



**RESPONSE OF THE STATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION MINI INQUIRY INTO RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION**

**NOVEMBER 2024**

**Background**

1. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has over 190,000 members belonging to over 500 congregations across 19 Presbyteries throughout Ireland, north and south. The Council for Public Affairs is authorised by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to speak on behalf of PCI on matters of public policy, with the Council's State Education Committee carrying specific responsibility for education matters in Northern Ireland. PCI is also represented on the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) with colleagues from the Boards of Education of the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland.
2. Throughout the denomination many hundreds of PCI members work across a wide variety of sectors and roles within education including principals, teachers, classroom assistants and support staff. In addition, hundreds of others serve as transferor governors on boards of governors within the controlled sector, both at primary and post-primary levels. PCI recognises the very difficult situations faced by many schools in Northern Ireland regarding funding and capacity within schools to deliver on ever increasing demands.
3. PCI recognises that the delivery of RSE within schools, including how and what is taught, will cover sensitive and personal issues. At the outset PCI would wish to commend school leaders and governors who have sought to develop RSE policies for schools in line with guidance from the Department of Education and CCEA; and the teachers who currently provide RSE to children and young people in their care, in a way which is appropriate for their age and stage. Additionally, PCI would like to commend DE for its recognition of the primary importance of school ethos, alongside the vital role played by governors in relation to setting the policy on RSE.
4. The primary objective and outcome of this mini-inquiry, and subsequent deliberations on RSE, must be that students in schools receive excellent RSE, which allows them to explore their own moral frameworks and sets of values, and which equips them to have healthy, respectful relationships in all aspects of their life.

## **Areas of Focus for Mini-Inquiry into Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)**

### **Curriculum Integration and Content**

*Evaluate how RSE integrates across different stages of the NI Curriculum, including key areas like Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level, and Learning for Life and Work at secondary level.*

*Assess the effectiveness of the statutory content and additional flexible content tailored by schools to meet specific community or pupils*

5. Every approach to RSE is shaped by a particular worldview and embedded in every approach and every resource, are explicit and implicit judgements about the meaning and purpose of relationships and sexuality. Therefore, there is no ‘neutral’ worldview through which RSE can be presented, nor indeed any ‘neutral’ understanding of human identity and relationships. RSE cannot be taught in a vacuum and as such it is not possible to discuss or teach these issues without consideration of the moral and ethical values involved. Schools should therefore aim to deliver the RSE curriculum within a safe and controlled environment where all pupils feel valued and able to express their viewpoints and opinions.
6. RSE should be taught to the highest quality, with children and young people encouraged to think critically about the range of moral and ethical matters that they encounter in these classes. Additionally, PCI commends DE for the circular published in January 2024<sup>1</sup> which requires all grant-aided schools to have an RSE policy and taught programme which aligns with school ethos, and developed in consultation with the staff, governors, parents and pupils. Such an approach allows schools and teachers the flexibility to tailor the curriculum to ensure that it is appropriate and responds to the needs of young people, whilst maintaining and respecting school ethos.
7. Additionally, the RSE content should include an exploration of the moral attributes that are foundational to healthy, positive, and nurturing relationships of all kinds; these include love, honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, faithfulness, courage, kindness, and generosity. Pupils should also have the opportunity to examine the benefits of permanent and faithful relationships, such as marriage, for the stability and health of family life and wider society.

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

*Review the implementation and updating of school-based RSE policies, particularly in light of new subordinate legislation on topics such as early pregnancy prevention and access to abortion.*

*Investigate the extent of paternal pupil consultation in developing these RSE policies.*

8. The General Assembly of PCI has consistently noted and affirmed the legal right and responsibility of Boards of Governors in controlled schools to adopt a non-

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<sup>1</sup> [DE Circular 2024/1 Subject: GUIDANCE ON AMENDMENTS TOP THE RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION \(RSE\) CURRICULUM CONTENT](#)

denominational Christian ethos as a valuable framework for nurturing the holistic wellbeing of children and young people, educationally, emotionally, morally and spiritually, and a framework for shaping the teaching and learning in RSE.

9. In line with the current guidance, every school should have in place its own policy on how it will address the delivery of RSE. The policy should be developed under the leadership of governors, in collaboration with parents or carers of pupils, as well as teachers and other education and health professionals. PCI welcomes the clear guidance in DE Circular 2024/41 which states that while the Board of Governors and Principal have a statutory responsibility to deliver the minimum curriculum content, they also have '*autonomy over when, how and who are involved ... aligned with the ethos of the school.*'<sup>2</sup>
10. This policy should clearly set out the aims and objectives of RSE and how the teaching will support the school's ethos, reflecting the moral and religious principles held by the parents/carers and the school's management authorities. An RSE policy should be made publicly available on a school's website and an outline of the RSE programme should be available for parents/carers and pupils on request. The policy should be reviewed regularly and any amendments should be undertaken in consultation with governors, teachers, parents/carers and pupils.

### **Resources and Support**

*Analyse the availability and utilisation of the RSE Hub and other CCEA resources intended to support RSE delivery.*

*Consider the impact that of external resources like those provided by the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service and the Council for Maintained Schools on the uniformity of RSE content.*

11. PCI, as one of a number of relevant stakeholders, has been involved in detailed discussions and consultation with CCEA about developing and updating resources for teachers who are responsible for delivering RSE in post-primary schools. PCI recognises the significant work that has been undertaken by CCEA in updating the RSE Hub since the 2018 CEDAW report and notes the publication of the RSE Progression Framework to support schools in developing their RSE programme.
12. In developing these resources CCEA made value judgements on what facts and science were presented, and what is to be understood by 'age appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate.' These resources should be open to continued scrutiny and annual review to ensure that they acknowledge differences in worldviews on many of these issues.
13. When teaching prevention of pregnancy, these resources should continue to promote the delaying of first sex. It should not be presumed that young people are willing to be, or are currently sexually active at this stage in their development, and it is important that resources continue to affirm that saying no to sexual activity is not only possible,

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<sup>2</sup> [DE Circular 2024/1 Subject: GUIDANCE ON AMENDMENTS TOP THE RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION \(RSE\) CURRICULUM CONTENT](#) para 9.

but also a positive choice. This is in line with the with government policy, for example the Department for Health Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action plan, which included the target that by 2013, 92% of 11-16 years olds should have not experienced sexual intercourse.<sup>3</sup>

14. PCI will continue to engage in the work of the RSE Hub including the development and production of resources and welcomes the continued partnership to ensure that children, young people and teachers has access to excellent RSE resources.

### **Teacher Training and External Providers**

*Examine the adequacy of professional training and development for teachers tasked with delivering RSE, focusing on their preparation to handle sensitive aspects of the curriculum. Assess the role and quality of external providers in RSE delivery, including their alignment with scientific accuracy and educational standards.*

15. RSE begins in the home and is the primary responsibility of the parent/carers, who also have the right to have their children educated in accordance with their wishes. Therefore, teaching on RSE is not, and should not be, the sole responsibility of teachers and schools.
16. It is vitally important that parents know who is delivering RSE, whether that be teaching staff or external providers, and schools should inform parents when external providers are delivering sessions to their children. To this end external providers should be obliged to inform a school of the topics they plan to cover, including the learning outcomes, and this information should also be made available to parents. Provision of relevant information about external organisations coming into schools to deliver RSE, will allow parents and carers if they so wish, to find out more details about the ethos and values of the organisation, and what material will be covered.
17. Parents should be assured that a teacher will always be present when an external provider is delivering content to ensure that what is delivered is in line with what was agreed and corresponds with the aims, values, ethos, moral and ethical framework of the school. Such an approach also allows that teacher to provide any necessary follow up support to pupils.
18. PCI supports the work of Initial Teacher Education providers in their work to ensure that all new teachers are equipped to deliver RSE with maturity and wisdom. Additionally, PCI would urge the introduction of a fully funded support programme of regular Professional Development for all teachers who deliver RSE.

### **Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity**

*Review how effectively the RSE curriculum engages diverse student populations and respects the rights and beliefs of different communities, including considerations of inclusivity and scientific accuracy.*

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<sup>3</sup> This was the [2008-2013 Action Plan and Strategy](#) with the target to be achieved by 2013.

*Access the impact of school ethos on the impartiality and comprehensiveness of RSE delivery.*

19. One of the most important issues in the delivery of RSE is that of ethos. Boards of Governors in controlled schools have a legal right to adopt a non-denominational Christian ethos as the framework for nurturing the holistic wellbeing of children and young people, educationally, morally, emotionally and spiritually. This should also be the framework that shapes the teaching and learning of RSE. Therefore, schools with a non-denominational Christian ethos should have the freedom to teach RSE in line with these values.
20. High-quality RSE within schools requires more than just information based on legal, biological or medical facts. It involves consideration of behaviours, values and attitudes that bring meaning and purpose to our understanding of healthy and flourishing relationships. Grounding this teaching in the values and attitudes which form the ethos of the school provides that framework which brings meaning and purpose to our understanding.
21. It is recognised that there are some aspects of RSE which are important for children and young people to receive in order that they might engage in healthy, respectful relationships of all types, not only with their peers but also with adults and those who are younger than them. For example, it is important that students understand matters like 'consent', in order to keep themselves safe, and also to ensure that they are treating others well.

### **Impact of Withdrawal Policies**

*Study the effects and prevalence of policies allowing parental withdrawal for RSE, and their impact on student access to essential health education.*

22. Where parents wish to exercise their right to have their child excluded from Article 5(1A) education, we believe as recommended in the DE Circular 2024/41 that a member of the school's senior management team (SMT) or pastoral care team should discuss the request with the parents and, where appropriate, the pupil.<sup>4</sup> This discussion should include an explanation of the content, approach and methodology of the upcoming lesson allowing any concerns to be alleviated and establish if the request relates to the entire course or for is for specific elements.
23. Earlier in this response it was recognised that the teaching of RSE begins in the home, whether parents and carers are intentional about doing so, or not. Behaviours, attitudes and words will be modelled by the adults in the home, with the potential for replication by the children who live with them. It is therefore essential that parents and carers are equipped to have healthy conversations about these issues with their children and the young people in the home environment.

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<sup>4</sup> [DE Circular 2024/1 Subject: GUIDANCE ON AMENDMENTS TOP THE RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION \(RSE\) CURRICULUM CONTENT](#) para 20.

24. The balancing of the rights of children and young people with the rights of parents/carers should never lead to a situation where the adults are not informed about what is being taught.

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

*Reflect on the recommendations for the school system of the Gillen Review of Serious Sexual Offences, and consider the role that RSE might play in developing consent education to reduce sexual violence, particularly against women and girls.*

25. Relationships and Sexuality Education in schools has an important part to play in helping children and young people develop an understanding of safe and healthy behaviours, delivered within the ethos framework of their school setting. Continued roll out of education within schools and other appropriate settings will provide opportunities for young men and young women to understand not only what it looks like to be on the receiving end of physical, coercive and/or controlling abuse, but also the characteristics of a perpetrator.
26. Such preventative work can only be beneficial in the longer term. Through its role on the Faith Subgroup of the Safeguarding Board NI, PCI was part of the working group considering the implementation of recommendations arising from the Gillen Review, which also touches on these issues and is willing to continue to work with such partnerships moving forward.



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