



SPECIAL CHARACTER FACT SHEET

The parish priest and New Zealand Catholic schools

A document from the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference for the guidance of priests, Boards of Trustees, principals, and DRSs in Catholic schools.

Following the huge contribution to Catholic life and formation made by priests, religious sisters and brothers down the years, Catholic education has been greatly blessed in recent years by the gifts, skills and dedicated service given by so many lay women and men. We assure them that in carrying out their work, they are the Church and their work is the Church's work, as well as the context of their own sanctification. We want them to experience not only the satisfaction that comes from doing a job well, but also the joy of knowing that through them Christ is giving life to the world. As Pope John Paul II said in his letter to the Church in Oceania:

For the lay people involved, teaching is more than a profession: it is a vocation to form students, a widespread and indispensable lay service in the Church ... and a way of Christian sanctification for both teacher and students.

(n.33)

Specific roles within the schools are governed by legislation and regulation. Within the Catholic School system, some of these roles are governed by Part 33 of the Education Act 1989 and by Integration Agreements. All this legislative backing has given a high profile to the roles of Boards of Trustees, Principals, DRSs ... Meanwhile, the profile of the priest in the Catholic School system has not been featured in the same ways. This is in recognition of religious freedom; the Church is free to develop the relationship between home, school and parish as it sees fit, and the role of the parish priest is a key factor in this relationship.

But the State does recognise several of the ways that the pastoral role of priests extends into the Catholic schools.

As **pastors** priests are agents of the Proprietors, and the Integration Act gives Proprietors and their agents the right to "have at all times reasonable access to the school to ensure that the special character of the school is being maintained" (Education Act, Section 456(2)(i)). (It should be noted that the bishops have established the Catholic Special Character Review and Development programme as the official method of monitoring the Catholicity of schools.)

The Integration Act also provides for a school to have a **chaplain** (though of course any costs associated with this role must not come out of government funds.) Here, too, the Act does not define the role of a chaplain, and the Church is free to describe the chaplain's role according to the Church's own understanding of it. Essentially, a chaplain is charged by the bishop with the exercise of pastoral care.

In most parishes, it is also the priest who carries out the role of **declaring preference status**. Again, the Church is free to determine how the preference system is to be applied. The bishops of New Zealand have determined that a principal may not enrol a child *before* receiving a preference certificate from the parish priest (or from any other persons designated by the Proprietor for this role.)

Equally, a priest who applies the preference criteria in a narrow or overly restrictive manner would not be acting according to the guidelines set by the bishops.

Of course, far more important than legal boundaries and definitions of rights and responsibilities is the question of **relationships**. The whole system needs to be under-girded by a positive and collaborative attitude which leads homes, schools and parishes to encourage and support one another, and where the common purpose, rights and expertise of each party are acknowledged.

The following are some suggestions for specific ways that priests, principals and DRSs can view their own and one another's roles.

Roles of the priest in relation to the school	
Spiritual Father and friend – supporter of the people of the school	Priests can call in on the school regularly, at times that suit the school, to chat with staff, students and parents – in order to become a known friend and source of support. The biggest role here may be as a listener.
Chaplain	Priests provide human, spiritual and religious support and guidance as appropriate, enabling staff and students to develop their relationship with God and with one another. The school is grateful to have access to Mass and the Sacraments. (The DRS usually has considerable skills in the area of children's liturgy, and can assist the priest to make Mass, the Sacraments and other liturgical celebrations speak to the children or young people.
Parish priest and pastor, developer of evangelisation and catechesis within the parish for those associated with the school	The children and families of the school are (or can become) members of the parish. They need to be shown the parish as a living, supportive community, which they can belong to. Along with this goes the offer of continuing evangelisation and catechesis for both children and adults.
Leader of the parish	It is helpful to ensure that the school feels it has parish support, that children are welcome at Mass, that school Masses and other liturgies are easy to set up, and that the various organisations within the parish encourage and welcome appropriate school interest and support, and are themselves supportive of the school. It is important that parishes give some lead roles to children at Sunday Masses. The sacraments of initiation provide a special opportunity for co-operation between school and parish. Preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) is the responsibility of the parish. Care must be taken to include any children who do not attend the parish school. At the same time the school is usually best placed and best equipped to assist the parish in carrying out these responsibilities.
	When the school carries out appropriately adapted forms of the RCICCA, it does so as an arm of the parish . At the same time, it should be remembered that the sacraments of initiation are initiation into the life of the whole Church community. This is why they are ideally celebrated in the midst of the assembly, preferably at a Sunday Mass. Celebrations at times or places which privatise the occasion, or involve only the young person's peers, are diminutions of occasions that should be proudly featured in the parishes.
Creator of specific links between the parish, the family and the school	There are many ways these links can be developed, with some actions instigated by the parish and others instigated by the school. It might be helpful to set up an action plan with the DRS and the principal, and to specify who will be responsible for what actions. The plan would need to be revised regularly. Examples of specific actions that could be considered are available from NZCEO.
Agent of the Bishop	The parish priest affirms the Catholicity of parents applying for preference status for their child, according to the criteria laid down by the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference. This initial interview with the parents provides an opening for evangelisation, and pastoral care. The parish priest is able to monitor the special character of the school on behalf of the Bishop, in dialogue with the Board of Trustees, the principal and the DRS. If a particular discussion does not achieve the desired end, the diocesan Catholic education office is likely to be able to clarify matters, and provide assistance.

Some parish priests have more than one school under their care. Some schools (particularly secondary schools) draw students from a number of parishes. The complexities and time involved in keeping connections with more than one school are well rewarded by the relationships that can be developed with the parish. Similarly, the secondary school gains much from fostering its relationships with the parishes its students come from.

Role of the Principal	
Leader of the learning community and custodian of the Catholic character	The principal relies on the expertise of his or her teachers in establishing learning programmes, including Religious Education. The principal can encourage teachers to welcome the parish priest, acknowledge his role and his expertise, and invite him into classrooms (according to his own availability and wishes, and the convenience of teachers) in Religious Education lessons. It is helpful to share the vision of the Catholic school with the parish priest and discuss the roles of the principal, DRS, priest and other parish staff.
Leader of the school as an arm of the parish	The parish priest needs to be made welcome in the school. If there are preferable ways and times for the priest to interact with staff, students and parent community, the principal can make suggestions, and establish a sense of collaboration. The school serves the life of the parish, and despite the heavy demands placed on a principal it is crucial that s/he devotes time and energy to considering ways that the school can contribute to that life. The principal can work with the DRS and the parish priest to set up an action plan to foster school-parish linkages, and to identify practical actions, including actions that serve the wider community.
Support for the parish priest	Many priests would welcome a sense of support from the principal for the many tasks they undertake in their responsibility for the parish.

Role of the Director of Religious Studies (DRS)	
Leader of Catholic Character, along with the Principal	DRSs are usually well trained for their role. It is important that they share their responsibilities as widely as possible, so that the whole community is involved in developing and sustaining Catholic character. Involving the parish priest is essential and acknowledging his responsibility for the Catholicity of all those under his care as parish priest.
Leader of the Religious Education programme	As leader of the teaching of Religious Education, the DRS may be able to draw on aspects of the expertise and knowledge of the parish priest, to add to his or her own knowledge. Ideally, the DRS will work with the principal and the parish priest to link the Religious Education programme into the activities of the parish.
Leader of liturgies	At times the DRS will take total responsibility for setting up liturgies and other forms of prayer for the school community. The priest is always ultimately responsible for the Mass, but the DRS will have much to offer in making it suitable for children. Where the parish priest is to lead or be involved in a particular liturgy, the DRS will seek to establish a considerate and co-operative relationship, so that strengths are used and roles negotiated, for the mutual benefit of all concerned.

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✠ Colin Campbell	Bishop of Dunedin
✠ Peter Cullinane	Bishop of Palmerston North
✠ John Cunneen	Bishop of Christchurch
✠ Patrick Dunn	Bishop of Auckland
✠ Barry Jones	Coadjutor Bishop of Christchurch
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1 February 2007