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## ‘Not trendy, not cool’: the future of Catholic primary school leadership in the Republic of Ireland

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The role of the primary school principal (headteacher) in Ireland (Republic) is deeply embedded in the historical, cultural, and educational fabric of the nation. The principal serves not only as an educational leader but also has a devolved responsibility to lead the characteristic spirit (ethos) of the school. Significant societal changes such as the decline in religious practice have influenced the demographic landscape, yet 88% of primary schools retain a Catholic patron and thereby a Catholic ethos. In an increasingly diverse society with rapidly falling numbers of people who identify and practice as Catholic, the possibility of recruiting principals able and willing to sustain this dual mission comes into question. This paper arises from the first large scale, mixed-methods empirical study into Catholic schools in the Republic of Ireland. Through an examination of quantitative and qualitative data, it analyses the practices, views and experiences of primary school principals to highlight the role and reality of leading a Catholic primary school in Ireland today. Their voices were then used to extract implications for patrons and policy makers. Research results indicate that principals are largely committed and professional in their approaches to ethos leadership. However, they also indicate a mismatch between demographic realities and the largely denominational primary school system, giving rise to leadership support and succession concerns. While the study is carried out in Ireland, it is also of interest to other jurisdictions where schools are faced with similar challenges and education systems are looking to the future of school leadership.

**Keywords:** Principals; school leadership; primary schools; Catholic schools; ethos; Ireland

### 1. Introduction

The role of the primary school principal in the Republic of Ireland (henceforth Ireland) is multifaceted and deeply embedded in the historical, cultural, and educational fabric of the nation. Traditionally, the principal served as an educational leader in a religious (mostly Catholic) context, reflecting the dual mission of primary schools to provide both academic excellence and faith formation.

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However, significant societal changes in Ireland in recent decades and the increasing pluralism of secular and religious views among the population, raise questions particularly for the leadership of Catholic schools, which at 88%, continue to dominate the primary sector in Ireland (Department of Education [DE] 2022a).

One such question, which lies at the heart of this paper, is against this changing background, how do principals experience their role as ethos leaders and what are the implications of this for the leadership of the (mostly Catholic) primary school sector? The aim of the paper is to investigate the reality and sustainability of Catholic primary school leadership in Ireland today. By exploring the beliefs and practices of principals and giving voice to how they experience their role as ethos leaders, it identifies implications for Catholic primary school leadership in the future.

This paper arises from the Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE 2024) (Ireland) research project entitled *Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools in Ireland, Exploring the Attitudes and Behaviours of Stakeholders*. While GRACE is an international research-based partnership (see [www.globalcatholiceducation.org/grace](http://www.globalcatholiceducation.org/grace)), GRACE (Ireland) focuses on Catholic education in the Republic of Ireland (see [www.mic.ul.ie/GRACE](http://www.mic.ul.ie/GRACE)). The role and responsibilities of the principal (headteacher) as leader is a key theme in this regard.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Primary school leadership: the Irish context

Primary education in Ireland has a long and storied history, deeply intertwined with the broader narrative of Irish society and its relationship with the Catholic Church. A patronage system of education, largely devolved under British colonial governance to the main Churches (Catholic and Church of Ireland), emerged following the introduction of the national school system in 1831 and persisted after the foundation of the State in 1922 (Walsh 2016). The Catholic Church's influence was so extensive that, by the mid-twentieth century, it was patron to the vast majority of primary schools in the country (Coolahan 2017). At that point, Ireland's schools operated within a cultural, social, and policy environment that was predominantly Catholic and largely supportive of their ethos, mission, and expressions of religiosity. Indeed, these schools played a significant role not only in the nascent education but also in the faith formation of the nation's youth (et al. 2024). Despite the increased role of the Irish State in recent decades, and much political and public debate around school patronage, the Catholic church remains the dominant patron with responsibility for 88% of primary schools in Ireland today. While these schools are largely state funded, they are managed locally by a Board of Management (BoM) on behalf of the patron, usually the bishop of the local diocese.

This historical dominance shaped the role of the Catholic school principal, positioning them as key figures in both educational and religious spheres. While initially, principals were primarily focused on maintaining religious orthodoxy and discipline. The role has evolved significantly from its origins in response to shifts in the Church's influence and the professionalisation of educational leadership and administration (O'Donoghue and Harford 2016). Furthermore, over recent decades, there has been a decline in religiosity in Ireland (Breen 2017; Breen and Healy 2016; Mary 2022). The increasing secularisation of Irish society, declining religiosity among the Irish population, and changing patterns of migration have resulted in a mismatch between an increasingly diverse population and the predominantly denominational

primary school system (Faas, Foster, and Smith 2020; Meehan and O’Connell 2021; Ó Caoimh et al. 2024). Census of Population data indicate that the percentage of those who self-identify as Catholic fell by almost 20% between 2011 and 2022, continuing a steady decline over the last six decades (Central Statistics Office 2024).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Census figures show a linear relationship between age and adherence to Roman Catholicism in Ireland. The older people are, the more likely they are to be Catholic. At the same time, the number of those with no religion continues to rise. In 2022, persons indicating no religion comprised c.14% of the population, up from c.6% in 2011, elevating no religion to the second largest affiliation category.<sup>2</sup>

Along with Catholic identity, Christian religious practice in Ireland is steadily decreasing, especially among young people. For instance, 26% of young people in the 16–29 age group say they never attend a religious service (Bullivant 2018, 7). This trend towards no-religion echoes international patterns in Western, once Christian-majority nations (PEW Research Center 2019). Catholic educators find themselves operating in a milieu that is increasingly secular and, at times, can be hostile to Catholicism in Ireland’s schools (O’Flaherty et al. 2018; Turpin 2022).

Both Catholic patrons and State leaders are supportive of an educational landscape which reflects the reality of this increasingly diverse society, indicating that a true plurality of patronage across the country should ensure parental choice whilst enabling patrons to be true to their own ethos and characteristic spirit (DE 2022a). The Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity Process (often referred to as divestment) aims to provide more multi-denominational schools, in line with the choices of families and school communities and the Programme for Government commitment. This process facilitates a change of patron, and therefore ethos, in areas where there may be demand for more diversity in school type. While the Government has set a target of increasing the proportion of multi-denominational primary schools from the current 5% to circa 13% by the year 2030 (DE 2022a), and some transfers of patronage have already occurred, progress on divestment has been stubbornly slow.

## **2.2. *Evolving responsibilities: the principal as ethos leader***

In accordance with the Government of Ireland Education Act (1998), the principal holds the responsibility, devolved from the patron, to uphold the school’s ethos. In a Catholic school, this dimension of the role is underpinned by a theological framework that views education as a holistic process aimed at the formation of the whole person – intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically, morally, religiously and spiritually. Catholic patrons further develop this by providing specific objectives and indicators for how the Catholic Church, Board of Management (BoM), principal, and staff can collaboratively foster this ethos within the school environment (IEC 2010). One key objective, 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” (207). To achieve this, it asserts that 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, 146).

More recently, in *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP 2019, 17–21)), the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference (ICBC) outlines five key expressions of ethos of the Catholic primary school as follows:

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

The school fosters a deep sense of the whole person, life and reality as a whole. Catholic schools are tasked with fostering a holistic educational environment that promotes academic excellence, moral development, and spiritual growth, in the context of a broad Christian philosophy of education.

B. The school is a Catholic community

Catholic primary schools foster a sense of community and belonging, in partnership with home and parish. These welcoming and inclusive schools create an environment where all students feel valued and supported.

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. “There is emphasis on pastoral care and student support, not least for those who are educationally disadvantaged” (18).

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

The religious education programme “receives its allotted time for each year” (19) and includes faith formation, prayer and sacramental experiences, and a growing awareness of being stewards of God’s creation.

E. Called to be followers of Christ

The vision that underpins all aspects of school life is that the human person is made in the image of God (*Imago Dei*) and is called to share in God’s own life forever. “All Christians who are part of the school are invited to constantly rediscover what it is to be a follower of Christ and to give witness to the centrality of the Gospel” (20).

Most school principals, therefore, are tasked with creating a learning environment that reflects this holistic vision, promoting not only academic excellence but also the integration of Catholic values such as the commitment to social justice into everyday school life (Groome 1998; Sullivan 2006).

## **2.2. *Evolving responsibilities: the principal as education leader***

The role of the Catholic school principal has also evolved in response to changes in educational theory and practice. Modern educational leadership emphasises collaborative practices, data-driven decision-making, and a focus on student outcomes. Primary school leadership and management statutory responsibilities are most recently defined in the quality framework *Looking at our school 2022: a quality framework for primary schools and special schools* (henceforth LAOS) (Department of Education [DE] 2022b). The LAOS framework is intended as a model for best practice and as a guide for reflection, recruitment, professional development, improvement and accountability. LAOS defines leadership and management as one of two dimensions of work in schools (the other is teaching and learning), with clearly defined standards of behaviour and practice. For instance, criteria and marking schemes for the

recruitment of primary school principals are governed by the leadership and management dimension of the LAOS framework (DE 2022b). In line with relevant legislation and regulations, the process to appoint a school principal is by open competition. The eligibility requirements include holding qualifications suited to the sector. 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” (2022b, 25) is considered a standard of leadership and management.

On the other hand, patrons and trustees in collaboration with the state have developed a competency-based approach to the selection of senior management at second level: school principal appointments to voluntary secondary schools follow this model, with the inclusion of ‘Leadership of a faith school’ 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 Board of Management (BoM), on behalf of the trustees, lays down as necessary for the carrying out of the role (AMCSS/JMB 2024). This has the potential to have significant impact on school identity and ethos (Meehan et al. 2024a). No similar competency requirement exists at the primary level.

In Ireland, there is no theological or religious education/formation prerequisite, or indeed any Catholic leadership accreditation requirement for leaders of Catholic schools. In contrast, for instance, 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 requirements to take on leadership positions. Indeed, the necessity for systemised foundational preparation and ongoing practice support for Catholic school leaders is recognised internationally (Boyle 2016; Schuttloffel 2013; Sullivan 2014).

#### ***2.4. Professional development and support***

Once appointed, principals must navigate complex issues of religious identity, inclusion, and diversity, balancing the demands of maintaining a distinctly Catholic ethos with the requirements of state education policies and standards. This balancing act can create tensions, which principals need to negotiate, working to ensure that their schools remain true to their Catholic identity while also meeting the needs of all students and complying with state regulations (Meehan et al. 2024a). The role requires a nuanced understanding of both educational leadership and the expertise necessary to lead a Catholic school. Effective professional development can help Catholic principals to address both educational leadership skills and the specific theological and spiritual dimensions of their work.

A number of State-sponsored professional learning opportunities exist for practising and aspiring school leaders, mostly provided by OIDE, the service for Supporting the Professional Learning of School Leaders and Teachers 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) (OIDE 2024)

Graduate programmes such as the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) and the Master's in Educational Leadership and Management offered by various Irish universities provide opportunities for principals to enhance their leadership capacities in line with State requirements (Sugrue & Solbrekke, 2021). However, as State-sponsored programmes, they make little reference to school ethos.

Given the unique demands of their role, Catholic school principals also require ethos-related preparation, professional development and support. However, support in this regard lags behind the increasingly professionalised approach of the State. Support networks, such as the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) that offer guidance on issues ranging from legal compliance to child protection also have a remit for leadership of Catholic ethos. Recently, CPSMA produced some ethos-related resources for BoM members such as the video entitled *Living our ethos, How are we doing* (2024) and a check list to accompany this video. Some patrons (dioceses) have also made efforts in this sphere. For instance, the St Senan's Trust – a joint initiative of the dioceses of Kerry, Killaloe, Limerick and Cashel & Emly – offers short training for new BoM members to which principals are invited. One significant development, the MA in Christian Leadership in Education – a professional qualification situated in the Christian school context – has found it difficult to compete with similar programmes which are state subsidised.

### 3. 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 primary school stakeholders including members of BoMs, principals (including deputy principals), teachers and other school staff (including ancillary, support, and administrative staff). Table 1 gives a breakdown of the number of respondents.

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, 28 interviews were conducted, eight with principals. This becomes a limitation of the data: whereas the interviews provide some interesting insights into the quantitative findings, such a small sample size cannot be considered representative of the principal population. This was dealt with by triangulating interview responses with (a) those of other cohorts and (b) the quantitative data.

Survey data were collated and analysed thematically by means of frequency tables and cross tabulations. Qualitative data were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke

Table 1. Number of survey respondents at primary levels.

Questionnaire cohort	Primary
Members of board of management	1162
Principal or deputy principal	1111
Teacher	794
Other staff	122
<b>Total</b>	<b>3189</b>
Interview cohort	Primary
Board of management	7
Principals	8
Teacher	12
Other staff	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>

2006) using NVivo software (O’Connell et al. 2024). Results are discussed below under the three themes which emerged from this process: principals’ attitudes and practices, age-related variables, and support for principals as leader of ethos.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. *Leadership of ethos: attitudes and practices*

School principals were invited to answer a series of questions about their attitudes and practices in respect of Catholic ethos. The survey findings reveal that at a personal level, the vast majority are committed to the faith tradition of the school. For instance, 88% say they model a Christian way of life and 83% agree with the statement “my Christian faith helps me to promote the wellbeing of all students”. This commitment to Catholic ethos also emerged from the interviews with principals. For instance, one described how the work of the school is about “going back to the message of the gospel ... to work with those on the periphery of society.” Another sees “my relationship with God as helping me to be kind to others and help them. We can’t all do great things, but we can do small things with great love. This is embedded in our behaviour policy and our golden rules.” A third offered how “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.” Yet another principal understood the school ethos as “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.”

However, as the survey delves into ethos practices in the school reflective of the indicators (see 2.2), the findings become more complex. For instance, although the indicators resonate with a Christocentric foundation, almost 40% of principals report that they are influenced in their school decision-making by the person and vision of Jesus Christ to some/a limited extent. 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.” On the other hand, “caring for

others, especially the poor, is a core value of this school” emerged as a strong indicator: the vast majority of participants across all cohorts agreed with this statement.

Some of the encouraging figures relating to principals are disputed by the data from other cohorts. For instance, while 80% of principals expressed agreement or strong agreement that opportunities for faith development of pupils are provided, when applied to teachers, this percentage drops to 56%. Only 49% of teachers agreed that parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school's ethos, compared with 66% of principals. This divergence is most profound where Religious Education (RE) is concerned: 80% of primary school principals say they ensure it receives its allocated time of 2.5 h per week, but only 17% of teachers say they teach it every day (for details see Meehan et al. 2024b). The qualitative data illuminate the significance of these statistics. For instance, principals explained that although they can timetable RE for 2.5 h per week, teachers are largely autonomous in their own classrooms: “I can no longer assume that the teachers will prioritise it, I can just ask.” Curriculum overload emerged as a key contributory factor: “with schools being so busy and being constantly challenged on their timetable,” religion is bound to suffer. Similar comments include

- “My teachers do their very best in the classroom, the priority here is for children to learn to read and write.”
- “They just can't get around to RE.”
- “If they take on a science project then they're probably not doing music and drama and other things, including religion, because you have to pick and choose.”

In summary, the data reveal that the current cohort of principals are personally committed, knowledgeable and appreciative of Catholic school ethos. However, principals exhibit a higher level of agreement than teachers with some ethos-related variables. With a close alignment between teachers and non-teaching staff (see Meehan et al. 2024b), it appears that in some cases principals' responses are more likely to reflect aspiration than reality.

#### **4.2. Faith and observance among principals in relation to age**

An overwhelming majority of principals report belief in God (90%). However, as Figure 1 illustrates, there is a linear relationship among principals between age and belief 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% of those aged 40–59 years, and 6% aged 60 or over.

Similarly, around three-quarters (76%) of principals over the age of 60 hold belief in a personal God (as understood in the Christian tradition); this falls to less than two-thirds (63%) of those under the age of 50. While just 3% of over 60s don't know what to think, this rises to 9% of principals under age 40.

The relationship between age and how important God is in the lives of principals follows a similar pattern. Whereas 61% 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 40 years. 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.

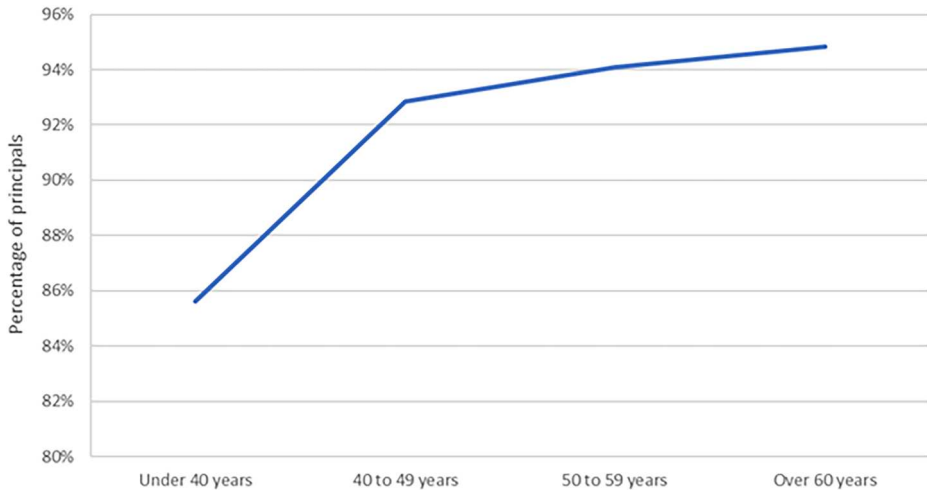


Figure 1. Percentage of principals who believe in God.

Nearly half of principals aged over 50 attend weekly. Of those under 50 years of age, 29% report attending such services on a weekly basis.

As Figure 2 illustrates, 72% of principals aged 50 or over at the primary level describe themselves as committed and practising Catholics. This figure falls to 62% under the same age.

These findings are reflected in the qualitative data in the form of concern for future leadership. From the previous theme (see 4.1) it is clear that most principals interviewed self-identified as people of faith and leaned into that faith in their roles as leaders. Although appreciative of the professionalism, gifts and dedication of staff, a number of these principals expressed concern around the recruitment and

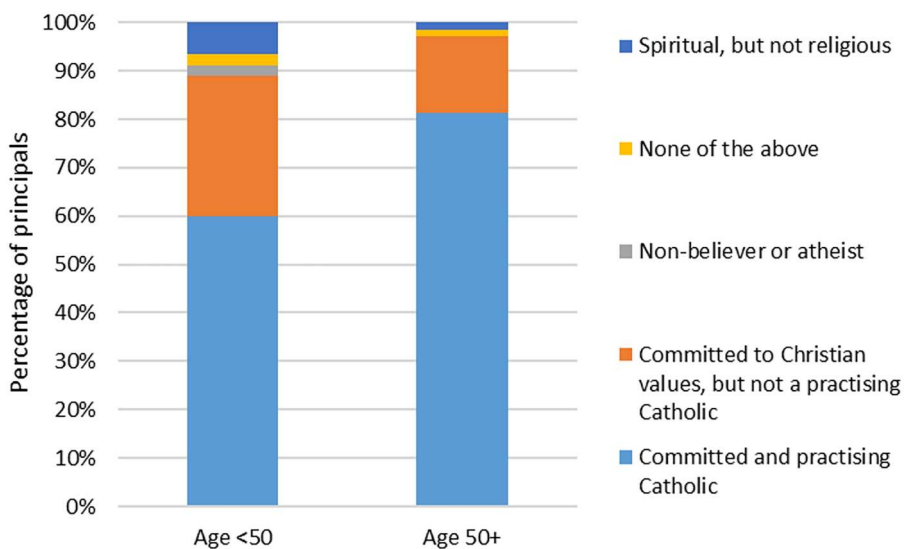


Figure 2. Relationship between age of principals and religious identification/practice.

appointment of future leaders. They told of the lack of ethos knowledge among prospective employees: “I interviewed maybe eight or ten people and not one of them mentioned the word Catholic. They didn’t have a core understanding – that’s a reflection of where society is at.” Another explained how principals “cannot afford to be choosy because there is such a [teacher] shortage. If I bring up the Catholic piece [at interview], well that’s not trendy, it’s not cool” and the applicant might go elsewhere.

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 [RE].” Teacher and staff responses triangulate this concern. For instance, one teacher explained that “many teachers themselves don’t practise any faith;” another admitted that “ethically, I probably shouldn’t be in a Catholic school. I’ve been there many years now but I have very little choice about where I can teach.”

With a clear association, for instance, between age and belief in God amongst primary teachers (O’Caoimh et al, 2024; O’Connell et al. 2024), at first glance the quantitative data seem to support this concern. However, these data present certain contradictory findings. For instance, a significant majority (77%) of primary-level teachers report a substantial respect for the Catholic ethos. Principals appear cognisant of this paradox, suggesting that the core issue may lie in the lack of opportunities provided to teachers for meaningful engagement with ethos. This deficiency of opportunity emerged as part of the final major theme in the research.

### **4.3. Support for ethos leadership**

The need for ongoing, systematic, high-quality support and oversight of Catholic school ethos emerged strongly as a theme, particularly from the qualitative data. Principals spoke about a range of challenges that make it difficult to lead Catholic school ethos, such as increasing diversity and demands, staff understandings/attitudes to ethos, and the lack of support for ethos leadership.

#### **(a) Increasing diversity and demands**

The presence of diverse faiths poses challenges to ethos leadership. Reflecting the Census data recounted earlier, principals reported a decreasing number of practising Catholics within schools, alongside an increase in those of other faiths, as well as individuals with various worldviews. This demographic shift is particularly evident in the many schools where practicing Catholic students are ‘the new minority’. The sentiment that “it can be hard to be a Catholic in a Catholic school” resonates with findings from a recent study by the national Anti-Bullying Centre, which highlighted that, amidst rising secularisation, teachers are particularly concerned about practicing Catholic students being subjected to bullying (Meehan and Laffan 2021).

Simultaneously, data indicate that principals and school communities are actively embracing this new diversity and striving to accommodate it by intentionally welcoming individuals of various faiths and worldviews. For example, 71% of primary-level respondents agreed that students of non-Christian faiths are free to express their religious beliefs within their schools.

Participants also report that State demands on schools and therefore school principals have intensified dramatically over the last number of years. With obligations like data protection and School Self Evaluation (SSE), time for ethos-related conversations suffers. A range of respondents spoke about the pressure principals are under with the continuous addition of new programmes, systems and initiatives, such as “pressure for literacy and numeracy on the curriculum.” Ethos concerns “can get overshadowed by the pile of paperwork, the endless emails and phone calls.”

(b) Staff understanding/attitude to ethos

Attitudes of staff can be challenging for principals as leaders of Catholic schools. Principals outline how some staff are not supportive of the ethos and can resist the principal’s efforts. Some teacher responses support this, for instance: “teachers have no connection with the ethos. It’s just something that’s on a wall.” Uncertainty around staff reactions can make principals reluctant to lead certain expressions of ethos. For instance, half of the principals interviewed were willing to lead prayer with the BoM and with pupils but reluctant to do so with staff. The quantitative data give some support to this concern: 10% of teachers disagreed with the statement “I am willing to attend all religious ceremonies and events held throughout the school year.” Furthermore, staff members are more likely to ‘respect’ the Catholic ethos than to ‘witness to’ it. Reflective of the previous theme, the older staff members are, the more inclined they are to both ‘respect’ and ‘witness to’ the Catholic ethos, as [Figures 3](#) illustrates.

One principal suggests that training to facilitate reflection and discussion with staff would be helpful: “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.”

(c) Lack of ethos-related support

Among principals, 54% have not received professional development from their patron/trust to “encourage, develop and promote the ethos” (IEC, 2010, 207) of

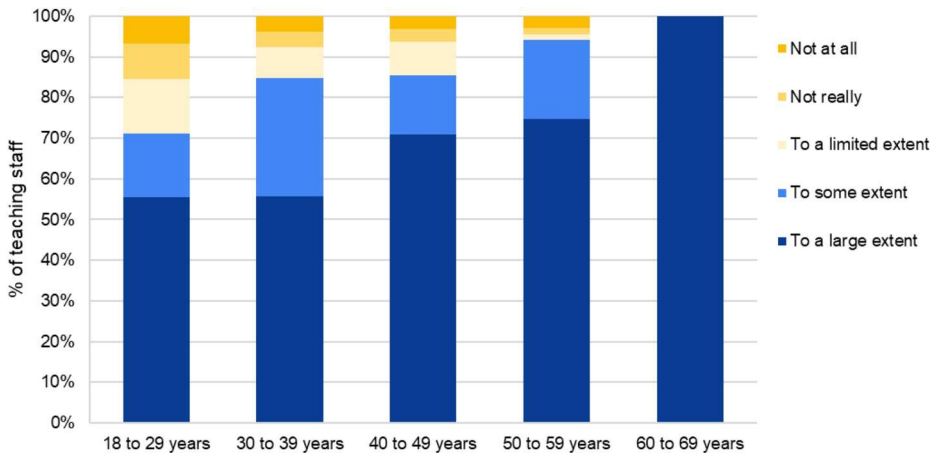


Figure 3. Extent to which staff members respect their schools’ Catholic ethos, by age.

their school. Of those who have received such training, almost three-quarters (74%) of principals reported that it was offered on a once-off basis (or less frequently than once a year). 70% reported that ethos was not prominent or present to a large extent in the training they received.

The qualitative data indicate varying levels and types of support from primary school patrons. For instance, one principal described the office of the patron as “very good. They send material every month ... the bishop speaks at different times of the year to the children. We also get resources for Catholic Schools’ Week.” Others offered a different perspective, with comments such as “[Contact from the patron is] all about the business of managing the school, but not so much the ethos. I’d love them to bring that forward a bit more” and “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.” Overall, principals wanted patrons and trusts to “take an interest, to listen to the concerns,” facilitate reflection and discussion around “what Catholic actually means in practice” and provide spiritual literacy opportunities, “like options of retreats for teachers.”

Principals also expressed the need for accountability. They described how “there’s nobody checking up on whether you’re doing what you purport to do. It seems like there isn’t the availability of people to do this.” Similar comments included “there’s no one looking up and checking on things in the school so [ethos] can be let slide” and “we should be asked by the patron about what we have done [regarding ethos] 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.

In short, the findings reveal a current cohort of principals knowledgeable about and committed to Catholic school ethos. 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.

## **5. Discussion**

The role of the Catholic school principal in Ireland is both complex and dynamic, shaped by historical legacies, contemporary societal changes, and the evolving demands of educational leadership. Principals must navigate a challenging landscape that requires them to balance the maintenance of a distinct ethos with the needs of a diverse student population and the requirements of state education policies. The responsibility for characteristic spirit (ethos) is underscored by legal obligations (Government of Ireland 1998), thereby highlighting the significance of the principal in upholding the Catholic identity of the school.

The results of this study indicate a strong commitment among current principals of Irish Catholic primary schools to fostering ethos leadership. They see this as part of their personal witness and leadership practice. For instance, 83% say that their Christian faith helps them to promote the wellbeing of all students; 88% 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, aligning closely with the indicators outlined in Catholic educational documents (IEC, 2010; CSP, 2019) (see 2.2). Assured leadership of social justice is evident, such as intentional building of inclusive school communities that embrace 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, Heinz, and Choi 2023, 1021). However, this level of assurance stands in contrast to the Christocentric faith formation expectation (CSP, 2019). Although “called to be followers of Christ” (17, 21) figures largely as an expression of ethos, over a quarter of principals did not agree that “providing opportunities for students to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central educational aim of this school.”

Discrepancies occur between the perceptions of principals and other school stakeholders, such as teachers and non-teaching staff. For instance, although the Catholic understanding of school community includes partnership with home (CSP, 2019), only 49% of teachers agreed that parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school’s Catholic ethos, compared with 66% of principals. With a close alignment between the other two school-based cohorts (that is, teachers and non-teaching staff), such divergent data may indicate that for some ethos-related variables, principals are unaware of the reality of school practices or aspire to these functions but need support to achieve them.

Catholic school principals are expected to integrate contemporary educational practices with the mission of Catholic education (Gleeson 2015). Principals are responsible for encouraging, developing and promoting Catholic school ethos in an increasingly secular environment. Census of Population figures show a linear relationship between age and adherence to Catholicism in Ireland: the older people are, the more likely they are to be Catholic. This pattern coincides with the findings in relation to age and principals that emerge from this study, such as age directly proportional to both belief and commitment/practice. For instance, whereas over 90% of principals aged over 50 express belief in God, nearly one-fifth in the 18–39 age range report that they either do not believe in God or don’t know. Mirroring the Census data, the older staff members are, the more inclined they are to both ‘respect’ and ‘witness to’ Catholic ethos.

Ongoing professional development and support provided to these principals are essential in enabling them to fulfil their multifaceted roles effectively. The Irish State provides training to meet State requirements by means of an increasingly sophisticated support structure, with a range of subsidised courses for principals, deputy principals, and middle leaders (see Section 2.4). Internationally, Catholic bodies such as Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) adopt a similar approach, which helps to identify, resource and support leaders and emerging leaders in Catholic schools. While the “provision of courses/modules in the management of Catholic schools [and] in-career support for those who are already in position” is mandated by the Irish Catholic bishops since 2010 (IEC, 2010, 207 and 208), the provision gap looms large.

Some implications are clear: first, the mismatch between primary school patronage and population demographics. 88% of primary schools fall under the patronage of the Catholic Church, despite a steady decline in the numbers who identify as Catholic and the age-related sliding scale described above. Despite agreement between Catholic and State leaders on the need for patronage

diversity and government commitments in this regard, divestment remains stubbornly slow.

A second implication concerns the ethos leadership role of the primary school principal into the future: whereas the commitment of current principals to Catholic ethos is evident, succession is an issue. Principals are concerned that without a personal connection to the Catholic faith tradition, the next generation of leaders may find leadership of ethos more difficult, especially in the increasingly secular milieu in which Ireland's Catholic schools are operating and with challenges to ethos such as limited understanding/degrees of negativity among some staff. Moreover, the current landscape of Catholic schools reveals significant gaps in support for current principals as well as systematic identification and development of future leaders.

To address these challenges, a more proactive and structured approach to Catholic school leadership is essential. This involves:

- **Succession strategies:** Establishing clear, systematic strategies for identifying and nurturing future leaders within the school community. This may include integrating specific competencies related to faith-based leadership into Catholic education leadership development programmes and appointment processes. The 'leadership of a faith school' competency in the principal recruitment process at second level can allow for the appointment of leaders with a specific ethos mandate (Meehan et al. 2024b). Integration of such a competency is in line with international practice (see 2.4).
- **Support programmes:** A clear need for leadership programmes designed for maintaining and enhancing Catholic school ethos emerges from this study. These programs should focus on the ethos indicators outlined by the Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP, 2019) for instance developing a deep understanding of Catholic education principles, and the ability to integrate these principles into school policies and practices. Programmes that offer guidance and support, helping existing and potential leaders to develop the necessary skills and confidence are necessary.
- **Divestment:** Continuing to engage with the State in the Schools Reconfiguration Process (divestment) to address the mismatch between school patronage and the changing demographics of Irish society. This partnership approach should also focus on introducing measures to alleviate the burdensome tasks of principals, thereby making time and space for school ethos.

## 6. Conclusion

The role of the school principal in primary education in Ireland extends to the nurturing of the school's ethos. 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.

This paper reveals the critical need for proactive leadership succession planning and the development of comprehensive support systems to address the challenges faced by principals today. By adopting a more systematic approach to identifying

and developing future leaders, and by providing robust support structures, Catholic schools can strengthen their leadership frameworks, ensuring that their principals are well-equipped to uphold and promote the Catholic ethos in an increasingly complex educational environment. At the same time, the mismatch between school patronage and the changing demographics of Irish society needs to be addressed.

The findings presented in this report could be informative for school patrons, policymakers, leaders, teachers, students and their parents, At the same time, the gaps which emerge from this study might be of interest to future research. For instance, the likely impact on school leadership of divesting a significant proportion of Catholic primary schools to multi-denominational or non-denominational patrons is an area for further research.

### Notes

1. In 1961, the percentage of the population who identified as Catholic was 94.9, the highest recorded. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rrc/>.
2. In 1961, approximately 0.04% of the population was of no religion. [https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/vol12\\_entire.pdf](https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/vol12_entire.pdf). It is important to note that ‘no religion’ does not necessarily denote atheist or agnostic. In the 2022 census, 942 people selected Atheist or 0.02% of the population.

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