

# Report on Spring 2025 Network Meetings of Principals and Deputies

The meetings were held in:

1. St David's College Artane – Dundalk, Drogheda and Dublin Schools
2. North Monastery Cork – Cork city and south Cork schools
3. Callan – Carlow, Kilkenny, Roscommon, Mayo and Westmeath schools
4. Mt Sion Waterford, Wexford, Waterford and south Tipperary schools
5. Charleville – North Cork, Limerick, Clare and north Tipperary schools

We are very grateful to our hosts and thank them for their hospitality.

Attendance at the meetings was excellent and the in-person meetings were arranged to launch the Strategic Plan 2025 – 2027.

In his address to the meetings, Gerry Bennett highlighted the following points:

- The purpose of the plan and how schools could help to promote it
- School leaders were already doing this work but it was important to highlight why our schools operate in this way using an 'ethos' heading
- The need to highlight links between the five pillars of the plan and the work being done in the schools
- The need to share the plan with the school community
- Incorporating the plan into the school's planning

Participants were then given time to consider the plan and explore how it could fit into the work of the school. Specifically, participants were asked how they could promote the plan so that it didn't become a dust-gathering booklet on a shelf.

Feedback included the following points:

- Perhaps we should look at appointing an ethos leader in the school? However, we need to be careful if doing this as it might lead people to believe that ethos promotion and development is the job of a person rather than the role of everyone in the school
- The school calendar could include the liturgical calendar and the ERST events calendar to keep Pillar 1 to the fore
- It could be used in student-led assemblies, one for each pillar, over the course of the year. This would also promote student agency and voice

- Students should have opportunities to go on ERST Retreats and some work in this is already underway in some schools
- More use of school facilities by the local communities would help develop partnerships and community
- Pillar 1 is the aspect that is most under attack in an increasing secularist country and requires our care and attention
- We could set up an ERST mentoring system where newly appointed leaders are mentored by established leaders, with a particular emphasis on ethos
- Pillar 3 – excelling in teaching and learning – is often the hardest to address by school leaders due to the other admin work that has to be done
- Perhaps we could put a greater emphasis on prayer in schools, particularly before exams. The Rosary, for example.
- All schools should try to have a dedicated room for prayer/reflection
- ‘100 days to exams’ initiative with an emphasis on prayer and personal reflection
- Use of ethos on the agenda for BOMs and Staffs so that its importance is highlighted and it becomes more fully understood by those present
- The plan is very clear and is easier to implement than trying to promote the entire Charter. It breaks the Charter into manageable chunks. More practical for use in schools than the Charter
- Use for professional development sessions with staff
- Possibility of developing a Sensory Garden dedicate to Edmund Rice
- Prepare a template document showing the links between what is being promoted in the school with an element of the plan
- Layout of the plan is excellent and more user-friendly for staffs and boards
- Great for induction of new teachers and students
- It will bring coherence among all schools and provide a clear roadmap for development
- Great for school self-evaluation; how well are we doing in each area?
- Student Councils could introduce it to First Years
- Could be used as a reflection tool at staff meetings. Take one area at each meeting and check what’s working well and identify areas for improvement
- The layout is similar to *Looking At Our School* (LAOS) and could be used in the same way. Could also feature in the *School Improvement Plan* (SIP).
- Could all our schools have the same Mission Statement?
- The plan validates what we already do. It is timely and is needed to support principals and deputies in keeping ethos on the agenda. Provides a rationale for what we do
- It is very well constructed – concise and clear
- Provides a focus and a clear pathway for our schools
- Provides credibility and validity for what we do

- Huge scope for all of us to reflect on our work in schools and identify areas for development
- It will be easy to sell this to our staff as teachers are already involved in many of the activities that promote these pillars
- We will know our 'whys' from reading this
- Closely aligned to Bí Cineálta philosophy which schools are working through at the moment
- Could we explore the possibility of ERST Awards for initiatives/people that promote the plan?
- Could the pillars be put into Google and Microsoft Forms that schools could use in auditing how well they are addressing the pillar elements?
- The Genesis Report showed that many parents still wish to send their children to Faith Schools and this plan will be very helpful in auditing the school's promotion of Catholic education in the Edmund Rice tradition
- Nurturing faith is challenging given the increasing secularisation of society and the apparent ambivalence of the Department of Education. This plan provides a way forward
- The plan will be a versatile tool in auditing our schools
- Some inspectors seem happy that withdrawal of students from RE is ok. This plan supports the work of the principal in addressing this and other areas where inspectors seem to be anti-religion
- We could use **#ethos** in online posts that have an ethos-promoting content, highlighting the activity and helping to explain ethos to the school and wider community
- This document will certainly generate conversations and this will be helpful in promoting ethos
- The plan will be a valuable reference document – we can go back to it time and time again
- A soft copy of the document will be very convenient as it will make it easier to send it to staff, students and parents
- It would be great if members of the Trust could visit the schools and help to support them in implementing the plan
- For schools with morning assemblies, perhaps the plan could be one of the many themes for discussion with students
- Students are very good at posting material online and they could be asked to make 1-minute videos on ethos activities that could be posted on the school's platforms
- The plan brings the Charter to the forefront again
- Many schools are losing teachers who were there from the early days, knew Christian Brothers and worked through the transition to ERST. This level of

understanding of Edmund Rice ethos is missing in the people who replace them. Therefore, this plan is a great way of inducting new staff and reminding all of us of our core values

- The online induction of new staff that ERST has been doing since Covid is not as effective as the in-person workshops. Could ERST go back to the in-person sessions?
- Could we get more ERST bookmarks and student-friendly Charters? These are very effective
- Pillars are broad enough to allow flexibility so that each school can identify its own area for development
- We should also put ethos on the agenda of Middle Leaders. They have a very important role in helping to promote and implement this plan
- There is a new Transition Year programme being introduced next year. Could this plan form a module?

In some groups we had time to consider areas of concern in schools but most groups spent all the time on the Strategic Plan.

Other issues raised were:

### **Provision of Special Classes**

Some schools reported that they felt under pressure to provide special classes and areas identified for building rooms were, in their opinions, unsuitable. ERST supports provision for SEN students, as it is in line with our Charter values, but identified spaces have to be fair to everyone, especially the students.

It was pointed out that families of students with special needs face constant challenges and enrolment is one of these. We need to be sensitive to their needs and the language used in refusing a place in the school needs attention.

### **Inclusion of Students with Special Needs**

Many schools had attended a seminar on the operation of Circular 0064/2024 in schools. The circular covers the operation/application and deployment of Special Education Teacher resources. While the circular gave greater autonomy to schools in the use of hours allocated to the school for special education, there is a lot of work involved in complying with the terms of the circular.

The principal has the responsibility for establishing, promoting and implementing inclusive whole-school policies and procedures, which are supportive of the learning of all children and young people, including those with special educational needs.

### **Grades in Junior Cycle**

The traditional grades, A, B, C, etc, have been replaced by a Distinction (90% - 100%), Higher Merit (75% - 89%), Merit (55% - 74%) etc and there is a feeling that these new grades are demotivating students. The grade brackets are too broad with, for example, the same grade for a student who gets 55% and a student who gets 74%. Hard work is not being rewarded and students seem happy to settle for a merit. Very few students are getting distinctions compared with the numbers that got A grades under the previous system.

This has implications for student subject choices for Senior Cycle.

### **Information**

Ideas for promoting the Strategic Plan will be found on this page:

<https://www.erst.ie/strategic-plan/>

The flipbook version of the plan is here: <https://publuu.com/flip-book/431576/1721240>