**National Association of Post-Primary Diocesan Advisers**

***Religious Education and the Revised Junior Cycle***

***(Position Paper, October 2012)***

Major change is proposed for the junior cycle in the Republic’s 737 post-primary schools. According to the OECD’s *Programme for International Student Assessment* (*PISA*), literacy and numeracy scores for 15 year olds in Ireland have fallen over recent years, relative to most other countries. The present Junior Certificate, which was introduced in 1990, may itself be partly to blame. It does not adequately manage the transition from primary education. Some students (especially boys from disadvantaged backgrounds) mentally disengage from the course in second year. The final exams become the overarching concern in Year Three. Rote learning for the exams is emphasized, while other worthwhile skills are neglected. Good Junior Certificate results can mask poor understanding.

Religious Education (RE) was introduced as a junior cycle subject in 2000. However, less than half of schools specify RE for their Junior Certificate exams. When it is examined, as with other subjects, too much of the preparation is based on memorization. Even the journal work component, which is intended to involve a wide range of skills and activities, tends to be organized around the examiner’s expectations. Schools that do not teach RE for the State exams are nonetheless tied to an exam oriented syllabus, without the motivation of the subject being included in the Junior Certificate.

**Focus on Skills**

Last year the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published a rationale and timetable for change in *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle: Innovation and Identity* (<http://ncca.ie/framework/>). It envisages the junior cycle as a learning stage in and of itself, rather than a “Leaving Cert light.” Students are to become aware of *how* they learn alongside *what* they are learning. There will be a move away from compartmentalizing education into individual subject areas.

The cross-curricular emphasis is reflected in the 24 “Statements of Learning” (*Framework*, p.15). Schools will be given a good degree of autonomy in managing the junior cycle around these goals. Two are of particular relevance to the catechetical enterprise:

* “21. The student appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which they live.
* 22. The student develops moral, ethical and responsible decision-making and a sense of personal values.”

Literacy, numeracy and the following “key skills” are at the heart of the new junior cycle and will be “embedded” in all subjects: Managing Myself; Staying Well; Communicating; Being Creative; Working with Others; Managing Information and Thinking. Each of these six abilities resonate with the Christian tradition. They encourage a relationship with oneself as the basis for a relationship with God (Augustine, *Soliloquies* 2.1). The role that “being spiritual” plays in mental and physical health is recognised (*Framework,* p.20). Students learn the multi-faceted language of communication, which contributes to the richness of their prayer-life. They are encouraged to see themselves as co-creators with God (Gen 1:26-28). At school everyone knows the value of working together, a communion that is best animated and celebrated in Christ. Finally, the use of critical analysis (*ratio*) has long been seen as a necessary complement to faith (*fides*)in the Christian tradition.

**Subjects and Short Courses**

In the new junior cycle, students will continue to have access to a broad range of subject areas. However the number of subjects for final examination will be capped at between six and eight. Many students currently prepare twelve subjects for exam. A greater proportion of the final evaluation (40%) will be based on the student’s own portfolio work. Teachers will have greater involvement in assessment, though the State Examination Commission will retain a moderating role. Most subjects, including RE, will be reduced in length from 240 to 200 hours. A more extensive use of internet and computer technology is proposed.

A new course committee for Religious Education is to be convened on an inter-church basis. It will draw up a new syllabus for RE which, like the present one, will be accessible to students of every faith tradition and none. The syllabus is to be taught in accordance with the characteristic spirit of the school and will be a useful catechetical resource.

Many RE teachers will welcome the emphasis on practical skills in the new junior cycle. However the reduced number of subjects for examination may mean that RE is dropped in favour of more “useful” subjects. The uptake will ultimately depend on how the partners in education prioritise religious formation.

Students will also take between two and four “short courses,” each one hundred hours in length and assessed by student portfolio. Among the proposed topics are “Computer Programming,” “Performance” and “Chinese Studies”. Short courses can also be developed locally and call on the expertise of “external agencies”, following a NCCA template. For example, a school might draw up a short course on justice using Trócaire resources. A short course on the Christian heritage of a school’s local diocese would build cross curricular links between History, Geography and Religious Education.

**Opportunities and Concerns**

The third year class of 2020 will be the first to receive the new “National Certificate of Junior Cycle Education.” As part of the phased introduction of the course, the revised syllabus for Religious Education will be launched sometime before 2017.

The theory behind the new junior cycle is broadly sympathetic to RE. It affirms the dignity of the student and their identity as an adolescent learner. The new curriculum aims to form citizens who value “equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy.” (*Framework,* p.9) Catechists will welcome the refreshed presentation of RE and the emphasis on active learning.

The legal requirement that schools provide Religious Education to all students continues. However, given the reduced number of subjects permitted for certification, it is possible that fewer schools will select RE as a mainstream exam course. Even as things stand, many schools do not meet the specified allocation of two hours or three classes of RE per week. It might be tempting to timetable RE solely as a short course. This option would restrict the students’ perspective on their faith to one or two topics. The advantage of the mainstream Religious Education syllabus is its comprehensive nature. A considered reading of the *Framework’s* rationale for education reserves a place for RE at the heart of the junior cycle. Schools are faced with the task of working out how that vision will be implemented.