



Global Researchers  
Advancing Catholic Education



## REPORT 4

# Principals as Leaders of Identity and Ethos in Catholic Schools in Ireland



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## About the GRACE (Ireland) Research Project

Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE) is an international research-based partnership between academics in universities and Catholic education bodies across three different continents (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick; Notre Dame University, Fremantle, Australia; Roche Center for Catholic Education, Boston College; St Mary's University, London; University of Glasgow; and the International Office for Catholic Education). GRACE provides an opportunity for scholars and practitioners of Catholic education and theology in their respective countries to affirm, study, collaborate, and respond meaningfully to challenges in Catholic education. Among its aims is to strengthen the argument for the importance of faith-based schools in a plural society.

This GRACE (Ireland)<sup>1</sup> research project – entitled *Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools in Ireland, Exploring the Attitudes and Behaviours of Stakeholders* – aims to establish a clear baseline and a set of signposts for the advancing of Catholic education at primary and secondary levels in the Republic of Ireland. The objectives of the research are:

- to complete a stakeholder mapping that identifies all the relevant actors and assesses their vision and roles – actual and potential – in contributing to the provision of Catholic education at both primary and secondary levels
- to capture and classify the values that underpin stakeholders' approaches
- to establish stakeholders' capacity to progress and further Catholic education.

Four Irish ecclesial documents underpin this research:

- The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference pastoral letter for Catholic schools *Vision 08* (ICBC 2008)
- *Share the Good News – The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (IEC 2010)
- *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic voluntary secondary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2016)
- *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2019).

The Overview to the six reports considers in some detail the underlying vision for Catholic schools that is charted in these documents with reference to how identity and ethos are expected to be amplified in Catholic schools.

## Acronyms

**AMCSS** Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools

**APTCS** Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools

**BoM** Board of Management

**CEWA** Catholic Education Western Australia

**CPD** Continuing Professional Development

**CSP** Catholic Schools Partnership

**DE** Department of Education

**ICBC** Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference

**IEC** Irish Episcopal Conference

**IPPN** Irish Primary Principals' Network

**JMB** Joint Managerial Body for Secondary Schools

**LAOS** Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools/Post-Primary Schools

**PDST** Professional Development Service for Teachers

**RE** Religious Education

**SEN** Special Education Needs

**SGN** Share the Good News

**SSE** School Self-Evaluation

<sup>1</sup> With the support of the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education DCU in the analysis of the data and write-up of reports.

## Key Findings

- Personal commitment is strong among current principals of Catholic schools. For instance, 88 per cent of principals say they model a Christian way of life. At primary level, 83 per cent agree with the statement 'my Christian faith helps me to promote the wellbeing of all students'. At second level, 97 per cent agree with that statement. However, whereas 86 per cent of principals aged 50 or over at second level describe themselves as committed and practising Catholics, this figure falls to 56 per cent for those under the same age.
- Among principals, there is a linear relationship between a) age and belief in God, with the pattern more pronounced at second level, and b) age and how important God is in their lives. Whereas 61 per cent of those over 60 years rate this importance at the highest level (5 in a 0–5 point scale), this gradually falls by age bracket to less than a third (30%) of those under 39 years. These patterns give rise to a succession concern, confirmed by the qualitative data.
- Principals are more likely to agree with ethos-related indicators than other cohorts surveyed. For instance, 85 per cent of secondary principals agree that parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school's Catholic ethos, whereas the corresponding figure for staff stands at 58 per cent. At primary level, only 49 per cent of teachers agree that parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school's Catholic ethos, compared with 66 per cent of principals.
- Qualitative findings reveal that strategic use of the competency-based process to appoint principals (second level) has the potential to influence the identity and ethos of a Catholic school. The 'leadership of a faith school' competency allows for the appointment of principals who are willing and able to lead Catholic school identity and ethos.
- Among primary principals, 54 per cent have not received professional development from their patron/trust to lead the ethos of their school. This compares less favourably with 22 per cent at secondary level who state they have not received training from their patron or trust 'for their role as a faith leader.' The qualitative data uncover an almost universal appeal from principals for meaningful ethos-related professional development and support.



## Principals as Leaders of Catholic School Identity and Ethos

This report focuses on the role of the principal as leader of Catholic school identity and ethos, as outlined in the four Irish ecclesial documents that underpin this research (see Overview). It is divided into three main sections. Section One presents the conceptual framework for the theme of this report: principals as leaders of Catholic schools. While the documents listed above are central to the conceptual framework, it also considers relevant legislation and statutory provisions, and other literature on the role of the principal. This section includes a brief description of the methodology. Section Two of the report presents the research findings, both quantitative and qualitative, pertaining to principals as leaders of Catholic school identity and ethos. The third and final section of the report presents an analysis of the findings and accompanying recommendations.



### Section One

As the prime leader of the Catholic school, the principal holds a unique responsibility for Catholic education and plays a vital role in building the culture and determining the lived reality of the school experience (cf. Belmonte and Cranston 2009). This depends on the person of the principal; it requires a deliberate positionality and intentional leadership choice (Duignan 2007; Bonner 2012). For instance, Coll's (2009) longitudinal study and Keher (2023) both found that principals' witness to their faith influenced the Catholic culture of their schools.

However, many principals live in the paradox between State demands and requirements of the Catholic community, with increasingly complex and sometimes competing expectations (Sullivan, 2014; Rieckhoff 2014; Branson et al. 2019).

## The Complex Role of Principal

At an International Confederation of Principals in Australia, Flockton (2001) stated that:

**Many of today's schools feed, counsel, provide health care for body and mind, and protect students, while they also educate and instruct. The principal is expected to be legal expert, health and social services co-ordinator, fundraiser, diplomat, negotiator, adjudicator, public relations consultant, security officer, technological innovator and top-notch resource manager, whose most important job is the promotion of teaching and learning.**

Although many principals find the job rewarding, they face many challenges such as role overload (Darmody and Smyth 2018; IPPN 2002); complex policy development (Morgan and Sugrue 2008); the integration of children with special education needs (SEN) (IPPN 2002); being expected to take on responsibilities that should be undertaken by the Board of Management (BoM) (Stynes and McNamara 2019); and interpersonal conflict (Darmody and Smyth 2018; IPPN 2002; Morgan and Sugrue 2008). Moreover, the legal imperatives of the position are increasingly demanding and multifaceted, and in the early years of principalship, principals often experience shock and isolation (McHugh 2015).

An added dimension applies to leaders in Catholic schools who must nurture a Catholic vision for education while fulfilling the demands of compliance issues that are imperatives for State-funded education (Treston 2005; Boyle et al. 2016). Clegg (2012, p.137) writes that the world of the leader in a Catholic school is also the world of 'good and difficult students, of Facebook and Twitter, of hassled parents, of over-burdened professional colleagues, of regulation and accountability ... of competing rights and expectations ... of the political processes necessary to achieve one's educational goals'. This added dimension of leadership provides an additional challenge. On repeated occasions, *Share the Good News – The National Directory for Catechetics in Ireland* (henceforth, *SGN*) (IEC 2010) underscores the importance of 'in-depth and continuing formation' of principals (p.146, p.157) and the 'ongoing education and training' of 'the Principal ... as well as others in leadership roles' (p.203, p.207) to support them in the leadership of Catholic school identity and ethos.

Upholding the characteristic spirit in a school is a legally recognised duty of the BoM under the *Education Act 1998* (Government of Ireland 1998a, 15.2(b)), and a principal's devolved functions include a responsibility for protecting, supporting and promoting the characteristic spirit of the school (AMCSS/JMB 2024). For the purposes of this research, the terms 'ethos' and 'characteristic spirit' are used interchangeably. They refer to the network of Catholic understandings, values and relationships that form the foundation of a school, and how that foundation is expressed in a contemporary context (O'Connell et al. 2021). The Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP 2014, p.20) highlights that the ethos of individual Catholic schools invariably differs, but they are all expected to 'give expression to their characteristic spirit through the lens of Catholic faith'.

## The Principal as Leader: Catholic Church Requirements

According to Tuohy, the key role of the leader in a Catholic school is to guide the school in accordance with the vision based on Gospel values, clarifying the promise contained in the vision and appreciating its application (Tuohy 2005). *SGN* (IEC 2010) develops this by presenting objectives and indicators of achievement for how the Catholic Church, the BoM, the principal and the staff can work together to nourish a Catholic ethos. *SGN* requires the position of principal to be 'carefully considered' (p.204); those 'training for principalship in a Catholic school today and those already in position need to be offered in-depth and continuing formation on what is meant by Catholic leadership in the complex world in which we live' (IEC 2010, p.146).

A key objective of *SGN*, in line with the *Education Act 1998*, is that the principal 'will ensure that the decisions of the BoM, and particularly the ethos statement set out by the board, are lived out in the day-to-day running of the school' (p.207). Some indicators of achievement include:

- The principal of a Catholic school will be employed on the understanding that he or she is delegated by the BoM and has responsibility to encourage, develop and promote the ethos associated with that particular Catholic school.
- Arrangements will be made for the provision of courses/modules in the management of Catholic schools. In-career support for those who are already in position will also be provided.
- At the behest of the BoM, the principals will take responsibility for providing suitable occasions for reflection on the spiritual and religious wellbeing of the school community (pp.207–208). (The specific responsibility of the principal to Religious Education (RE) is dealt with in Report 5: Religious Education in this series).

It highlights the role of the BoM in supporting the principal (IEC 2010, p.207) and asserts that the principal, as well as others in leadership roles, should be 'supported, as a priority, by ongoing education and training' (p.204).





*Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2019, pp.17–21) outlines five key expressions of ethos as follows:

**A. The school is founded on a Catholic understanding of education**

The school understands all pupils, as human persons made in the image of God, are called to share in God’s love forever by following the example of Christ.

**B. The school is a Catholic community**

Catholic primary schools are rooted in parish communities where they are an important part of local life and foster a sense of shared responsibility for Catholic education/are part of a partnership between home and parish.

**C. The school is an agent of personal growth and social transformation**

The school community is committed to growth in moral awareness and to the search for justice, integrity and care for the earth.

**D. Religious education is an integral part of the life of the school**

The religious education programme includes faith formation, prayer and sacramental experiences, and a growing awareness of being stewards of God’s creation.

**E. We are called to be followers of Christ**

The vision that underpins all aspects of school life informs us that the human person is made in the image of God (Imago Dei) and is called to share in God’s own life forever. For further details on these documents, see Overview).

In line with the *Education Act 1998*, the principal has responsibility to encourage, develop and promote these expressions of ethos. Unlike some other jurisdictions, in Ireland there is no theological or religious education/formation prerequisite, or indeed any Catholic leadership accreditation requirement for leaders of Catholic schools. However, the necessity for systemised foundational preparation and ongoing practice support for Catholic school leaders is recognised internationally (cf. Schuttloffel 2013; Sullivan 2014; Boyle 2016). The Western Australian Catholic education system is one that has taken on board the importance of supporting leaders in matters of faith. In order to prepare future leaders, Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) runs a developmental suite of career stage leadership programmes to support staff at every stage, including Emerging Leaders; Middle Leaders; Senior Leaders; Aspiring Principals, Beginning Principals, and Principal Wellbeing programmes (CEWA 2023). This accredited professional development programme allows all staff the opportunities to meet the accreditation requirements. Once appointed, principals must continue to work towards a master’s degree in either Theology or Religious Education (Anderson et al. 2008).

## School Leadership in Ireland: State Requirements

School leadership and management statutory responsibilities have been further defined in the quality frameworks *Looking at our school 2022: a quality framework for primary schools and special schools* (henceforth LAOS primary) (Department of Education 2022a), and *Looking at our school 2022: a quality framework for post-primary schools* (henceforth LAOS post-primary) (Department of Education 2022b). For instance, State-sponsored measures for school improvement involve a dual model for school inspection: external evaluations carried out by the inspectorate using these quality frameworks and an internal school self-evaluation (SSE) process, led by the principal. Both frameworks are intended as a model for best practice; to underpin school inspections and the SSE process; and as a guide for reflection, recruitment, professional development, improvement and accountability. The quality frameworks divide work in schools into two dimensions: (1) teaching and learning; and (2) leadership and management.

Under the leadership and management dimension, there are four domains:

1. leading teaching and learning
2. managing the organisation
3. leading school development
4. developing leadership capacity (Department of Education 2022a, p.13)

Each of the above domains is further broken down into standards of behaviour and practice, for instance, the responsibility of school leaders to 'create and maintain a positive school culture' and 'to communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation' (Department of Education 2022a, p.25; 2022b, p.25).

## Support for the Principal as Leader

A number of State-sponsored professional learning opportunities exist for practising and aspiring school leaders, mostly provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) unit of the Department of Education. Some of the programmes offered include:

- Misneach: (newly appointed principals)
- Forbairt: (experienced principals and deputy principals)
- Tánaiste: (newly appointed deputy principals)
- Comhar: (middle leadership programme) (PDST 2023)

Since the mid 2000s, a number of lay trusts for voluntary second level schools (previously under the trusteeship of religious congregations) have been established. Many of these have made initial attempts to provide ethos education, for instance as part of their annual conferences, welcome days for new principals and deputy principals, and short courses for middle leaders. Principals are also invited to participate in the one-day training for new BoMs run by the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS). At primary level, some patrons make similar efforts, such as the short training provided by the St Senan's Trust for new BoM members to which principals are invited in the dioceses of Kerry, Killaloe, Limerick and Cashel & Emly.

## Appointment of Principals

In many respects, the process to appoint a school principal is similar at primary and second level. Competitions are open, follow relevant legislation and regulations, and occur in accordance with Section 15 of the *Education Act 1998*. The eligibility requirements include holding qualifications suited to the sector in which they are teaching. Recruitment criteria and marking schemes are governed by the LAOS frameworks (Department of Education 2022a; 2022b) in accordance with the four domains of leadership and management outlined earlier and should reflect the needs and priorities of the school. Whereas there is no mention of faith, ethos or the founding intention of the school in these frameworks, the ability to ‘communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation’ (2022a, p.25) is considered a standard of leadership and management.



However, one significant difference applies to the appointment processes. Second level appointments follow a competency-based model, with the inclusion of ‘Leadership of a faith school’ as a key competency among five other competencies. The successful candidate is expected to understand what is involved in leadership of the characteristic spirit of the school, to be committed to the demands implied in such leadership, and to operate in accordance with what the BoM, on behalf of the trustees, lays down as the quality of action, function and presence necessary for the carrying out of the role (AMCSS/JMB 2024). Moreover, in their guidance to BoMs, AMCSS/JMB (2024) advise that a BoM can decide what weight to allocate to each competency. Generally, all competencies receive equivalent weighting; however, based on the needs and priorities of the school, a BoM can adjust this to reflect the importance of a competency. This has the potential to have significant impact on school identity and ethos.

No similar competency requirement exists at primary level. However, a selection panel can insert questions pertaining to ethos in any of the four domains. If requested, some patrons provide help on devising ethos questions for interviews.

## Methodology

This mixed-methods study employed an explanatory sequential design whereby a large body of quantitative data was initially gathered by means of an online survey. This process was followed by a smaller qualitative strand of semi-structured interviews designed to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results (Creswell 2022; Shorten and Smith 2017). This design allows the quantitative data to inform the questions to be explored during the qualitative strand; integration is further enhanced when qualitative analysis uncovers how the qualitative findings help explain the quantitative results in more depth (Creswell 2022).

Survey questionnaires were distributed to four cohorts of secondary and primary school stakeholders. At primary school level, these included members of BoMs, principals (including deputy principals), teachers and other school staff (including ancillary, support, and administrative staff). In the secondary school context, these included BoM members, principals (including deputy principals), teachers of religious education, and all other teaching staff. To take account of the distinctions in the two contexts, the surveys incorporated a number of additional or differently worded questions specific to each environment. The table below gives a breakdown of the number of respondents at both levels.

*Table 1 Number of survey respondents at primary and second levels*

Cohort	Primary	Secondary	Total
Board of Management	1,162	95	1,257
Principal or Deputy Principal	1,111	117	1,228
Teachers - Classroom or Subject	794	302	1,096
RE Teacher		129	129
Other Staff	122	74	196
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,189</b>	<b>717</b>	<b>3,906</b>

At the close of each questionnaire, respondents were invited to self-select for follow-up interviews by inserting their email address. All were assured that this information would be decoupled from their survey responses to protect anonymity. As a result, 52 interviews were conducted, 28 at primary level and 24 at second level.

Survey data were collated and analysed thematically by means of frequency tables and cross tabulations. Qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo software (for a more detailed methodology, see Overview in this series).

## **Section Two**

### **Research Findings**

A total of 1,178 principals participated in the survey: 1,078 from primary and 100 from second level; 66 per cent are female, 33 per cent male.

In terms of age range, 41 per cent of leaders are in the 50–59 age range. 37 per cent are aged 40–49, and 13 per cent are 30–39. A further 8 per cent are in the 60–69 age group. Almost all principals identify as Roman Catholic (97%), with 75 per cent at secondary and 67 per cent at primary describing themselves as committed and practising. Just under a quarter are committed to Christian values but not as practising Catholics. However, there is a distinct sliding scale when age is considered, with both belief and commitment/practice decreasing in direct proportion to age. This emerged as a significant theme from the research and is dealt with in Theme 2 below. For more information on the profile of participants, see Report 1.

### **Theme 1: Roles and Responsibilities**

School principals were invited to answer a series of questions about their specific roles and responsibilities in respect of Catholic identity.

#### **Roles and Responsibilities: Primary**

At primary level, the survey findings reveal that:

- 88 per cent say they model a Christian way of life, with over half in strong agreement (see Figure 4.1)
- 83 per cent agree with the statement ‘my Christian faith helps me to promote the wellbeing of all students.’
- 57 per cent report that, to a large extent, they are influenced in their school decision-making by the person and vision of Jesus Christ to a large extent. Just under four in ten (38%) report such influence to some or to a limited extent.
- Over 80 per cent of primary school principals say they ensure that RE receives its allocated time of 2.5 hours per week, but only 17 per cent of teachers say they teach it every day.
- Two-thirds of principals agree that parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school’s Catholic ethos. However, the data from other cohorts somewhat dispute this figure.
- More than three-quarters (76%) of primary principals report that, to a large extent, they take their responsibility for the faith formation of their Catholic pupils seriously, while almost one in four (23%) do so to some or to a limited extent. Again, these figures are called into question by the data from other cohorts.

- Over a quarter (28%) did not agree that ‘providing opportunities for students to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central educational aim of this school’.
- 65 per cent strongly agree that ‘caring for others, especially the poor, is a core value of this school’, with a further 23 per cent in agreement.

Whereas the survey findings listed above may appear encouraging, some of these figures are disputed by the data from other cohorts. For instance, with regard to the faith development of pupils, while 80 per cent of principals expressed agreement or strong agreement that this is provided, this applied to 56 per cent of teachers. Only 49 per cent of teachers agreed that parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school’s Catholic ethos, compared with 66 per cent of principals. When it comes to RE, over 80 per cent of primary school principals say they ensure it receives its allocated time of 2.5 hours per week, but only 17 per cent of teachers say they teach it every day (for details on RE, see Report 5). This gap was less evident for other indicators, such as ‘caring for others, especially the poor, is a core value of this school’.

**The qualitative data illuminate the significance of these statistics. Participants were in general agreement that the level of the principal’s commitment to ethos has a direct effect on the Catholic identity and life of the school. Almost all participants agreed that when the principal is engaged with ethos, it filters down through the life of the school. Most of the principals interviewed were proud of the Catholic ethos and confident to lead it.**

A significant level of understanding and commitment to Catholic school ethos emerged from the interviews with principals at primary level. Almost all principals articulated a rich understanding of Catholic school ethos. One considered that the ethos is ‘the essence of a Catholic school – it’s very accepting, it’s very open to everybody. We have moved away from any kind of indoctrination. The values underpinning the school community are about knowing God and loving God and how all that links together in the work that we do as a school.’ For another, it is modelled on ‘the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ’. In another school, the principal starts assemblies every week with a prayer or a period of reflection, and takes the opportunity to remind the school community ‘to be Christian about how we talk about others, how we talk about children, how we respond to the needs of those who are most marginalised’.

A number of principals described a living ethos, for instance: ‘something we live and breathe in the school ... you can feel it in the atmosphere. It’s the everyday small actions and it’s modelling kindness’. Similar understandings of Catholic school ethos include:

*Almost all principals articulated a rich understanding of Catholic school ethos.*

*Ethos is ‘the essence of a Catholic school – it’s very accepting, it’s very open to everybody.*

- 'It's about positive relationships, about authentic experiences of spirituality and faith ... it all boils down to love, how to love one's neighbour as yourself, so I think in terms of relationship-building with staff, children and parents, God is love and that's the starting point for everything.'
- 'How to live as a Christian, how to behave and what the right thing to do is in a particular situation, so your decisions are guided by [the ethos] when it comes to difficult things.'
- 'It's also very important to encourage the children and teach them that they are loved and that they are called to love, this is intertwined into everything we do.'



This rich understanding, although closely aligned to key documents, is not rooted in familiarity with them. As part of the study, respondents were asked about their awareness of and familiarity with three key Church documents that pertain to Catholic education and school identity in Ireland. At primary level, they include the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (IEC) pastoral letter for Catholic schools *Vision 08* (ICBC 2008); *Share the Good News – the National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland (SGN)* (IEC 2010); and *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2019). The findings show that 80 per cent of primary school principals are unsure or have not heard of *Vision 08* and 86 per cent of principals are unsure or have not heard of *SGN*. Three-quarters are unsure or have not heard of *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school*; of the quarter who have, 53 per cent have little to no familiarity with it (see Report 2).

## Roles and Responsibilities: Second Level

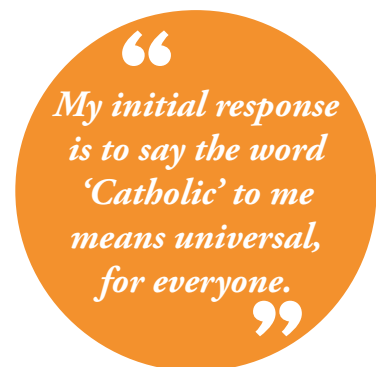
Second level school principals were invited to answer similar questions about their specific roles and responsibilities in respect of Catholic identity. The survey findings reveal that:

- 88 per cent say they model a Christian way of life, with over half in strong agreement (see Figure 4.1).
- 72 per cent strongly agree with the statement 'my Christian faith helps me to promote the wellbeing of all students', with a further 25 per cent in agreement.
- 85 per cent of principals agree that parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school's Catholic ethos. However, the data from other cohorts dispute the reality of this.
- Over a quarter (26%) did not agree that 'providing opportunities for students to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central educational aim of this school'.
- 80 per cent strongly agree that 'caring for others, especially the poor, is a core value of this school', with a further 13 per cent in agreement.
- Just over 4 in 10 principals report that they try, to a large extent, to develop and support the faith life of staff members in accordance with the Catholic tradition, while over half (51%) state that they do so to some or a limited extent.

Resonant of the findings at primary level, principals at second level are more likely than teachers to agree with indicators of ethos. For instance, while 85 per cent of principals agree that parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school's Catholic ethos, the corresponding figure for staff stands at 58 per cent. While 91 per cent say they try, at least to a limited extent, to develop and support the faith life of staff members in accordance with the Catholic tradition, almost 30 per cent of staff disagree that they receive opportunities for faith development. Again, this gap was less pronounced in other indicators, such as 'caring for others, especially the poor, is a core value of this school', with 86 per cent of staff in agreement with this statement.

The qualitative data provide insights into these findings. All second level principals interviewed identified as people of faith and all articulated a rich understanding of Catholic ethos. One principal offered this rich view:

**My initial response is to say the word 'Catholic' to me means universal, for everyone. We are a Catholic school but we're not just a school for Catholics. We should be places of welcome, where identity must be rooted in and driven by Gospel values. For me, those values are respect, being just, being inclusive, providing equity, as it's only through providing equity that we can provide equality.**





Another principal spoke about ‘transmitting the message [to staff] that Catholic schools are “places of hope and love”, stating ‘I don’t need the staff to be practising Catholics, but I do need them to know that this person of Jesus is the person whose values drive what we do here’.

*“ I don’t need the staff to be practising Catholics, but I do need them to know that this person of Jesus is the person whose values drive what we do here. ”*

These principals were passionate about the value of Catholic education, committed to the Catholic identity of the school, and deliberate in their leadership of Catholic school ethos. Invigorating or reinvigorating this aspect of the school was a common priority. All were intentional about the faith life of the school, for instance by introducing or leading prayer at staff meetings and board meetings, and regularly articulating the Catholic vision of the school. However, this ability and commitment may be linked to their professional backgrounds: all but one of the principals interviewed hold a professional degree in Religious Education or a degree in Theology, and experienced formation as part of their third level education.

Comfortable in the language of Catholic faith, these principals clearly locate the identity of the Catholic school in the person of Jesus evident in the Gospels. They attribute a background in RE to having ‘a better chance of understanding their role in Catholic schools’, and helping the school ultimately to reveal how people can ‘live life to the full’ and ‘be a place of hope as resurrection people’.

The influence of the principal on school ethos also emerged from the qualitative data, with BoM members and teachers in broad agreement that leadership sets the tone for ethos:

**Well, our senior management is very strong. It’s a Catholic school and a Catholic school celebrates with students. So, if you don’t wish to participate in that, that’s OK. You can come along but not subscribe to the ethos or be a Catholic, but you’re welcome.**

**[Supported by the school leadership] we do have quite a strong Catholic ethos here. We have the luxury of being very much a close community and our Catholic traditions and faith would be very much a part of the school and students would be very involved in that as well.**

However, the data indicate that this can work in reverse, with respondents also reporting the effects when a principal is not committed to/confident about the Catholic identity of the school. For instance, one staff member described how the remnants of a past era are all that remain, such as a quick prayer at the beginning of the staff meeting, which ‘seems a little bit of tokenism, almost a box-ticking exercise’. Another respondent remarked that ‘crosses on the wall, maybe prayers at various times throughout the year ... I wouldn’t see it much more than that’. School management may also be seen to embrace pluralism and diversity at the expense of pro-Catholic values, for instance not allowing a ‘pro-life group’ to set up in case it would offend anyone. Another participant illustrated how:

**We apologise for disrupting the class to make this announcement about St Bridget's Day, or whatever it might be. We shouldn't be apologetic about it ... there has to be discussion about it and discussion that's open, rather than being afraid to say things because we might insult people. Because I think that's a huge issue in the world today.**

The influence of school leaders was particularly clear in the case of three principals who, on appointment, intentionally set out to renew the ethos of the school. These principals had to be creative and strategic in getting staff to embrace the Catholic identity of the school. They spoke about resurrecting traditions that had been abandoned by 'navigating this territory sensitively'. Initiatives they adopted include:

- addressing the absence of a qualified RE teacher on staff through allocations
- introducing an RE textbook at both Junior Cycle and transition year
- distributing the ashes on Ash Wednesday and introducing prayer/moments of reflection at staff and BOM meetings
- increasing the number of periods for RE to meet the requirement of two hours per week.

In an outlying comment (not supported by the quantitative data: See Report 2), one principal described how 'one of the things that we did was look at [was] the documents around Catholic education.' Moving to the Gospels, staff discussed 'why are those Gospel values important to us; what is the Christian story that drives those Gospel values?'



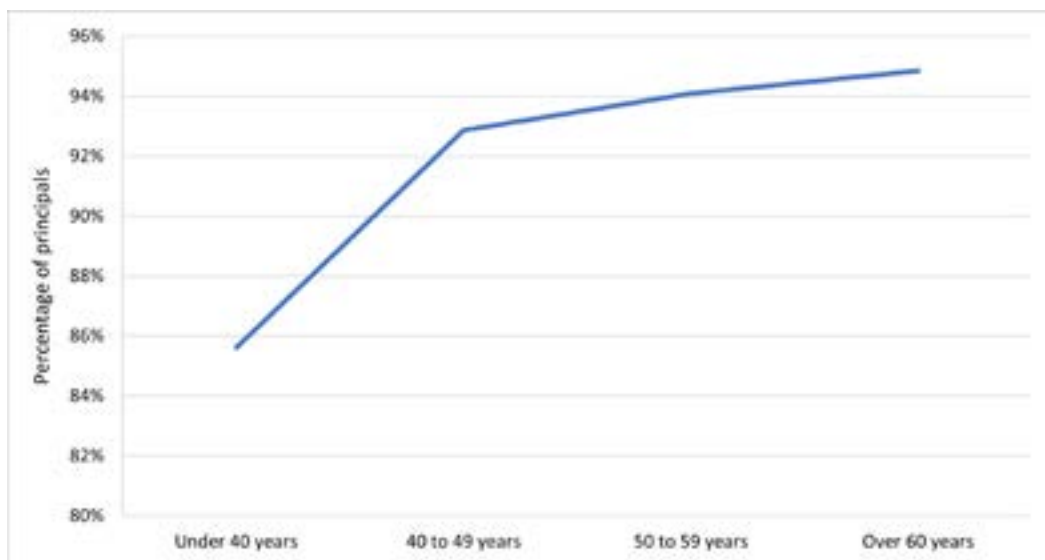
This strengthening of the Catholic identity was not without its challenges. These principals experienced, for instance, resistance from BoM members, a 'hands-off' attitude from staff, and anxiety around enrolment. However, the data suggest that, led by the new appointees, each of these schools is re-emerging as distinctly Catholic with few adverse consequences.

In summary, the data reveal that the current cohort of principals are personally committed to Catholic school ethos. Overall, principals (primary and second level) exhibit a higher level of agreement with ethos related-variables than teachers. With a close alignment between teachers and non-teaching staff, it appears that in some cases principals may either be out of touch with what is happening on the ground, or that their responses are more likely to reflect aspiration than reality. Finally, the qualitative findings suggest that strategic use of the competency-based process to appoint principals (second level) can influence the identity and ethos of a Catholic school.

## Theme 2: Belief and Practice as a Function of Age (Primary and Second Level Principals)

An overwhelming majority of principals at both primary and second level report belief in God (90%). However, as Figure 4.1 illustrates, there is a linear relationship among principals between age and belief in God, with the pattern more pronounced at second level (see Report 1).

*Figure 4.1 Percentage of principals who believe in God*

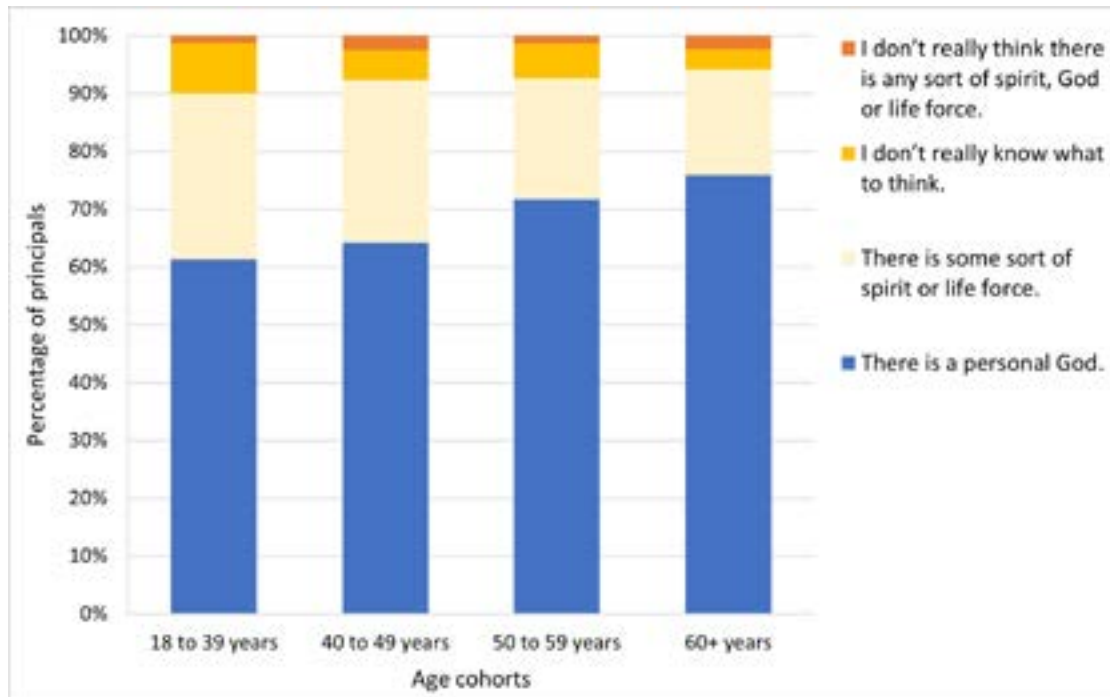


For instance, among the primary cohort, nearly a fifth (18%) of primary principals in the 18–39 age range either state that they do not know or do not have belief in God, in contrast with an average of 9 per cent of those aged 40–59 years, and 6 per cent aged 60 or over.

Similarly, a significant majority of 92 per cent of all principals either express belief in a personal God (68%) or see God as some sort of spirit or life force (24%). As Figure 4.2 indicates, this is also a function of age. Whereas around three-quarters (76%) of principals over the age of 60 hold belief in a personal God, this falls to less than two-thirds (63%) of those under the age of 49. While just 3 per cent of over 60s don't know what to think, this rises to 9 per cent of principals under age 39.

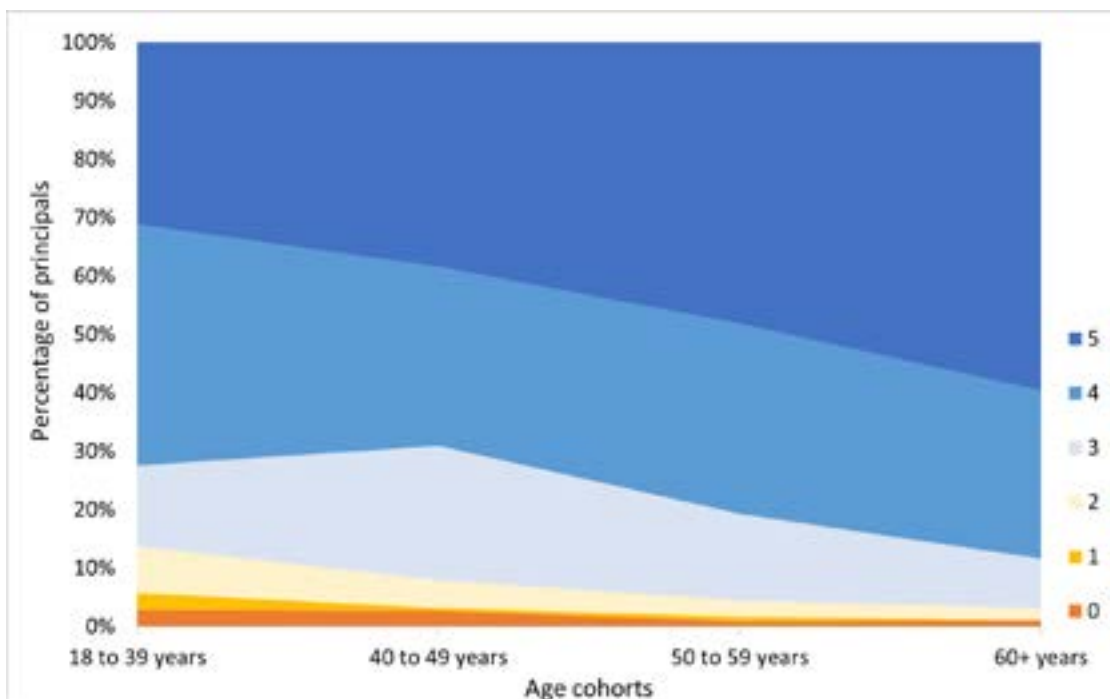


Figure 4.2 Relationship between age of principals and view/understanding of God



Among principals at both levels, there is also an association with age and how important God is in their lives. Whereas 61 per cent of those over 60 years rated this importance at the highest level (5 in a 0-5 point scale), this gradually falls by age bracket to less than a third (30%) of those under 39 years. (See Figure 4.3.)

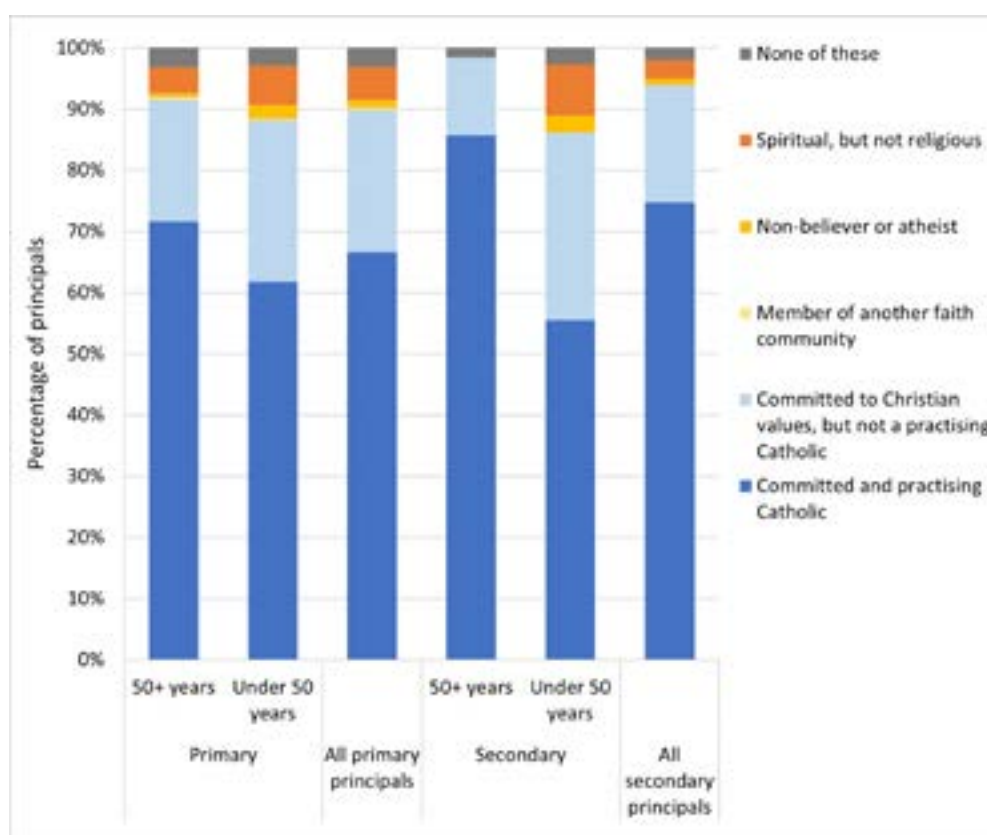
Figure 4.3 Relationship between age of principals and importance of God in their lives



The data also indicate a significant difference in religious practice between those aged 50 and over and those below 50. An illustration of this is attendance of those who identify as Catholic at organised religious services. Nearly half of both primary and second level principals aged over 50 attend weekly. Of those under 50 years of age, 33 per cent of principals at second level and 29 per cent at primary level report attending such services on a weekly basis.

As Figure 4.4 illustrates, 72 per cent of principals aged 50 or over at primary level and 86 per cent at second level describe themselves as committed and practising Catholics. These figures fall to 62 per cent and 56 per cent respectively under the same age. No second level principals over 50 years of age identify as spiritual but not religious, compared with 8 per cent of their colleagues in the under 50 bracket.

Figure 4.4 Relationship between age of principals and religious identification/practice



These findings are reflected in the qualitative data in the form of concern for future leadership, particularly at primary level. Most of the primary principals interviewed self-identified as people of faith and leaned into that faith in their roles as leaders. Having ‘great personal faith’ allows one principal to ‘use that to guide the teaching and learning in the school’ and ‘to encourage other teachers and staff along with that as well’. Another principal notes how their relationship with God helps them to be kind to others and to help them: ‘we can’t all do great things, but we can do small things with great love, [and this transfers to] our behaviour policy, and our golden rules’.

Although appreciative of the professionalism, gifts and dedication of staff, a number of these principals expressed concern around the recruitment and appointment of future leaders of ethos.

The lack of knowledge around Catholic faith tradition and school ethos is evident when employing teachers. They describe experiences where teacher applicants perform well in many other aspects during the recruitment process, but poorly in ethos-related questions. Principals were concerned that some younger teachers 'might not have the same experience of faith or the same interest', and there is a preference among younger teachers for 'trendier forms of spirituality'. There was a particular concern about the teaching of RE in this regard: one principal described how younger staff 'do not have that belief themselves, so it's very hard to teach something that you disagree with'. This lack of understanding is a cause for succession concern among many principals. Teacher and staff responses provide credence for this concern. For instance, teacher respondents explained that some colleagues find it difficult to grasp exactly what a Catholic ethos is, and this can be problematic – for instance, individuals reducing Catholic ethos to 'being a good person' or 'treating others as I would like to be treated myself'. The quantitative data support this concern to some extent, with a clear association, for instance, between age and belief in God amongst primary teachers (for more detail, see Report 1).

On the other hand, the quantitative data also offer some contradictory findings. More than three-quarters (77%) of teachers at primary level report that they respect the Catholic ethos to a large extent. A comparable proportion (75%) say they understand the Catholic ethos of their school to a large extent. Principals seem aware of this paradox, with some proposing that actually lack of support for teachers to explore the Catholic faith and opportunities for faith formation is the root of the problem. This lack of opportunity formed part of the final major theme to emerge from the research – lack of support and oversight.



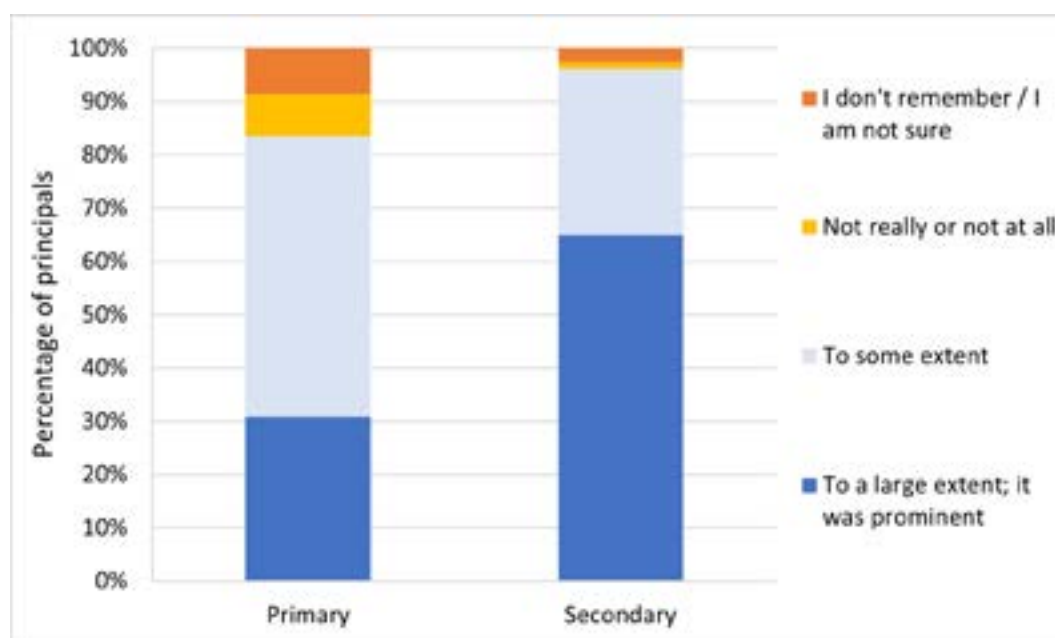
### Theme 3: Lack of Support and Oversight

The need for ongoing, systematic, high-quality support for principals emerged strongly as a theme.

Among primary principals, 54 per cent have not received professional development from their patron/trust to 'encourage, develop and promote the ethos' of their school. This compares less favourably with 22 per cent of the same cohort at secondary level who stated they have not received training from their patron or trust 'for their role as a faith leader'.

Of those who have received such training, just over a quarter (26%) at primary level and a majority (60%) at secondary level reported that it was provided on an ongoing basis (or at least once a year). Almost three-quarters (74%) of primary principals reported that it was offered on a once-off basis (or less frequently than once a year), while this applied to less than half (40%) of the secondary cohort. Figure 4.5 shows the extent to which principals at both levels believe the Catholic ethos was covered in the respective training they received.

*Figure 4.5 Extent to which their role to 'encourage, develop and promote the ethos' of their school was covered in the CPD provided to primary school principals*



As Figure 4.5 shows, there are notable differences between primary and secondary schools in respect of the extent to which principals report that the training/CDP they received covered Catholic ethos, with 70 per cent of primary school principals reporting that the Catholic ethos was not prominent or present to a large extent in the training they received. This is considerably higher than the corresponding figure (38%) among secondary school principals.

The qualitative data indicate varying levels and types of support from primary school patrons. For instance:

- '[The patron is] very good. They send material every month, we get Grow in Love resources and the bishop speaks at different times of the year to the children. We also get resources for Catholic Schools' Week.'
- 'My patron/trust is very proactive in offering in-service.'
- 'My diocese offers a lot of training, it comes through the bishop's office, via the diocesan advisor.'
- 'Very little support [is] coming to us for faith formation, like options of retreats for teachers.'
- '[Contact from the patron is] all about the business of managing the school, but not so much the ethos and I'd love them to bring that forward a bit more.'
- 'My patron needs to be more involved and listen to and communicate and dialogue more ... if people are serious about the faith at the grassroots, they need to dialogue more.'
- The patron needs to 'appreciate where people are at', i.e. the majority of pupils in some of their school are non-Catholic.'

Primary level principals described how ethos concerns 'can get overshadowed by the pile of paperwork, the endless emails and phone calls, so in-service days make such a difference'. They want patrons and trusts to:

- facilitate reflection and discussion around 'what Catholic actually means in practice'
- 'take an interest, to listen to the concerns'
- 'At the moment there's very little support apart from rubber stamping, or a letter or circular in the year ... circulars or emails from patrons are not sufficient.'
- '[In-person visits to dialogue with staff around ethos] maybe once a year'
- '[Both the BoM and the patron] need to keep this conversation going to ensure it doesn't end up on the back burner'.



Principals also expressed the need for accountability:

- 'There's nobody checking up on whether you're doing what you purport to do, and it seems like there isn't the availability of people to do this in all Catholic schools and that's the reality.'
- 'There's no one looking up and checking on things in the school so [ethos] can be let slide.'
- 'We should be asked by the patron about what we have done to spread the faith during the last few weeks in the school.'

Overall, principals see a substantial need for support both for themselves and for their teachers, some of whom will go on to become senior leaders in Catholic schools. They identified a significant need for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) around the Catholic identity of schools, which is 'slowly fading away'.



## Support for Principals: Second Level

The role of lay trust bodies and how this role is exercised was a significant theme among second level principals. Some principals pointed to their trust as a valued and regular source of support. Responses described:

- Support from the school coordinator ‘who visits the school occasionally’, and ‘a middle leader’s course done by four of the trusts and it was good’.
- Inviting the trustees to come to speak to the board on their responsibility towards ethos, ‘so, they’re coming in to do that for us. I wouldn’t say they’re driving [ethos], but they’re definitely open to what needs to be done for the school’.

*Principals see a substantial need for support both for themselves and for their teachers, some of whom will go on to become senior leaders in Catholic schools.*

Other responses were more critical. For instance, one principal reached out to the trustees for support with ethos issues, but the support was not forthcoming. The trustees need ‘to get their act together, putting it very bluntly, as they have a responsibility which I don’t see them currently fulfilling and I am appalled to be quite honest’. Support/oversight of RE was a particular theme here, with some principals saying that the trusts need to be a little more critical, especially ‘of the Religious Education that is being taught in their schools’. Principals would like the patron or the Church to give them direction in how to assess the quality of what is happening in the RE classroom, but stated that ‘it needn’t go so far as the State inspection goes’ (for details on RE, See Report 5).

Principals hope that trusts bodies/patrons would:

- develop staff in their understanding and knowledge and their ability to lead ethos
- ensure that whoever is working for them ‘is genuinely interested’
- help principals to lead the practice of faith
- help school leaders of the future to be clear about the mission and value of Catholic schools, and able to articulate and lead this mission; to be confident in the Christian story in order to ‘engage with society in a way that offers hope to the next generations’
- articulate publicly ‘the positive values and influence that Catholic schools’ can have.
- articulate publicly ‘the positive values and influence that Catholic schools’ can have.

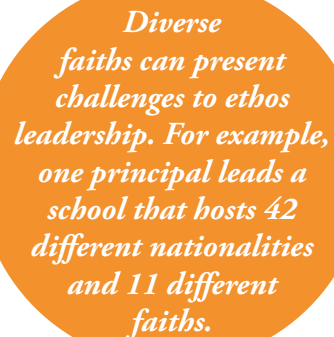
Overall, the combined data from principals at both levels indicate the urgent need for ongoing, systematic, high-quality support.

## Principals Face a Range of Ethos-related Challenges

Although the quantitative instruments did not deal with the challenges to ethos leadership, sufficient data emerged from the interviews with both primary and second level principals on this issue to warrant inclusion of this as a subtheme. Principals spoke about a range of challenges that make it difficult to lead Catholic school ethos, such as increasing diversity, State demands, staff understandings/attitudes to ethos, and lack of support for principals.

### a) Increasing diversity in Irish society

Diverse faiths can present challenges to ethos leadership. For example, one principal leads a school that hosts 42 different nationalities and 11 different faiths, and at the same time is 'committed to being principal of a Catholic school and to do all that it entails. I speak to the children about God as a loving and a forgiving God.' This principal tries, where appropriate, to help children develop a relationship with God, whatever they perceive that to be, 'so that they can talk to God when they are in need and experience that relationship as positive'.



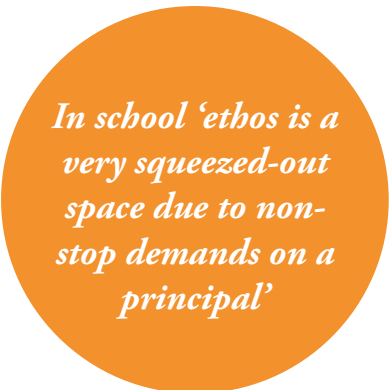
*Diverse faiths can present challenges to ethos leadership. For example, one principal leads a school that hosts 42 different nationalities and 11 different faiths.*

Principals spoke about how schools have a diminishing number of practising Catholics, with much greater multicultural and multifaith populations, as well as people of no religious faith. The shift is noticeably clear in many schools where Catholic students who are practising their faith outside of school are 'the new minority'. Comments such as 'it can be hard to be a Catholic in a Catholic school' resonate with a recent study from the national Anti-Bullying Centre, which found that in the context of increasing secularisation, RE teachers have specific concerns about students who were practising Catholics being targeted for bullying (Meehan & Laffan 2021). Remarks such as 'how do you have liturgies when they are alien to the majority of students?' and 'we probably have a significant majority of what we call non-practising teachers ... how then can they lead young people will be the greatest challenge from five years forward' echo the quantitative findings of a decline in faith practice (see Report 1).

At the same time, it is clear from the data that principals and schools at both levels are embracing this new diversity and trying hard to accommodate it. They address this reality by consciously welcoming people of faiths and worldviews other than Christian, in accordance with their Catholic school ethos. For instance, over three-quarters (77%) of respondents at second level and almost the same proportion at primary level (71%) agreed that students of a faith other than Christian have the freedom to express their faiths while in their schools.

### b) Increasing and complex State demands

Participants report that State demands on (all) principals has grown exponentially over the last number of years. A range of respondents spoke about the pressure principals are under with new programmes, systems, initiatives continually being introduced: 'things keep getting added but nothing is taken away'. In school 'ethos is a very squeezed-out space due to non-



*In school 'ethos is a very squeezed-out space due to non-stop demands on a principal'*

stop demands on a principal. There's so much happening in schools ... the change is phenomenal in terms of everything. SEN regulations have come in, there's new Junior Certs and Leaving Certs ... we're very initiative laden.'

Principals lamented the lack of space and time for ethos-related issues: 'time is probably a massive issue ... we'd love to train up our staff [on ethos] ... but required things like data protection, and child protection and things like that up to teaching and learning, methodologies and that, so that there's a huge competition for space. Another challenge related to a BoM having had 'several chairpersons in three years because of anti-social behaviour that goes on in the school', and 'board members don't feel safe'. Every time there's a change of chairperson, this principal has to start from scratch 'to build up a relationship with them'. Such societal challenges have a direct effect on the life of the school.

### c) Staff understanding/attitude to ethos

Attitudes of staff can be challenging for principals as leaders of Catholic school ethos. Principals outline how some staff 'have no real allegiance to it being a Catholic school' and report that some staff are not supportive of the school's Catholic identity. While in the minority, they can resist the principal's efforts. Some teacher responses support this, for instance: 'It may not be total opposition but there wouldn't be a massive drive from a cohort of the staff to promote ethos.' At primary level, challenges such as uncertainty around how staff might react can make principals reluctant to overtly lead certain expressions of ethos. For instance, half of the principals interviewed were willing to lead prayer at BoM level and with pupils but reluctant to do so with staff.

- 'I've never started a staff meeting with a prayer.'
- 'With my pupils I'm 100% comfortable. With staff, no. I wouldn't say that's coming from a lack of confidence in my ability, it's just that, in front of your peers, when not all will be on the same page as you, it's quite difficult.'
- 'With staff it can be challenging.'

The quantitative data give some support to this concern, with 1 in 10 teaching staff members disagreeing with this statement 'I am willing to attend all religious ceremonies and events held throughout the school year.' Staff members are more likely to 'respect' the Catholic ethos than to 'witness to' it. The older staff members are, the more inclined they are to both 'respect' and 'witness to' the Catholic ethos, as Figures 4.6 and 4.7 illustrate.



Figure 4.6 Extent to which staff members respect their schools' Catholic ethos, by age

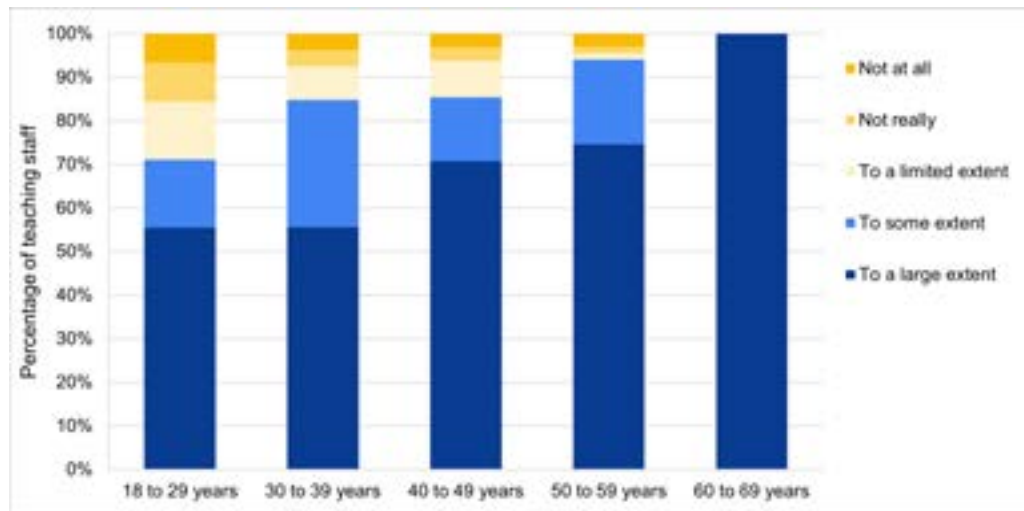
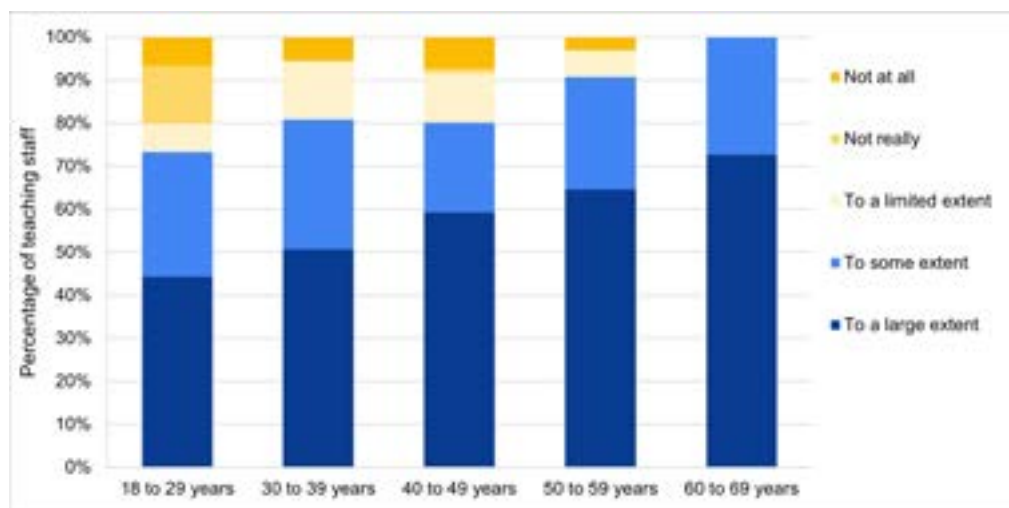


Figure 4.7 Extent to which staff members witness to their schools' Catholic ethos, by age



One principal suggests that training to facilitate reflection and discussion around ‘what Catholic actually means in practice’ would be helpful, as ‘principals will try and hold on to it as long as we can, but we won’t rock the boat too much with our staff. Principals are afraid too, as it can annoy people’.

In short, the findings reveal a current cohort of principals knowledgeable about and committed to Catholic school identity and ethos. The complex nature of the role echoes the insights of authors such as Clegg (2012) and Darmody and Smyth (2018) outlined in Section One. However, the changing demographics among school leaders – for instance the linear relationship between age and belief in God – give rise to succession concerns. The qualitative data uncover an almost universal appeal from principals for meaningful ethos-related professional development and support.

## Section Three

### Discussion of Findings

The influence of the principal on the Catholic identity of a school, for better or for worse, is significant. Much depends on the person of the principal; a deliberate positionality and intentional leadership choice are required (Duignan 2007; Bonner 2012). Overall, current principals of Catholic schools in Ireland are committed to Catholic education. The vast majority of principals say that they model a Christian way of life in their work and agreed with the statement ‘my Christian faith helps [me] to promote all students’ wellbeing.’ Principals at both primary and second levels articulated rich understandings and personal commitment to Catholic education. Those who identified as practising Catholics leaned into that faith tradition and found it very helpful in aspects of their role from wellbeing to decision-making.

The literature outlined the principal’s responsibility to encourage, develop and promote expressions of ethos, such as taking responsibility for providing suitable occasions for reflection on the spiritual and religious wellbeing of the school community (IEC 2010, pp.207–208), following the example of Christ, and fostering community (CSP 2019, pp.17–21). In their personal witness, principals clearly take this seriously, with 88 per cent of primary and 80 per cent of second level principals reporting that they model a Christian way of life in their work. Fostering a Catholic community that is inclusive of all, concern with the wellbeing of all students, and caring for others, especially the poor, all emerge as well-achieved expressions of ethos.

On the other hand, some indicators where principals scored highly, such as formally introducing parents of incoming students to the school’s Catholic ethos, were somewhat disputed by the data from other cohorts. Overall, principals (primary and second level) exhibit a higher level of agreement with ethos-related variables than teachers and non-teaching staff. With a close alignment between the other two school-based cohorts (that is, teachers and non-teaching staff), it appears that in some cases principals may either be out of touch with what is happening on the ground or their responses are more likely to reflect aspiration than reality. Divergent data on some ethos indicators between principals and teachers may also indicate that principals are aware of and aspire to these functions but need considerable support to achieve them.

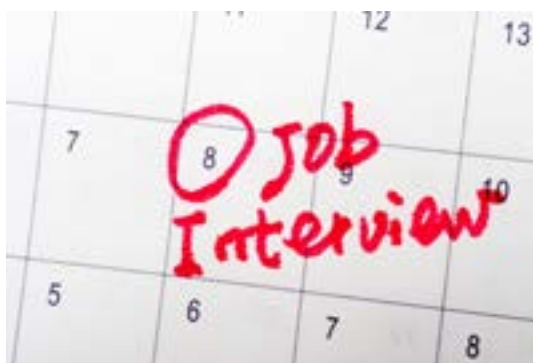
Confident leadership of social justice indicators – such as intentionally inclusive school communities – is evident, with many schools embracing the new diversity in Irish society. This resonates with a recent study which found that Irish teachers demonstrate a ‘heightened focus on cultural and religious diversity as a central issue within their teaching (Cho et al. 2023, p.1021). *The Understanding and living the ethos* documents (IEC 2016; 2019) underline the expectation of respect, welcome and dialogue with those of other beliefs and worldviews in all Catholic schools. Principals demonstrate this by consciously welcoming people of faiths and worldviews other than Christian and ensuring that students of a faith other than Christian have the freedom to express their faiths while in their schools. This level of confidence stood in contrast to the Christocentric faith formation expected in *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school* (IEC, 2019). Although ‘called to be followers of Christ’ (p.17, p.21) figures largely in the expressions of ethos articulated in this document, over a quarter of principals at both levels did not agree that ‘providing opportunities for students to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central educational aim of this school’.

Whereas the commitment of current principals to Catholic ethos and identity is evident, succession emerged as an issue: the data clearly reveal a distinct sliding scale when age is considered, with age directly proportional to both belief and commitment/practice. As mentioned previously, the older staff members are, the more inclined they are to both 'respect' and 'witness to' the Catholic ethos. The qualitative data at primary level, and to a lesser extent at second level, echo this finding. Principals are concerned that without a personal connection to that faith tradition, the next generation of leaders may find the role more difficult, especially leadership of ethos. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the linear relationship between age and ethos-related factors – such as belief and understanding of God – among principals themselves. Earlier in the report, we saw that over 90 per cent of primary level principals aged over 50 express belief in God, whereas nearly one-fifth in the 18–39 age range either state that they do not know or do not believe in God. This linear pattern is even more pronounced at second level.



Despite this, concern about future leadership did not emerge as a significant theme among second level principals. One reason may be the introduction of Middle Leaders courses by some of the lay trust bodies. These are courses to develop an understanding of ethos leadership in aspiring leaders. In general, these principals were aware of the succession issue, but not overly concerned. They did, however, see a need for the trusts to provide opportunities for ongoing, invitational, faith formation/ethos exploration for staff, similar to how aspiring leaders are supported through Middle Leadership programmes. This need for support emerges clearly from the data, and it forms the final theme in this section.

Another factor may be the inclusion of 'Leadership of a faith school' as one of six key competencies in the recruitment process at second level, which can allow for the appointment of principals with a specific ethos mandate. This competency was clearly in evidence where the three principals appointed to schools experiencing an ethos-drift had managed to turn this around as a result of their own understanding of Catholic



identity and ethos, and their commitment to renewing ethos-related understandings and practices. It is interesting that all of these appointees had third level qualifications in Religious Education or Theology, with experiences of faith formation.

The complex role of the principal as outlined in the Overview is even more demanding when challenges to ethos such as limited understanding/degrees of negativity among some staff are considered. This resonates with the arguments outlined for instance by Clegg (2012) that leaders in Catholic schools face an additional burden of nurturing a Catholic vision for education while fulfilling the compliance imperatives of the State. It also adds urgency to the almost universal appeal among participants for meaningful support and oversight. Although upholding ethos is a legal requirement, there is little support forthcoming for this aspect of the principal's role. The advanced system of State training where legal imperatives and government requirements are concerned, for instance through the Misneach and Forbairt programmes, does not extend to matters of ethos. Although the inputs from patrons and trust bodies are mostly appreciated, a much more developed, systematic approach is called for. *SGN* recognised this over a decade ago; this research highlights the urgency of the need.



## Conclusions

Upholding the characteristic spirit (ethos) of a school is a legal requirement of the BoM, devolved to the school principal (Education Act 1998). Both the State and the patron have a responsibility to support principals in this regard.

Patrons will take heart from the level of commitment and professionalism among principals, and the abundance of good practice and commitment at both primary and second level. On the other hand, it is clear that principals are more confident in their leadership of some expressions of ethos, such as social justice expressions, than others. The potential of the appointment process at second level is also affirming: inclusion of 'Leadership of a faith school' as a key competency can allow for the appointment of principals with a mandate to renew the ethos needs and priorities of a school, with noticeable results.



**Recommendation 1:** The key competency 'Leadership of a faith school' should be embedded in the process at primary level. Those charged with appointing principals, such as BoMs and appointment process selection committees, understand the depth and breadth of this competency, consider it deeply, and employ it carefully in the principal appointment process.

The school principal is responsible for nurturing the Catholic character of a school and plays a vital role in determining the quality of the Catholic school. Leadership programmes must develop leaders with qualities, capabilities and competencies that leadership of Catholic schools demands. However, support for existing principals and programmes for leaders of the future are urgently needed. Work needs to be undertaken in the area of leadership succession, with clear strategies to identify and develop future leaders, many of whom might be discouraged by the workload and burdensome tasks of the position. Providing ongoing, high-quality CPD for existing and aspiring leaders in sustained and life-giving ways is an important first step. As far back as 2010, *SGN* identified that 'training for principalship in a Catholic school today and those already in position need to be offered in-depth and continuing formation on what is meant by Catholic leadership in the complex world in which we live' (IEC 2010, 146). Although the inputs from patrons and trust bodies are mostly appreciated, a much more systematic, career stage developmental approach is urgently called for. Models such as the CEWA suite of leadership programmes (see Section One) might be helpful in this regard.



**Recommendation 2:** A support system for existing and emerging leaders, in consultation with those leaders, is put in place as a matter of urgency. This should include practical support around areas identified by principals, such as leading liturgy and faith development opportunities for staff.

Although the findings presented in this report could be informative for school patrons, policymakers, researchers, school leaders and staff, and students and their parents, some limitations should be outlined. First, all principals interviewed as part of this study self-identified as Catholic people of faith. Moreover, with just one exception, all second level principals interviewed had a third level qualification in Religious Education/Theology. The qualitative data resonates with their rich understanding and personal commitment to Catholic education. However, this is a limitation of the data. Although the vast majority of school leaders identify as Catholic, it is clear that not all share similar levels of commitment to Catholic school ethos. Finally, the data pertain to the perspectives of teachers, school staff, leaders and BoM members. The voices of both students and their parents would add to this field of research. These limitations should be addressed in future reports and research papers.





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