

## **CSTS Response to Mini Inquiry of Assembly Committee into Relationship and Sexuality Education**

The Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS) provides the Trustees with a professional support body to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities within the network of the Catholic family of schools in Northern Ireland.

The CSTS, as a sectoral support body for the Catholic family of schools, seeks to develop systems in support of all Catholic school Trustees.

As part of its responsibilities CSTS, on behalf of Trustees, provides appropriate advice and support to the Trustees in developing and promoting, at all levels, the ethos of Catholic education, based on the personal teaching and witness of Jesus Christ, and support the Trustees in promoting the ethos of the Catholic family of schools, through the provision of advice and guidance to Governors and Principals.

As part of this remit CSTS has, over a number of years, provided the Catholic family of schools with guidance support and encouragement to ensure that Relationships and Sexuality Education is part of each school's curricular provision.

To begin CSTS would wish to outline the work undertaken in recent years:

1. In 2021 CSTS produced guidance for primary & post-primary schools on the development of RSE policy. Copies of these documents were provided to all Catholic schools. In addition, they are publicly available on the CSTS website:

[RSE-Guidance-Booklet-Post-Primary.pdf \(catholiceducation-ni.org\)](#)

[RSE-Guidance-Booklet-Primary.pdf \(catholiceducation-ni.org\)](#)

These documents provided schools with an outline of the content of an RSE policy and offered advice and guidance on a wide range of related factors including; the importance and relevance of a comprehensive age- appropriate RSE programme in Catholic schools and offered suggestions on consultation on the policy and programme among other matters.

2. In 2020/21 CSTS was involved in consultation with principals, teachers, parents, and others towards the development and production of an online RSE resource This resource, Flourish, was launched in 2022 providing schools with an outline programme for RSE, based on a series of lessons for each year group from P.1 to P7. These lessons offer a wide range of age-appropriate incrementally developing topics for primary school children including; Me, My family, My friends, Growing and Changing, Keeping safe, Making choices, New Life, Puberty, Positive Role Models, Safe Internet.

The resource is accessible online to schools, parents, carers and others:

[Primary RSE Resources - Catholic Schools Trustee Service \(catholiceducation-ni.org\)](#)

3. In Spring 2023 CSTS held a series of face-to-face information sessions for Governors and school leaders attended by 275 representatives. These sessions explored the Flourish materials and the post-primary resource Living Love and provided participants with an opportunity to discuss their school's RSE provision and any areas where they required support. Issues raised included: staff training and confidence, the challenge of delivering a programme acceptable to all parents, issues relating to accessing high quality resources, etc. One of the main issues raised related to the amount of time available to deliver a comprehensive RSE programme within an already burdened school day.
4. Following consultation with school leaders, practitioners, parents, and others CSTS launched a Key Stage 3 post-primary programme Living Love in Summer term 2023. This programme, like Flourish, is an online teaching resource and was piloted by schools in 2023/24. The programme offers a wide range of power-point style lessons for use across the key stage and includes lessons on: Building Relationships, Puberty, Love, Attraction, Decisions and Choices, Peer Pressure, Stereotypes, Body Image, Consent, Women's Safety, Love & Intimacy, A Moral Compass, Sex and Marriage, STI Awareness, Fertility Awareness.

The resource is accessible at: [Post Primary RSE Resource - Living Love - Catholic Schools Trustee Service \(catholiceducation-ni.org\)](https://www.catholiceducation-ni.org/post-primary-rse-resource-living-love)

5. Following the information sessions in Spring 2023 a working party of school practitioners and others was established to devise a training programme for school leaders and practitioners in the delivery of RSE in school. The training programme was devised and includes input from Governors, School leaders, practitioners, parents and students and engagement with representatives of the ETI and was developed during the 23/24 school year.
6. In Spring 2024 CSTS held a series of further information/ training sessions with school leaders and practitioners to introduce the training modules. These face -to-face sessions involved 286 professional attendees. The training modules cover 7 areas: Why RSE in a Catholic School, Ethos and Values, RSE Policy, Engaging Parents and Carers, the programmes Flourish & Living Love, Teaching Sensitive Subjects and Using External Agencies.

As with all the other materials these are available online:

[RSE Training Resources - Catholic Schools Trustee Service \(catholiceducation-ni.org\)](https://www.catholiceducation-ni.org/rse-training-resources)

7. CSTS are currently work with others on developing an RSE programme for Key Stage 4 which it is hoped will launch later in 2024.

### **Regarding the Specific areas of the Mini inquiry**

It is our view that RSE is a complex and vitally important area of the school curriculum which requires the imparting to children and young people of knowledge, understanding and skills, alongside the development of attitudes, beliefs and values which are critical to a full exploration of sexual identity, relationships and intimacy. There are legitimate differences of view on a whole range of issues pertaining to RSE including pastoral, developmental, ethical and sociological matters as well as parental rights considerations. To meet all these effectively, the RSE curriculum, as with other areas of the curriculum, should be delivered within the context of the ethos of a particular school in consultation with parents, students, and all members of that school community.

### **Policy Implementation and School Compliance**

Throughout the information sessions, publications and training CSTS has always encouraged schools to ensure that their RSE curricular provision has been widely consulted upon with Parents/Carers and, in an appropriate manner, with students. The important role of parents as primary carers has been frequently highlighted as part of the rationale for ensuring that parents are fully aware of and engaged in the development of RSE curricular provision. This is one of the reasons that all the RSE materials developed are accessible online so that they are fully available to parents who can be reassured by the content as well as having the opportunity to use the material with their children at home.

Schools have however identified several issues with parental engagement which continue to create challenges. Firstly, some parents express strong views about specific topics and indeed some are of the view that their child's education in such matters should be a matter for the family environment and not the school. Schools also face challenges with parents for whom English is not their first language and, in the multi-cultural context of schools, there is a need to understand and navigate specific cultural beliefs which impact on parental views of particular aspects of RSE. All these issues are explored within the training modules to aid schools in determining how best to undertake consultation and devise a programme suitable for all. Student participation is also key in the development of the RSE programme and schools are encouraged to engage students appropriately in determining the content of the programme. Again, there are some excellent examples of practice in this area included in the training programme.

Schools' responsiveness to changes in legislation in this area, from the work undertaken by CSTS appear to be positive though, again, this has created challenges from some parents which schools have had to navigate. CSTS is of the view that any changes to policy should result from a period of awareness raising, training and embedding of understanding within the whole school community and at any time change should be given time to embed.

### **Resources and Support for RSE**

As is clear from the introduction, CSTS has been very involved in the development of resources which school can use, confident that they are consistent with the ethos of their school as a Catholic school. It is hoped that these resources, approved by the Trustees of the schools, will

also encourage and provide reassurance to the parents who have specifically chosen a school with a Catholic ethos for their child.

CSTS is also aware of the work undertaken by CCEA in the development and provision of an RSE hub for schools. While some of the resources proposed and available within the RSE hub may be consistent with the ethos of a school CSTS, as with all generally available resources, encourages schools to reflect on their content and to determine if the material offered can be delivered in a manner consistent with that ethos. This advice is consistent with that provided by CCEA *“Teachers should also review resources before using them to check that they're appropriate for their pupils and in line with their school's ethos and RSE policy”*.

While there is significant material available on the CCEA RSE hub many schools express a view that teachers have lacked access to high-quality training and often felt that only limited support has been available as they devise an RSE curriculum. In some cases this impacts significantly on their confidence to deliver a comprehensive programme and results in a less effective programme for some students.

If schools are to fully develop their provision in RSE it will be necessary for training opportunities to be made available alongside quality resources. Schools have very limited access to readily available training currently.

### **Teacher Training & External Providers**

As mentioned above schools frequently express a view that there is a lack of Continuous Professional Development opportunities to explore and collaborate on the development of an RSE programme - one demonstration of this is the high level of attendance of practitioners at the CSTS training sessions (during a period of industrial action) and the positive feedback received from staff at having had the opportunity to participate and collaborate with colleagues from other schools.

In the absence of DE funded training provision many schools have sought out training opportunities through a wide range of external providers; some commercial organisations, charity providers and advocacy groups. Given the wide range of such provision CSTS is unable to assess the quality of such training though anecdotally schools describe both positive and negative experiences. CSTS notes that the terms of reference include the phrase 'scientifically accurate' and would note that there is much debate about how this phrase is defined, given the wide range of scientific understandings which exist around RSE. In relation to educational standards, again, many of these groups are trying to provide support but often cannot provide the rigour that a dedicated curricular support service could offer.

### **Monitoring & Evaluation**

In working with schools on the development of the resources and training modules CSTS is aware of some excellent practice around monitoring and evaluation - often including a rigorous process of student evaluation. However, a system-wide monitoring and evaluation process such as ETI might be expected to provide is complex. The RSE

curriculum, extends beyond the delivery and acquisition of facts into a wider understanding of personhood and the development of a value base from which students learn to evaluate their decision making and hone their skills of relationship building. This cannot be evaluated simply by confirming the existence of a policy, or the delivery of a set number of lessons. Indeed, a focus which could lead to a 'tick box' approach to topic delivery could be extremely detrimental to the process of information, discussion and debate required to provide a quality RSE education and to embed a value base from which students can begin to make life and relationship decisions.

### **Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity**

CSTS is of the view that the RSE curriculum must be delivered in a manner that is sensitive to and cognisant of the students being taught and their families. This is best achieved by ensuring that parents, carers and students are engaged in the development of the policy and programme for RSE. CSTS publications and training emphasise this need for the school to be aware of the needs of the students and their parents and indeed, in offering, invitationally, a particular perspective on matters of RSE, schools are asked to be aware of, and to encourage debate on other views and perspectives on these topics. The Key Stage 3 resource is designed to encourage such debate. For example, in providing information on the age of consent in the two legal jurisdictions on the island, the resource encourages debate on why they might be different and which is most appropriate.

Matters of rights and beliefs also need to be considered in the context of parents who will often have particularly strong views on matters relating to aspects of the RSE curriculum and, in a multi-cultural environment, we need to be mindful that parents may have different, and sometimes opposing views on some matters related to RSE.

In managing this sensitive and challenging environment the individual school is best placed, working with its community, to arrive at the best policy and provision for that school.

### **Legislative and Rights-Based considerations**

*Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.* (Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26: 3)

*No person shall be denied a right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the state shall respect the rights of parents to ensure that such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious philosophical convictions* (European Court of Human Rights Right to Education Protocol 1 Article 2)

*States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child*

(Convention on the Rights of the Child - Article 14:2)

It is the view of CSTS that parents and carers are the first and most important educators of their children and that the role of the Catholic school is to support and complement this role through partnership with those who have parental responsibility.

We believe therefore that the content and delivery of RSE should be set within the context and ethos of a particular school, as is currently the case under NI legislation, and agreed in consultation with the whole school community, including the young people and their parents.

Our experience, as demonstrated by the school experiences explored in the online training videos, that in this context, an agreed comprehensive RSE curricular programme can be developed and delivered, supported by the parents and meeting the needs of the children & young people.

In particular CSTS would wish to highlight that, in the increasing multi-cultural nature of NI, the rights of parents from the broad range of religious, cultural and philosophical backgrounds need to be considered. In practice this means that the nature of each school community is different and, in that context, the most appropriate way to develop and deliver RSE policy and curriculum is in consultation with the local school community; including parents, guardians and students, where local needs are identified and met by the school.

### **Impact of Withdrawal Policies**

Currently, parents have a legislative right to withdraw their children from the specific aspects of the RSE programme outlined in the legislation brought forward in 2023 by the Secretary of State through Westminster Parliament.

In practice, many schools, respecting the rights of parents, facilitate, on a case-by-case basis, a similar approach to some other aspects of RSE. This allows schools to accommodate parents who, for religious, cultural or other reasons have views on the delivery of some of the messages included within the RSE curriculum which make them feel that the messages being delivered are not appropriate for their child at that time.

In exploring this with schools the rationale schools use for this approach covers several areas.

- By accommodating parents in this way, students may be removed from a single lesson on a particular day whereas without such an accommodation frequently the parent removes the child from the entire school day
- In practice, parents wishing for such an accommodation meet with school staff to discuss their concerns and, in many cases, reassured by the school, the parents allow their children to participate

- In some cases, parents request for withdrawal is based on concerns and anxieties and often, having removed their child and hearing reports on the curriculum, they are happy to reengage for all of the programme
- The absence of a withdrawal option can place the school and the parent in conflict which is not helpful for overall relations and can be damaging to the young person's education in the longer term.

In relation to the current legislative withdrawal process it formalises an arrangement and, once requested, automatically applies for the remainder of the school year. This is less helpful than an arrangement, as demonstrated above, which encourages a more flexible approach.

### **Violence against Women and Girls**

CSTS is of the view that any RSE programme must address issues of equality, rights and respect. The Catholic school shares its vision of the human person in relationship with others by how it lives out values such as inclusion, respect and care. The Catholic understanding of the human person, as uniquely created by God in his image confers on each person inalienable and inherent dignity. An RSE curriculum in a Catholic school seeks to ensure that all within the school community understand and respect the dignity of each person.

Within the curriculum there are lots of opportunities for the development of this understanding; both the individuals understanding of themselves, and their understanding of and in relationships with others. This value of the person is explored from an early age through topics such as making choices, keeping safe, Its Ok to Say No, to the development of a clear understanding of matters around consent.

### **Conclusion**

CSTS wishes to reiterate the importance of retaining the rights of schools, and parents, to have access to an RSE policy and curriculum which is delivered in a manner that is consistent with the ethos of the school. The Catholic vision for RSE is centred on the transmission of Christian values which educate children and young people in the formation of their understanding of themselves. This vision seeks to imbue confidence and respect in all young people so that throughout their lives they have the skills and disposition to relate to others in ways that are respectful and that bring joy to their own lives and those of others. The programmes developed by CSTS and the training modules clearly demonstrate that such an approach encourages access to a comprehensive curriculum and open exploration of all matters relating to relationships and sexuality in a safe and pastorally supportive environment.

