



**STRANMILLIS**  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
A College of Queen's University Belfast



Centre for  
Research in  
Educational  
Underachievement



**Scripture Union**  
Northern Ireland

# FAITH IN OUR SCHOOLS

Evaluating the role of Christian  
churches and organisations in  
Northern Ireland schools



# INTRODUCTION

## CONTEXT

This study was commissioned by Scripture Union Northern Ireland, and conducted by the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College, Belfast. It evaluates the role of Christian churches and organisations in schools across Northern Ireland, exploring both the nature of their engagement and the perceived value of their involvement.

## METHODOLOGY

The project adopted a mixed-methods design. Four online surveys were distributed to school leaders, church and Christian organisation leaders, parents, and pupils. In addition, six school case studies were conducted, involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups with school leaders, governors, teachers, parents, pupils, and representatives of local churches or Christian organisations engaged with the school. A separate focus group was also held with members of Parents for Inclusive Education .



# KEY FINDINGS

This study provides clear evidence that Christian engagement in schools remains both widespread and widely valued, while also highlighting points of tension within an increasingly diverse and contested educational landscape.

## NATURE OF ENGAGEMENT

Christian engagement with schools in Northern Ireland remains widespread, though uneven across sectors and geography. Almost all principals (94%) reported links with at least one local church, while nearly three quarters (73%) reported partnerships with Christian organisations. The most common activities included assemblies and worship (95%), charity or community programmes (51%), extra-curricular activities (50%), and support for curriculum delivery (45%).

Mapping of organisational engagement shows strong concentrations in urban areas, with lower levels of engagement further west and in more rural areas.

## PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Alongside faith activities, churches also provided practical assistance, including:

- providing halls and car parking
- volunteering for maintenance and projects
- mentoring programmes
- governance expertise
- pastoral support during crises

“[The church is] showing an outpouring of practical love that came from wanting to serve God... and it really did back up our ethos.” (Principal)

## PERCEIVED VALUE OF ENGAGEMENT

Christian involvement was widely valued by principals, teachers, governors, parents and pupils for its spiritual, moral, pastoral and practical contributions.

Survey findings indicate that engagement is widespread and generally well received, with clear benefits reported for pupils, schools and communities. Pupils also reported high levels of enjoyment, with over half saying they enjoyed activities “a lot.”

## PRACTICAL BENEFITS

Practical support from churches was frequently mentioned. Examples included painting classrooms, maintaining playgrounds, funding mentoring programmes, and providing halls when school facilities were unavailable.

“How can you best show your love to your neighbour? Well, we found ways that we could help in the school.”  
(Ministry Leader)

## VARIATION ACROSS SCHOOL CONTEXTS

The case studies revealed notable variation in how Christian engagement is expressed.

***Catholic maintained primary school:*** Christianity was embedded in daily life, with prayer, sacramental preparation and the liturgical calendar shaping the rhythm of school life.

***Special school:*** Christianity was described as “the heart of the school”. Worship and sacramental preparation were adapted for pupils with learning difficulties, and parents valued the presence of Christian youth clubs.

***Controlled and integrated schools:*** Schools in these sectors adopted a more cautious approach. Leaders sought to respect denominational diversity and parental sensitivities. In the integrated school, the principal described rebuilding relationships with local clergy after a previous approach that had largely excluded religion.

## **CONCERNS AND TENSIONS**

Despite overall positive perceptions, some tensions were identified.

**Communication and Awareness:** Communication with parents and pupils was inconsistent. Almost all principals said parents were informed about withdrawal rights; however, only 79% of parents were aware of this right, and just 38% felt sufficiently informed about activities. Awareness among pupils was even lower: only around one third knew they could opt out.

**Limited Evaluation:** Formal evaluation of school engagement was rare.

- Only 3% of churches reported formal evaluation processes
- 47% of Christian organisations reported formal evaluation

Most relied on informal feedback rather than systematic review.

## **Diversity and Inclusion:**

Although most organisations reported awareness of increasing diversity, adaptation was limited: 55% reported making no changes, and only 15% had modified activities to be more inclusive. Some parents felt that activities were not always respectful of other beliefs.

## **Concerns about**

**Proselytising:** A minority of parents and governors expressed concern that school engagement could involve attempts to promote a particular faith. Others raised concerns about exclusion, such as pupils feeling uncomfortable participating in overtly religious activities.

“There are so many cultures who are now coming to the school... We are being informed all the time about what parents want for their children” (School Governor)

# CASE STUDIES

**This section presents insights from six case studies and one focus group, offering a qualitative perspective on how schools engage with churches and Christian organisations**

## **CATHOLIC MAINTAINED PRIMARY SCHOOL**

This case study presents a school where Catholic faith is fully integrated into daily life, shaping ethos, practice, and community relationships. Engagement with the local parish is constant and embedded, through weekly Mass, sacramental preparation, and clergy involvement in governance and teaching. Faith is not treated as an add-on but as the organising framework of school identity, while inclusivity is managed through respectful accommodation of other beliefs. The school also plays a compensatory role where faith is less present in the home.

## **RURAL CONTROLLED PRIMARY SCHOOL**

This school demonstrates a broad, collaborative model of engagement with multiple churches and Christian organisations. Assemblies, RE lessons, and Scripture Union form the backbone of engagement, supplemented by significant practical and pastoral support from churches. The ethos is explicitly Christian but framed primarily through shared moral values rather than doctrinal enforcement. Engagement is widely accepted and normalised within the community, with minimal resistance.

## **URBAN CONTROLLED PRIMARY SCHOOL**

In this highly diverse urban context, Christian engagement is more carefully bounded and framed through inclusivity. Churches provide valuable practical support and contribute to assemblies, but there is a clear distinction between moral teaching and evangelism. The school prioritises a values-based ethos rooted in, but not explicitly defined by, Christianity, ensuring accessibility for a multicultural intake.

## **RURAL CONTROLLED POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL**

This school reflects a strong, community-embedded Christian ethos sustained through deep relationships with local churches. Ministers are highly visible in assemblies, governance, and pastoral life. Engagement is relational, with pupils benefiting from familiarity with local faith leaders. However, sustainability is seen as contingent on leadership and community commitment.

## **INTEGRATED POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL**

This case study reveals a more contested and complex relationship with Christian engagement. While leadership values links with churches, pupils often perceive minimal religious presence, reflecting a broader ethos of neutrality and inclusivity. There is sensitivity around perceived imposition of religion, and RE is often framed through philosophy and world religions rather than Christianity. However, some pupils and staff express a desire for greater optional engagement.

## **SPECIAL SCHOOL**

In this special school context, Christian ethos is deeply embedded yet expressed through highly adapted, inclusive practices tailored to pupils with complex needs. Prayer, assemblies, and sacramental preparation are central, but carefully contextualised. Church partnerships, particularly through a long-standing youth club, provide critical social, emotional, and spiritual support for both pupils and families, often filling gaps in wider provision.

## **PARENTS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

This focus group introduces a critical counter-narrative, highlighting concerns about the appropriateness, consent, and inclusivity of Christian influence in schools. Parents representing *Parents for Inclusive Education* expressed unease about exposure to religious content without explicit choice, and questioned whether schools sufficiently respect diverse belief systems. They highlighted the importance of parental autonomy, and the need for greater transparency and balance.

# SURVEYS

Survey data from pupils (n=73), parents (n=412), and principals (n=81) shows that Christian engagement in schools is widespread and well-established. Almost all principals (94%) reported links with at least one local church, and 73% reported partnerships with Christian organisations. Engagement most commonly takes the form of assemblies and collective worship, alongside curriculum support, extra-curricular activities, and community programmes, typically delivered on a weekly or monthly basis.

## PERCEIVED VALUE AND IMPACT

Perceptions of engagement are largely positive. A majority of principals (84%) rated it as “very valuable,” highlighting benefits such as increased community involvement (86%), moral and spiritual development (77%), pupil enjoyment (72%), and improved wellbeing (67%). Parents similarly reported positive views, with the majority expressing comfort with their child’s participation. Pupils reported high levels of enjoyment, interest, and learning, with many indicating they would like engagement to continue or increase.

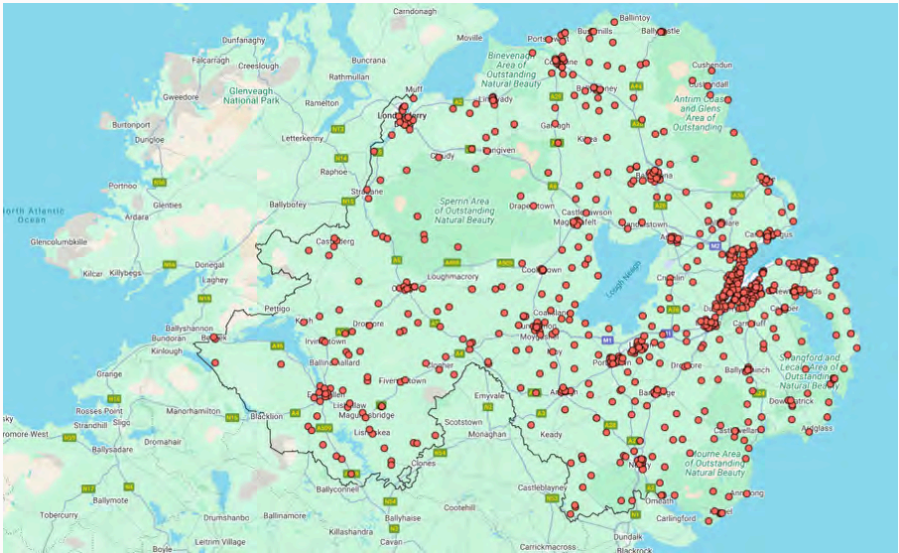
## KEY TENSIONS AND GAPS

While most parents were aware of church involvement (82%), only 38% felt sufficiently informed about its content and purpose. Awareness of withdrawal rights was inconsistent. A minority of parents raised concerns about inclusivity, with 23% feeling activities do not respect diverse beliefs. Finally, formal evaluation remains limited, with over 90% of schools reporting no systematic process for assessing impact.

# MAPPING OF SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Christian Ministry organisations were asked to complete a spreadsheet detailing their school engagement.

Responses were received from 19 of the 23 Christian ministry organisations invited to participate in the research, with 12 providing further data on the schools they engage with. This data was combined with school enrolment data from the Northern Ireland Schools Database and mapped using the ZeeMaps platform. The map below plots all schools in Northern Ireland currently engaging with these organisations.



Engagement is widely distributed across the region, with particularly high concentrations along the Jordanstown–Belfast–Portadown–Armagh–Dungannon and Belfast–Bangor corridors.

Engagement is less dense in rural areas, reflecting both lower population density and fewer schools.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**The following recommendations reflect both the strong appreciation and the minority concerns identified in this study. They seek to support forms of engagement that are appropriate, inclusive and responsive to contemporary Northern Ireland, while encouraging greater clarity, communication and transparency between schools, churches, parents, and children and young people.**

- 1. Recognise the contribution of churches and Christian organisations:** The spiritual, moral, pastoral and practical value of this engagement should be more widely acknowledged and clearly communicated.
- 2. Improve transparency and communication:** Develop a clear engagement protocol to support proactive information-sharing with parents.
- 3. Respect choice and minimise stigma:** Manage pupil withdrawal rights sensitively, protecting inclusion while upholding legislation.
- 4. Provide training for those engaging with schools:** Equip clergy, ministry leaders and volunteers with cultural awareness and practical guidance.
- 5. Strengthen evaluation:** Encourage churches and organisations to assess their impact more systematically, alongside schools' review of external provision.
- 6. Clarify school ethos:** Schools should articulate their ethos clearly to reduce ambiguity about the role of faith.
- 7. Support school leaders:** The Department of Education and sectoral bodies should provide clear guidance and professional development.
- 8. Commission further research:** Larger surveys, independent evaluations and longitudinal studies are needed to strengthen the evidence base.

The surveys were limited by small samples, especially from pupils and the Catholic maintained sector, meaning findings are illustrative rather than representative. However, the qualitative data from case studies were rich and offered deep insights across school types. The PIE focus group ensured critical perspectives were represented.

The findings of this study underline the enduring significance of Christian engagement in Northern Ireland's schools, but also reveal its contested and uneven character. In some schools, a Christian ethos was seamlessly embedded, explicit and confidently expressed, providing clarity and coherence for families who chose such settings. In some controlled and integrated schools, by contrast, engagement was often more defensive, carefully managed, and shaped by awareness of increasing diversity and parental challenge.

Christian engagement was widely valued for the pastoral, practical and community support it offered, the sense of belonging it created, and the enrichment of pupils' spiritual and moral development. Yet concerns were equally evident: the lack of adaptation to a more diverse school population, weak transparency and inconsistent communication with parents, the limited evaluation of faith-based initiatives, and the risk of children feeling excluded or pressured.

These findings sit squarely within a highly sensitive and shifting policy context. With the 2025 Supreme Court ruling, campaigning by parents, and research evidence of greater diversity in school populations, there is growing pressure to ensure that Christian engagement, while highly valued in many school settings and communities, is not assumed as a default, but is transparent, respectful, and adaptable.

# LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION



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