is misleading in trying to understand the dynamic at work in second-level education. Rather it is better to speak of voluntary schools, state schools and schools which operate on the basis of a partnership between voluntary bodies and the state.

A large number of schools in Ireland belong to the voluntary sector. Catholic and Protestant voluntary bodies provide about 50% of post-primary schools directly and about another 20% in partnership with the state through agreements with Education and Training Boards (ETBs, formerly Vocational Education Committees). The state itself (through the ETBs) provides about 30% of post-primary schools.

The second-level system can be represented in diagram form as follows:

**SECOND LEVEL: SCHOOLS BY SCHOOL TYPE IN REPUBLIC OF IRELAND 2014** (number of schools in brackets)



### **What is the voluntary sector?**

To appreciate the nature of voluntary schools it is helpful to reflect on the overall voluntary sector. It forms a dynamic part of every society. We commonly speak of the private and public sectors but there is also a third sector – the voluntary sector - which forms a key part of our society. The voluntary is private in the sense that it is not established or run by the state but it is quasi-public in that it is not for profit. Here we have a private reality established and run by citizens who are not acting as employees or agents of the state but whose primary goal is driven not by the desire to make profit but to provide some public benefit. This is based on a mission or vision as articulated by some individual or group.

### **The importance of ethos and the founding intention in a voluntary school**

A key component of every voluntary body is its founding intention. This is the source of its identity and energy. If the link with the founding intention is severed then the voluntary body will almost inevitably disappear or become purely an agent of the state or a private business.

Voluntary secondary schools need to re-imagine their founding visions and to invite the various members of the school community to be part of this process. Every school has its own ethos or characteristic spirit. One of the great strengths of the Catholic voluntary sector is the diversity found within it. In the Education Act the characteristic spirit of the school is understood 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”.<sup>1</sup>

In reflecting on its ethos and articulating it anew for our times every Catholic voluntary school can draw on various resources. The founding intention of the particular school is one resource. So too are the charters of the various trustee bodies which act as patrons of schools. Another resource is the rich tradition of Catholic education emerging from the ministry of Christ himself and given varied expressions throughout the history of the Church right down to and including the ministry of Pope Francis. This paper analyses six principles that Catholic schools can usefully draw on as a resource in supporting their ethos:

- Catholic schools continue the work of Jesus the teacher;
- Catholic schools are part of a living tradition;
- Catholic schools respect both faith and reason;
- Catholic schools integrate Religious Education in the curriculum while providing opportunities for catechesis;
- Catholic schools give expression to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council;
- Catholic schools educate to intercultural dialogue.

### **Funding and the relationship with the state**

The number of Catholic voluntary schools has decreased significantly over the past thirty years due to a process of rationalisation. Today, some schools face serious financial and curricular challenges. One of the key issues relates to finance. Catholic schools receive significantly less funding than other second-level schools. Furthermore, the patronage structure which supports these schools receives no state funding. This is clearly unjust. A recent report by the ESRI, *Governance and Funding of Second-level Schools in Ireland*,

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<sup>1</sup> Education Act (1998), 15 (2) (b).

provides detailed information on all the relevant issues.<sup>2</sup> Most people do not realise that Catholic secondary schools are severely disadvantaged in terms of finance in comparison with Community/Comprehensive Schools and ETB Schools.

The reality is that most Catholic secondary schools are not viable without fundraising. In the current economic situation such levels of fund-raising by charitable and voluntary organisations are not sustainable. It also places a huge burden on school management. In particular, there are serious concerns about the workload carried by principals in Catholic secondary schools as a result of increased administrative burdens and recent cuts in resources, both in terms of finance and personnel. The ESRI report concludes that:

It is clear that voluntary secondary schools receive a significantly lower proportion of funding from the state and, as a result, are more reliant on voluntary contributions from parents and on general fund-raising.<sup>3</sup>

### **Next steps**

CSP is committed to working with all of the partners in Catholic schools and the broader post-primary sector in order to deal with some of the substantive issues raised in this paper. In particular, the following issues will be addressed:

1. Voluntary schools will be provided with a process to facilitate them in reflecting on their characteristic spirit through re-imagining their founding intention. This will be done in the context of the trust / congregation / diocese which oversees the school.
2. CSP will publish a user-friendly pamphlet on frequently asked questions concerning Catholic voluntary secondary schools.
3. CSP in co-operation with ATCS and AMCSS will identify pilot areas where Catholic secondary schools will be invited to create a local forum that addresses common issues.
4. CSP will participate with all relevant stakeholders in a strategic review of the structure of Catholic patronage / trusteeship / management at second level.
5. The relationship of the voluntary sector with the state needs to be clarified. This should take account of the importance of the voluntary sector in the provision of second-level education and the fact that there are multiple Catholic and other voluntary patrons of schools.
6. CSP will continue to support patrons and bishops in their roles vis-à-vis ETB and community / comprehensive schools.

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<sup>2</sup> ESRI, *Governance and Funding of Second-level Schools in Ireland*, Dublin 2013.

<sup>3</sup> ESRI, *Governance and Funding of Second-level Schools in Ireland*, p.146.