

# The Catholic Heads' Association

## Response to the Independent Review of Education

### Introduction

The Catholic Heads' Association (CHA) is a non-profit making organisation which represents 29 local Catholic Voluntary Grammar School Principals from right across Northern Ireland (NI). CHA's overarching aim is to provide a forum for the Principals of our member schools to meet in common cause and to contribute constructively to educational policy by engaging with relevant bodies. Our affiliated schools reflect the needs of their local areas and include amongst their number those schools which rely wholly on the use of academic selection for admissions, those which use both academic as well as non-academic criteria and those which use no academic criteria in their admissions process.

CHA is a vital forum for its members as they are not represented by either the CCMS or the CSTS. As this paper demonstrates, they have an important place in the NI Education sector, and it is critical that their voice is heard in any education policy review.

The list of member schools is shown in **Appendix A**.

### **1. The Role of Catholic Voluntary Grammar schools within the NI Education Sector**

Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools are committed to leading young people in a spirit of pluralism, tolerance, mutual understanding and respect and they play a significant part in providing stability in the lives of our young people. Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools are progressive and outward-looking, adapting to new economic and social realities whilst upholding deeply valued standards of academic rigour and a love of learning alongside the development of the whole person.

Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools make a major contribution to the educational success enjoyed by our young people and the consequences of this success make a significant impact on our wider society. Our schools are to the fore in opening up pathways that enable all of our young people to secure a positive and successful future. The successes of these young people, which have been achieved over many decades in our schools, underpins the stability and success of our society in the C21<sup>st</sup>. Such outcomes are the real success of our schools as we provide an education that is based on love, solidarity, the common good, truth and justice.

### **2. The Distinctive Ethos of Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools**

The Catholic tradition lends its own spiritual philosophy to education. Catholic education takes on the responsibility and the challenge, in partnership with the parents of our students, to form character, to nurture strong moral values, to give life purpose and to promote the awareness of human dignity in self and others.

*“Education must aim at excellence, competence and empowerment. The Catholic educator is interested in enabling young people to take up roles of leadership and responsibility in society and this necessarily involves the attainment of academic success. We aim to form Christian*

*people of competence and conscience, people who can play a full role in society with a Christian vision and value system, a concern for their fellow human beings and a deep desire to put their talents at the service of others". (Proclaiming the Mission - The Distinctive Philosophy and Values of Catholic Education, The Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, [Ara Coeli, Armagh 2001])*

Academic success is only one element of the experience within the Catholic Voluntary Grammar sector. An underlining reason for the success of our schools is that while each promotes a distinctive spirituality in line with its founding principles, each also recognises that the human person has personal, physical, intellectual, social, spiritual, moral, emotional and aesthetic dimensions. Our schools seek to promote each student's development in all of these areas.

In the Catholic Voluntary Grammar School setting, appropriate pathways and subject choices are offered within a high-achieving, inclusive education structure to promote and meet the needs of our learners. Our schools provide opportunities for our young people, enabling them to develop their talents and skills so they can realise their full potential, academically, socially and personally. It is an approach that champions and cherishes diversity, nurtures a love of learning by recognising and developing the talents of our young people, in an educational setting where everyone is encouraged and supported to be their best.

Our schools successfully meet the needs and expectations of pupils, parents, onward education providers and employers.

There are consistently high levels of satisfaction amongst our parents who appreciate the high standard of teaching and learning in all our Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools and as well as the breadth of experiences their children can avail of.

In partnership with the home, parishes and local communities, our schools seek to nurture and encourage a distinctive Christian spirituality coloured by a practical imperative that compels our pupils to take on the challenges presented to each new generation as they come of age. In each of our schools, Religious Education and practice is shaped by the desire to promote growth in spirituality. This spirituality ultimately is exhibited through a living faith, where our young people are encouraged to work for and with others and to be active participants in our local and global communities.

Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools are widely acknowledged as having particularly strong pastoral care systems. The child is placed at the centre of all we do as we seek to form Christian people of competence and conscience. We prepare our young people to play a full role in society, shaped by a Christian vision and value system and a concern for their fellow human beings. We imbue our pupils with a deep desire to put their talents at the service of others. Our teachers and staff model this in their support of our young people. We believe that this relationship-based education is key to both academic success, student well-being and the development of the whole person in a safe and nurturing environment.

### **3. Parental Choice**

*"Parents are able to express a preference for the schools they wish their child to attend."* DENI

Our schools are enduringly popular with parents and pupils because they offer something that is unique in NI. They are at the forefront of educational innovation and development. They

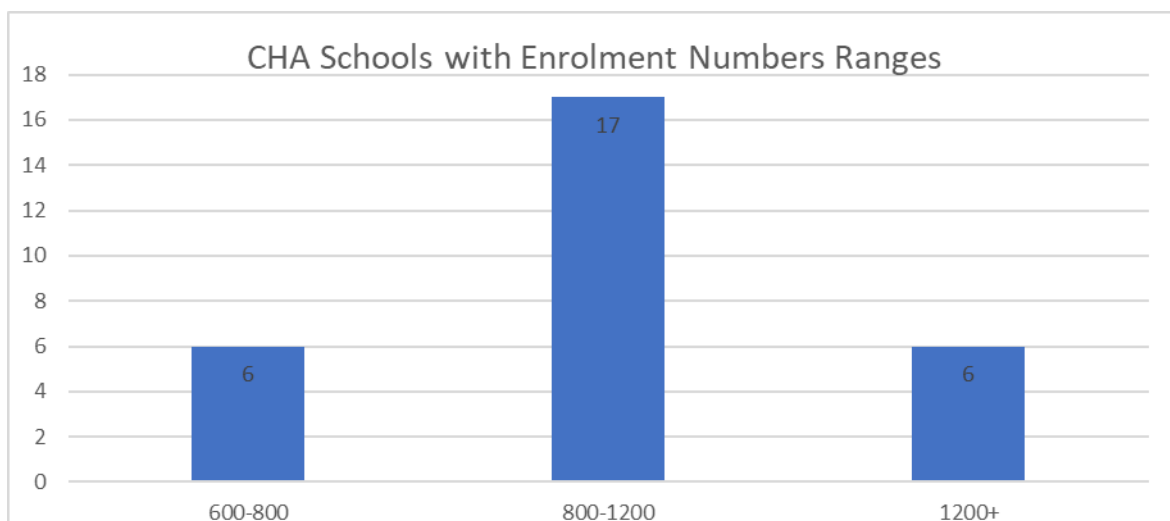
consistently maintain the highest standards of pupil achievement. They are focused on the formation of young people true to the values of their founders and they reach out to all. Heavily over-subscribed, year after year, our schools are testament to what a good education can be, and they have a critical role in shaping any review of the NI educational landscape. We defend the right of parents to exercise their choice to send their child to a Catholic Voluntary Grammar School.

#### 4. Demographics of our Schools

The headline data presented below demonstrates the rich diversity of our schools' culture and the inclusive nature of the ethos of our schools.

There are 148,918 pupils in post-primary education and of these, 29,205 pupils attend a Catholic Voluntary Grammar School. This represents 19.6% of the total post-primary enrolment in NI.

The number of post-primary students attending all schools in the entire Catholic family of schools, both Voluntary Grammar and Maintained, is 68,556 pupils. Thus 46% of all pupils currently enrolled in post-primary schools at the time of writing attend a Catholic school. Of this number of students in all Catholic schools, the 29,205 pupils attending Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools accounts for 43% of the total enrolment in all Catholic schools.



*Source: Post-Primary Schools Data (2020-21)*

Our school enrolment numbers range in size from 700 to just under 1700 pupils and thus, on this single sustainability measure alone, are deemed to be viable and thriving schools with healthy enrolments demonstrable over many years.

Our schools, while denominational in nature and ethos, are diverse and inclusive, reflecting very much their particular catchment areas and the needs of the local communities in which they are situated.

Our schools welcome students from all backgrounds, including those from other Christian and Non-Christian backgrounds, as well as those who identify as having no religious faith. In this context, just over 3.5% of our student population are of a Non-Catholic denomination.

We recognise that some of our children experience challenges in their learning and we provide additional support to help overcome these challenges so that our students can experience high levels of academic success. In terms of those children with statements of special educational needs, our schools educate 8.6% [644] of those students who attend mainstream post-primary education.

Of all NI students who are entitled to free school meals in post-primary education, 12.5% [5020] attend Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools.

There are 3754 Newcomer pupils in post-primary education; of those, 7.2% [269] attend one of our schools.

This data emphasizes that the community of Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools is and always has always been ready and keen to play its part in providing a high-quality education to all students and to act as an agent for social mobility for all.

## **5. Governance of Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools**

The governance framework for Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools is set out in primary legislation. They are wholly and independently managed by their respective Boards of Governors within this legal and regulatory framework.

Each Board of Governors in a Catholic Voluntary Grammar School is made up of Trustees or their nominees (4/9<sup>ths</sup>), DENI representatives (3/9<sup>ths</sup>) and parent and teacher representatives (2/9<sup>ths</sup>). The Trustees represent the interests of those who originally founded the school and are usually nominated by the legal owners of the school premises. The responsibilities of Trustees are commonly set out in a foundation document or deed of trust and there is an obligation to protect and promote each school's values and ethos.

The land and buildings of each Catholic Voluntary Grammar School are owned by that school's respective Trustees; however, for the Department of Education to pay capital grants to a Catholic Voluntary Grammar School, the school premises must be 'vested' in the Department.

The Board of Governors is the Employing Authority for all staff within the school; this means that Governors have autonomy in recruiting the best staff to serve in our schools. Catholic Voluntary Grammar School Governors have played key roles in driving school success by determining the strategic direction and improvement journey of each of our schools. Governors have a clear vision for their schools which is underpinned by each school's distinctive ethos. Our Governors are drawn from local communities and understand and support the particular ethos of their school. They are committed to their respective schools and are able to respond quickly and effectively to changing circumstances so as to protect the best interests of our students. The Boards of Governors, along with staff, parents and our local communities, are responsible for the excellent quality of the educational experience provided for pupils enrolled in our schools.

## **6. The Voluntary Principle**

Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools operate under the voluntary principle which provides our Boards of Governors with the relative autonomy to make key decisions for their schools, free from the constraints of centralised decision making. The voluntary principle is grounded in the concept of subsidiarity, that is, where important decisions are made at the most local level by those closest to the issues faced in our schools.

As such, Boards of Governors of Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools are the Managing Authority of their respective schools. In line with School Development Planning legislation, (The Education [School Development Plans] Regulations [Northern Ireland] 2010), they have responsibility for the strategic direction of their particular school.

The Boards of Governors of Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools operate as companies limited by guarantee, i.e. are a 'Body Corporate', with direct control of and responsibility for their finances. In addition to carrying out the same statutory duties and responsibilities as every other grant-aided school, as the Employing Authority for all staff (teaching and support) in the school our Boards of Governors are therefore responsible for recruiting, deploying, managing and paying all those working in and for the school. Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools determine their own recruitment and selection procedures which must comply with the procedures in the school's Scheme of Management and all relevant employment and child protection legislation.

The statutory responsibility for establishing admissions criteria rests with individual Boards of Governors, allowing our member schools the independence to reflect the ethos and the community which they serve. Consequently, our schools use varying admissions criteria to meet the needs of the locality in which they are based; some include an academic component in their admissions policy, whilst others offer bilateral entry arrangements or all-ability entry. Similarly, we are accustomed to driving forward the strategic direction of our own schools, shaping curriculum, extra-curricular and pastoral provision by responding to changing needs and managing finances and procurement according to the highest standards but free from the straitjacket of bureaucracy.

It is essential that in this current review of education the voluntary principle is valued and protected.

## **7. The Challenges Facing Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools**

The current promotion of Integrated Education over various other sectors has, we believe, contributed to a distortion in the wider understanding of the nature and impact of Catholic Education. We are clear that our position in providing Catholic Education and the mission of the Catholic educator does not, and must not, imply any form of elitism or sectarianism. Many of our schools are already involved in Shared Education projects and have for many years contributed to educating young people beyond the confines of their own individual schools in the successful delivery of collaboration courses for Key Stage 4 and Post-16 students.

The case for promoting Catholic schools must not be construed, in any way, as an attempt to sustain sectarian divisions. Admission to Catholic schools, as is the case outside of NI and most notably in England and Wales, must remain open to all who wish to avail of the type of

education we offer. Catholic schools remain totally committed to the promotion of harmony, tolerance and trust among all in our society.

We wish to contribute constructively to a system that secures high-quality educational provision for all young people locally. Our concern as Catholic educators is not confined exclusively to those who attend our schools, but also extends to all young people who are a part of the wider communities we serve.

## **8. CHA's Response to the Independent Review of Education**

### **Respect for the Concept of Parental Choice**

We believe that in carrying out the Independent Review, the panel should build on the many strengths within the current educational system. We believe that schools having evidenced the capacity to deliver high-quality, child-centred education on behalf of their local communities should be encouraged and supported into the future.

Parental choice and indeed active parental involvement in our local Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools help to drive system improvement and contribute to community cohesion. Our Governors are drawn from the local community and are invested in ensuring the best for each child in their respective schools. Diversity built on respect of others is a strength shown in many of our schools. Much mature debate is needed throughout the educational system to develop this further with the avoidance of a narrow, singular and somewhat populist provision.

### **Recognition of the Key Role played by Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools**

Many features of our schools are highly regarded by educational partners throughout the world and, in the efforts now to secure further improvement, a priority must be to ensure that we retain our current strengths within any future arrangements. It is recognised that Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools continue to achieve high-quality educational outcomes for pupils and make up the majority of top performing schools in NI. Of the list of Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools enclosed in Appendix A, all have been deemed as either, "very good" or "outstanding" when inspected by ETI. The examination performance outcomes place all of our schools towards the top of the historical performance tables. It is imperative that the current Independent Review of Education recognises and embeds the role of Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools in all future arrangements in our education system.

### **Qualifications and Review of the Curriculum**

Traditionally our sector has focused on an academic-based curriculum. As the nature of our schools develop to reflect the local and wider communities we serve, we welcome further 11-19 curriculum review and seek a reform of vocational and technical pathways, which are currently undervalued. This should allow for the development of equal standing between vocational and academic courses, enabling pupils to progress to a wide range of pathways reflecting their particular strengths and addressing the skills shortage in the economy in many areas. We believe that our sector, working in partnership with others, can achieve optimum outcomes for all our young people. The qualifications and transition to Post-16 study including appropriateness and viability of provision and the roles of Further Education Institutions needs particular reform. We require a curriculum and assessment system that supports our young people, our third level institutions and our employers in developing a prosperous and open society which has demonstrated its resilience over the years supported by some excellent schools. We recognise that improvement in education will require significant funding and

recommend much of the provision in our particular type of schools as, effective, efficient, autonomous, reflecting the needs of our communities but above all placing the child at the centre of all we do.

In order to ensure that appropriate pathways for progression for all pupils continues to be provided in all schools, we are keen that consideration is given to how the curriculum offer is to be sustainably funded. Funding consideration is crucial in order to safeguard the curriculum offer in individual schools and to enable ongoing flexibility of the curriculum offer based on pupil aspiration, labour market information and employer needs.

We are also keen that the role of arm's length bodies and those involved in measuring pupil and school success evolves to ensure that a holistic determination of all available data (quantitative, qualitative and case-study analysis) is utilised in professional collaboration before a final determination is made regarding individual school performance. We recommend that the dashboard of measures be developed further to enable this approach to be progressed.

### **Co-curriculum and Extra-curricular Activities**

The additional learning experiences and activities that schools deliver alongside the academic curriculum enrich school life. Academic success is a key component of education and is complemented by an enriching and broad co-curriculum to provide a well-rounded and full educational experience. With high expectations of pupils both in and outside of the classroom experience and opportunities for personal development and growth, the acquisition of softer skills and the development of emotional and social intelligences, a rich extra-curricular programme enables the school ethos in action to be experienced by pupils by 'living life to the full'. Opportunities are also afforded to learn and develop effective leadership and team-working skills and help students learn how to manage emotions associated with winning and losing in a safe, secure environment, supported by coaches and teachers. As well as the positive impact on health and well-being and on the development of friendships and positive relationships, high-level team sports and other activities stretch and challenge pupils, encouraging them to use their gifts and talents for a common goal. In turn this develops community responsibility, cohesion and purpose, teaching critical skills and harnessing positive qualities for life.

### **The Health and Well-being of our Students**

The past two years dealing with COVID-led disruption to education has exposed the current examination system as outdated. It has also highlighted the pressures and stresses our young people experience striving for success in an examination-led education provision. Less emphasis is required on assessing and more required in supporting and developing the skills of our young people. This is particularly true in the areas of well-being, resilience and adaptability.

### **Qualifications and Curriculum**

A review of our assessment and qualification strategy is long overdue. We acknowledge further work is required to further deliver the NI Curriculum at Key Stage 3 to develop knowledge and skills and personal attributes in our young people. However, the current arbitrary examination system at Key stage 4 and beyond, focusing on a content delivery, has failed to develop the ideals of the NI Curriculum. We support a reform of this system which can match the wide needs of both our young people and ultimately the employers and society in which our young people will contribute positively to.

### **Capital Investment in the School Estate**

One of the significant constraints impacting on any future provision is the fact that, without a massive capital building programme, education will continue to be provided within the buildings currently available. There is a need to modernize much of the school estate. Recent recommendations on safety learnt through COVID show how poor conditions are for much of the school estate.

### **Funding and the Voluntary Principle**

It is important in any future consideration, that a level of autonomy experienced in the voluntary sector continues. Our Boards of Governors and their schools have shown they have the capacity to lead and deliver effective, efficient and successful education provision, placing the child directly at its centre.

School leaders and Boards of Governors of Catholic Voluntary Grammar Schools have long years of experience of successfully managing multi-million pound budgets, including through many years of austerity. Our accounts are audited twice yearly and because of the voluntary principle, we are able to direct our funds to achieve maximum impact for our students.

We also support a review of funding held and spent centrally to ensure as much funding as possible goes directly to schools, with schools having greater autonomy over how to spend allocations. Centrally-held services, both in education and wider social services, need to be better focused to support schools at the earliest opportunity. Coupled with decentralisation of funding there is a clear need to review the current model of funding schools which will need to go hand in hand with the ability of schools to offer appropriate opportunities, particularly with Post-16 provision.

### **Area Planning**

Within Area Planning, the Trustees of Catholic Grammar Schools are represented by the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICEE) supported by its professional support body the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS). Boards of Governors are represented directly by the Governing Bodies Association (GBA). It is imperative that in any future planning, including Area Planning initiatives, Governors' views are fully taken account of.

## **9. Conclusion: Moving Education Forward**

We have an education system at the moment which is made up of many valuable constituent parts and this offers choice and diversity to parents and students. A monolithic educational system with centralised control, in which power is remote from the learning environment and local community and where authority is exercised top-down, disempowers schools, by-passes Governors, marginalises school leaders and weakens the connections parents and communities want to establish and indeed maintain with their local Catholic Voluntary Grammar School.

CHA acknowledges that reform of some aspects of our current system is required and we stand ready to play our part in contributing to these improvements. Equally, we are firm in our position that any attempt to diminish the rights of parents to access denominational education for their children in a Catholic Voluntary Grammar school would be a retrograde step and one which would undoubtedly be met with strong opposition.



The Catholic Heads' Association looks forward to engaging further with the Independent Review of Education in order to explore more deeply all of the issues addressed in this response.

***4<sup>th</sup> February 2022***

## Appendix A

### Catholic Heads' Association – Member Schools 2022

1. Abbey CBS Grammar, Newry
2. Aquinas Diocesan Grammar, Belfast
3. Assumption Grammar, Ballynahinch
4. CBS Grammar, Omagh
5. Dominican College, Belfast
6. Dominican College, Portstewart
7. Loreto College, Coleraine
8. Loreto Convent Grammar, Omagh
9. Lumen Christi College, Derry
10. Mount Lourdes Grammar, Enniskillen
11. Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock
12. Our Lady's Grammar, Newry
13. Rathmore Grammar, Belfast
14. Sacred Heart Grammar, Newry
15. St Colman's College, Newry
16. St Columb's College, Derry
17. St Dominic's High School, Belfast
18. St Joseph's Grammar, Donaghmore
19. St Louis Grammar, Ballymena
20. St Louis Grammar, Kilkeel
21. St Malachy's College, Belfast
22. St Mary's CBS Grammar, Belfast
23. St Mary's Grammar, Magherafelt
24. St Michael's College, Enniskillen
25. St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon
26. St Patrick's Grammar, Armagh
27. St Patrick's Grammar, Downpatrick
28. St Ronan's College, Lurgan
29. Thornhill College, Derry