
New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference

1 July 2016

Dear members of Boards of Trustees and Trust Board members

Ngā mihi aroha ki a koutou e ngā kaitiaki o te ngākau Katorika i roto i ō tātou kura

1. Each of you, elected or appointed, has accepted responsibility for the governance of your primary or secondary school. This is a very significant and multifaceted responsibility. We thank you for your generosity in serving the Catholic community in this way.
2. Amid all the responsibilities you have as members of a Board, one responsibility is absolutely critical. You must ensure that the school is true to its nature as a Catholic school, and true to its purpose, which is to provide Catholic education for young people by forming them as disciples of Christ. This is at the heart of the integration agreement between your school and the Crown. It is the reason for the existence of your school.

3. In *The Catholic Education of School-Age Children (2014)* we wrote:

“The primary goal of the Catholic school was clearly stated by Saint John Paul II in an address to Catholic educators in the United States in 1979:

‘In order that the Catholic school and the Catholic teachers may truly make their irreplaceable contribution to the Church and to the world, the goal of Catholic education itself must be crystal clear. Beloved sons and daughters of the Catholic Church, brothers and sisters in the faith: Catholic education is above all a question of communicating Christ, of helping to form Christ in the lives of others.’”

4. The preservation and enhancement of Catholic character can easily be marginalized by state compliance requirements or a narrow drive for academic success. Central to your role as Board members is your responsibility for Catholic character. This primary responsibility belongs to each of you, not just the Proprietor’s representatives.
5. The Board should show its engagement with the Catholic character of the school through its regular review of the aspects of Catholic character which are at the heart of *The Catholic Education of School-Age Children*, namely Encounter with Christ, Growth in Knowledge and Christian Witness.
6. The Principal is the spiritual leader of the school, and thus an active member of his or her parish. If the priorities of Board members are predominantly secular in nature, then it becomes difficult for the Principal to fulfil his or her role in relation to the Catholic character of the school.

7. A principal cannot delegate his or her Catholic character leadership responsibilities to others on the staff. If the Principal defaults on his or her responsibilities and witness, then additional pressure is exerted on other staff who have their own roles to play in the maintenance of Catholic character.
8. In these circumstances the Director of Religious Studies (DRS) may become the frontline person in the support of Catholic character. A DRS should not have to plead for space for Catholic character among other priorities being driven by the Board through the senior management of the school. A DRS should be respected as a team member with particular responsibilities for Catholic character, but not the entirety of responsibility for making Catholic character real in the school. For this reason, it is of utmost importance that the Board remain vigilant during the appointments process of tagged teachers.
9. The tasks and duties of Principals and DRSs (and tagged teachers) in our schools are pivotal to the mission of the Church. We are very appreciative of their commitment and are concerned about the pressure which many find themselves under. Their roles are absolutely critical in the maintenance of Catholic character, and we know there are multiple issues in schools which make their work in this respect more difficult. These include “unchurched” students with parents who are indifferent to the Catholic faith, students who have no knowledge of the faith prior to coming to the school, pressure for academic achievement, a shortage of suitably qualified Religious Education teachers, and even a view on some Boards that underplaying the Catholic character of the school will attract more enrolments. Principals and DRSs may also experience pressure from some families for the school to adopt particular religious practices or programmes. These situations take considerable time and tact to address.
10. Principals must constantly balance the requirements of the Ministry of Education, the priorities of the Board, the demands of parents, legislative compliance and a myriad of other factors with their role as spiritual and faith leaders of the school. “Forming Christ in the lives of others...” is at the heart of the service a Principal offers the Catholic community, and at times Principals struggle to make it a priority against powerful voices and competing pressures.
11. As well as their teaching duties, DRSs organize or are involved in many events associated with the Catholic character, such as retreats, school Masses, and activities associated with Caritas, St Vincent de Paul, MissioNZ and other Catholic entities. They are sometimes expected to do the major work in encouraging other staff to study for Catholic qualifications. It is little wonder we are experiencing a shortage of suitable applicants for many DRS positions, though there are qualified people who would do the role very well. If the DRS role is seen as being of low status compared to other management roles, and the DRS is under constant pressure in relation to the Catholic character of the school, why would they apply?
12. The Principal and the DRS in a school should be natural allies in relation to the Catholic character of the school. We appeal to Principals and DRSs to give time to the relationship, and to be prepared to talk honestly together about the challenges they each face.

13. There are practical ways in which the Board can support the Principal and DRS in their shared responsibilities for the Catholic character of the school. Expect your Principal and DRS to have a mutually supportive relationship, and to dedicate time to work on Catholic character together. Consider whether the DRS should become part of the senior management team or have additional time and management units, if this is not the case already. Support the Principal in maintaining the minimum requirements for Religious Education hours against pressure from other curriculum areas, and in providing faith-related professional development. Provide your Principal and DRS with spiritual direction and/or professional supervision.
14. Most importantly, take stock of your priorities as a Board, and be honest about your priorities. Is the Board giving great weight to secular priorities while the maintenance and enhancement of the Catholic character of the school is somewhat token or pedestrian? Proprietor's appointees on the Board have particular responsibility for Catholic character, but the responsibility is not theirs alone. As a Board you may not be in daily contact with teachers and students but your actions and decisions flow into the daily life of the school in ways you may not see. What you value will be valued in the school, and reflected in the people appointed to your staff.

Hēoi anō, kia tau ngā manaakitanga o te Runga Rawa ki a koutou katoa.

✠ Patrick Dunn
Bishop of Auckland
President, NZCBC

✠ John Dew
Archbishop of Wellington
Vice-President, NZCBC

✠ Charles Drennan
Bishop of Palmerston North
Secretary, NZCBC

✠ Colin Campbell
Bishop of Dunedin

✠ Stephen Lowe
Bishop of Hamilton

✠ Peter Cullinane
Emeritus Bishop of Palmerston North

Fr Richard Loughnan
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