

**THE WELSH GOVERNMENT IS MAKING CHANGES TO THE CURRICULUM
AND IT COULD SPELL DISASTER FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
BY PAUL BARBER DIRECTOR OF THE CATHOLIC EDUCATION SERVICE**

It has gone largely unreported in the press, but the Welsh Government is making wholesale changes to the way schools teach certain subjects. Some of these changes, if implemented, could have a damaging impact on Catholic schools and put the future of Catholic education in Wales at risk.

One of the most troubling proposals is their plan to change Religious Education (RE) to Religion, Values and Ethics. On the face of it, a name-change may not sound that big a concern, but it would be surprising if such a move were not accompanied by a change in what the government considers to be the content of the subject. Any attempt to impose that on Catholic schools could be disastrous for what the Church considers to be the most important subject on the curriculum. Worryingly, Catholic schools are not immune from these proposals as Education is devolved in Wales meaning that the Welsh Government has legislative control over schools, the curriculum as well as other areas including inspection.

Religious Education is at the core of the core curriculum in Catholic schools, and at both primary and secondary levels (including post GCSE), at least 10% of school time is dedicated to this subject. Academically rigorous, it is a school-level version of what most would recognise as the university subject of theology.

Being grounded in the 2000-year-old theological tradition of the Catholic Church, RE in Catholic schools gives pupils the opportunity to delve into the motivations behind faith, the ability to critically approach the 'big questions' of life and the skills needed to analyse the various 'truth claims' made by religion. It involves an in-depth study of scripture, Church texts, and the work of some of history's most prominent philosophers and theologians from St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas to St John Henry Newman. This approach creates religiously literate pupils who can understand the language of religion and critically engage with their own faith and that of others.

In other schools (that is to say non-Catholic schools), RE can look very different, with many taking a more sociological approach to faith and belief. These approaches tend to observe the practices of different religions from without, rather than engaging with the theological motivations within. This can result in the approach that religion is something that 'those people over there' do, with the student as an external observer, rather than a potential participant, engaging in the theological debate. It is therefore unsurprising that those who subscribe to this secular approach to RE want to lump 'values and ethics' in with religion, as they believe faith to be just another 'worldview'.

This approach may be appropriate in some schools, but is contrary to the Catholic approach, where instilling values, virtues and ethics are the job of the entire school community, supported by a rigorous RE curriculum. To this extent, exam boards recognise the difference in these approaches by offering a specific Catholic RE GCSE which pupils in Catholic schools sit.

Moreover, not only would this change represent a dumbing down of the subject, it also overloads stretched RE departments in many schools, where the time dedicated to RE has already fallen to minimal levels. In these schools, the merging of subjects into 'areas of

learning and experience' (which the Welsh Government are also proposing to do) risk RE becoming lost as just another 'humanity'. If imposed on all schools, this approach would also effectively strip parents of their right to choose a school in accordance with their convictions, and remove the rationale for the existence of Catholic schools. There are, as ever, those who would fervently wish this to be the case.

The other potentially damaging proposal is the usurpation of parents' rights as the primary educators of their children, by removing parents' right to withdraw their children from RE as well as Relationship and Sex Education (RSE).

Not only do these rights respect parents' inalienable role in their child's education and formation, especially when it comes to dealing with sensitive topics such as these. They have also proved a useful tool in ensuring that schools communicate and engage with parents on key aspects of the curriculum. Our belief in parental primacy means that Catholic schools will always engage with parents over the delivery of RSE, successfully resulting in no pupils being withdrawn from RSE in Welsh Catholic schools last year. But we believe this 'conscience clause' is important in other schools, too. Catholic provision in Wales is much smaller than it is in England and for many Welsh Catholics it is simply not possible to send their child to a Catholic school. Many parents of other faiths will also face a similar problem.

Hence, while we can be confident that RE and RSE can be delivered in accordance with Church teachings and parents' wishes in Catholic schools, the same cannot be said for all schools. Therefore, it is essential that Catholic parents maintain the right to withdraw so that all schools must respect and engage with their pupils' primary educators. This will enable a partnership to be forged to deliver these subjects in a way which takes into account parental concerns.

What can be done to stop these changes? The Catholic Education Service has been working hard trying to explain to the Welsh Government how these proposals will negatively impact on our schools, but their ears seem to be closed to our concerns. Therefore, as we await legislation to appear before the Welsh Assembly, we need to show the Welsh Government the strength of feeling amongst the Catholic community against these proposals. To date, over 1300 letters have been sent to Welsh Assembly Members (AM) but the more letters we send, the better chance we will have at stopping these changes. Therefore, I urge readers in Wales to visit the Catholic Education Service's website (catholiceducation.org.uk) and use our handy letter generator to contact AMs. It only takes a few clicks and a couple of minutes, but it could make all the difference to Welsh Catholic schools.

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