

Towards a Policy for Religious Education



A school, as part of its mission of the Church, should always allow its policies, its priorities and purposes, to be illuminated, inspired, guided and challenged by the teaching of the gospel

(Sullivan, 2000)

Section One

‘Towards a Policy on Religious Education’

This religious education policy will impact on the whole school community. The scope will reach:

Board of Management

To approve the policy and ensure its implementation.

Principal and Deputy Principal

To support the procedures of the policy and ensure its effective implementation.

School Staff

As teachers of St. Mary’s Secondary School, Ballina, the hope is that the whole staff embraces and safeguards the ethos of the school and support the cross-curricular nature of Religious Education.

Teachers of Religious Education

To implement and review the policy.

To ensure a high standard and effective delivery of Religious Education.

To ensure inclusivity and openness to all faiths and none, while maintaining a Catholic ethos and living out the message of Jesus – to love one another.

To assist in the faith development of students.

Parents / Guardians

To support the RE Programme in the school and facilitate the faith formation of their children.

Students

To participate in the RE programme and to cultivate an openness and respect to other religious traditions.

To reflect on and develop their own faith, through prayer and personal reflection.

SCHOOL MISSION STATEMENT

St. Mary's is a Mercy school, which is concerned with developing the whole person within a Christian atmosphere.

By providing a balance of educational activities, we foster growth in self-esteem and respect for others.

We take pride in encouraging high standards of teaching and learning.

VISION of St. Mary's Secondary School

St. Mary's Secondary school was established by the Sisters of Mercy. The school's vision is based on the Mercy ethos and on the CEIST charter. St. Mary's Secondary School is a Catholic school founded by the sisters of Mercy and under the trusteeship of CEIST.

The policy is informed by the CEIST Charter:

Mission: To provide a holistic education in the Catholic tradition.

Vision: A compassionate and just society inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

The school's vision is inspired by the vision of Catherine McAuley.

Mercy education is committed to holistic development and to the achievement of the full potential of each student, particularly those who are disadvantaged or marginalized. It is a process informed and influenced by the teaching and example of Jesus Christ and is conducted in an atmosphere of care, respect and joy. Mercy education is committed to on-going whole-school development in collaboration and partnership with the Board of Management, Staff, Parents and the wider community. (Mercy Philosophy of Education 1996)

Inspired by the Mercy vision St. Mary's secondary school community :

- Seeks to live by Gospel values;
- Recognises the dignity of each individual;
- Has a special concern for the poor and under-privileged;
- Is challenged to develop a curriculum, which promotes the harmonious growth of the whole person;
- Contributes to the building up of the local community;
- Works for peace and justice in society.

Aims of Religious Education:

- To contribute to the religious development of our students.
- To develop care for the weak, co-operation between pupils, justice and fair play towards all, respect for truth, a passion for the environment and a love for learning.
- To provide opportunities to deepen sacramental awareness.
- To encourage our students to ask and seek answers to important questions.

RATIONALE for the policy

As a Mercy school under the Trusteeship of CEIST we are committed to the importance of formal religious and moral education. This policy allows us the opportunity to reflect on, explore and articulate what it means to be a Catholic school. It is our hope and privilege to harness the religious development of our students and to provide opportunities for them to know their God. We strive to be faithful to the founding intention of the Sisters of Mercy and the implications of what it means to be a Catholic school.

The objectives of the policy

- To maintain the status of RE in the school.
- To promote the religious and overall development of the students.
- To appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to provide a framework to encounter these traditions.
- To lead to a greater degree of clarity in respect of aims, procedures and roles for RE in the school.

Section Two

As we consider Religious Education to be such an integral part of our school ethos and school community then it is imperative that we give it the status it deserves.

At present all pupils are taught by teachers with specialist qualifications to teach religion. All students have three classes a week in religious education as set down by CEIST. There is an R.E. co-ordinator in the school, this is a rolling position and changes each year, when possible. The R.E. co-ordinator chairs meetings where subject planning, liturgical events planning, sacred place rota and school masses are planned.

The role of the Chaplain in the school is pastoral one. It is their responsibility to be a faith presence in the school and to recognise where students are at. The school ethos is Christian and it is important that we continue to promote the Christian message in all aspects of our work here. Faith development opportunities are considered very important for our students.

The Chaplain aims to be of service to students, teachers, staff and parents.

At present a member of staff has the post of Faith formation and development in the school, they liaise with the staff, RE team, Chaplain, Board Of Management, parents, students and the wider community forging links and developing the ethos of the school. They also have the role of developing a school policy on School Ethos.

Curriculum and Resources

In Junior Cycle, Religious Education follows the syllabus designed by the NCCA, all Junior Cycle students sit the State examination in Religion at the end of third year. In Junior Cycle the book is Inspire by Michael Purcell and Ailis Travers.

In Senior Cycle, Religious Education is non exam. In senior cycle RE units are included from the SPHE programme in particular the Relationships and Sexuality Education modules. The textbooks at senior level are Life Matters and Wellbeing. Guest speakers are regularly invited to talk to classes on various topics – Trocaire, Christian Unity etc.

Staff Support and Development

Effective Religious Education does not just happen spontaneously or accidentally. The very nature of the Religious Education class requires teachers of Religious Education to keep ‘upgrading’ and enhancing their teaching skills and resources.

Religious Education has three classes per week in each year group. Teachers are invited to become members of the RTAI (Religious teachers association of Ireland). Within the diocese a Religion Teachers network is formed. CEIST holds a training day during the year for all Religion teachers. Religion teachers receive training as part of the JCT training.

Faith Formation and the Liturgical Year

It is important that teachers who work in a school participate actively in the liturgical and sacramental life of the school. Students who witness and experience the concrete involvement of adults in the liturgical and sacramental life of the school will share more readily in the life of the school.

Each of the liturgical seasons are marked in the school. The sacred space in the school entrance hall is decorated to represent the time of year on the Liturgical calendar. Some feast days are marked e.g. Ash Wednesdays when the whole school community join with the parish community for mass. At Christmas, a Christmas carol service is held each year and parents are invited to attend.

Every Monday morning the week begins with a Monday morning reflection and prayer. At the beginning of the school year a mass is held on Mercy Day to honour the Sisters of Mercy founders of the school. First years are welcomed to the school with an opening day mass which parents and teachers attend. Incoming students are involved in the liturgy. Some teachers say a prayer at the beginning of their lessons. A penitential service is held before Easter.

The whole school staff are invited to the liturgical ceremonies. Members of the staff are invited to be ministers of the Eucharist, ministers of the word and they are involved in the music and art.

All year groups have retreats organised for them by the RE team - Knock, Holy Hill, Sligo, etc. Teachers are invited to attend a retreat on one Saturday during the year. At the beginning of each staff meeting a prayer is said to guide our work. In the event of a sudden death of a person associated with the school community, a prayer service will be organised by Religion department and school chaplain. A prayer service is on file for such occasions.

A prayer room is provided for use by all members of the school community to take time out, reflect and pray. Religion teachers bring their classes to the room for quiet meditation and prayer.

Outreach Programmes

The physical expression of the distinctiveness of a school and the importance given to religious education is no where more evident and obvious than in its visibility within the school walls. Religious Education should always seek to be experiential through faith in action.

In St. Mary's students are involved in outreach programmes through Young SVP, Pope John Paul 11 Award, Transition year students organise Tocaire Lenten Campaign.

Parental and Parish Involvement

Schools are most successful in achieving their religious goals when the school, home and parish mutually reinforce each other.

Here in St. Mary's Secondary School we see parents as the primary educators of their children in religion. Parents are informed of the aims, objectives and content of R.E. programmes at Parent Teacher meetings and Open Days.

Parents and family members are invited to the first year opening mass. The school community joins the parish community for mass on 8th December and Ash Wednesday. Parents are invited to say reflections and prayers during the school Leaving Certificate graduation mass.

The local clergy are invited to say mass throughout the school year and are asked in as guest speakers.

The Mercy sisters are an integral part of St. Mary's Secondary school and our ethos. Our ethos is rooted in the rich tradition of the Sisters of Mercy. The Mercy sisters are honoured guests each year at the opening of school year mass on Mercy day. On that day, a student is honoured with the Mercy Award for the work she carries out in society, which reflects the outstanding contribution made by the Sisters of Mercy to society down through the years. The sisters are invited to speak to the students about their missionary work and the importance of helping others in the community. Each year the Sisters of Mercy pray for the students during examinations and give out prayer cards to the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate students.

Inclusion in parish activities

Students are actively involved in their local parish. A youth group runs in the parish and the students come together to sing during the mass, are ministers of the word and organise exam masses. They also organise charity events in the community.

Withdrawal from RE classes

Children of all faiths (or of no faith) are welcome in this school. Each child is welcome to attend and benefit from the religious education programme of the school.

In very limited circumstances, withdrawal of students from Religious Education class should be negotiated with school management and addressed prior to their enrolment.

While it is a parent's right to withdraw their daughter from RE class, the supervision of the student can present the school with considerable logistical and supervision dilemmas. Therefore, the school does not have capacity for the individual supervision of the student outside of the RE classroom due to the limitations of the Department of Education and Skill's staff allocation to the school.

Students who opt out of Religious Education will have to remain in the classroom while not participating. It is important to note that this is not a 'free class' to do homework.

The 1998 Education Act states that schools are required to promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students (Section 9(d)). The allocated time on the timetable for Religious Education responds to this and students who opt out of the subject will be required to use this time to study something relating to their own religious tradition or belief, for example, a sacred text.

The school has made available suggested readings for students at both Junior & Senior cycle who are opting out of RE.

Section Three

Monitoring and Review of Policy

The RE department will monitor policy implementation. Good communication between the RE Department and school management exists. Each year group will be surveyed regarding the school retreats and their effectiveness. At the end of each year, the RE department meet to evaluate the success of the policy implementation.

Timeframe

Apart from the usual on-going informal monitoring that would occur with every area of policy, formal monitoring would be appropriate at least twice in the first year and at least once during each subsequent year.

The Religious Education Policy will be reviewed as necessary.

The Religious Education Policy was ratified by the Board of Management on:

Signed: Michael Brett
Chairperson of Board of Management

Signed: Robert S. Kelly
Principal/Secretary to the Board of Management

Date: 3rd February 2020