Pilgrims of Hope: A Journey of Faith and Participation.

Celebrating 50 years of Boards of Management in Irish Catholic Primary Schools in a Jubilee Year.

"They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'" **Luke 24:32**

Abstract

This article explores the historical and political factors that shaped the governance of Irish Catholic primary schools, culminating in the establishment of Boards of Management in 1975. It challenges the conventional narrative of a conservative Church opposing modernisation by highlighting the complex negotiations between Church and State, influenced by Vatican II, economic imperatives, and evolving social expectations. The study situates these governance reforms within the broader context of Catholic social teaching, subsidiarity, and policy shifts in Irish education.

Marking the **Jubilee Year** of Boards of Management and the upcoming **bicentenary of Catholic Emancipation in 2029**, this paper reflects on how historical church-state relations inform contemporary governance debates. It argues that school governance was not a straightforward transition from clerical control to state authority but rather a **negotiated process** involving competing interests, financial constraints, and ideological shifts.

Recognising the need for continued evolution, the article proposes the development of a **participatory framework and toolkit** to enhance local engagement in school governance. By providing structured support, training resources, and policy guidance, this initiative aims to empower Boards of Management to uphold transparency, inclusivity, and faith-based educational leadership in the changing landscape of Catholic education.

Introduction

The establishment of Boards of Management in Irish Catholic primary schools in October 1975 marked a shift in education governance, moving from an exclusively clerical model to a more inclusive structure involving parents and teachers. This development resulted from complex negotiations influenced by historical church-state relations, Vatican II's emphasis on lay involvement, and changing societal expectations regarding educational authority and participation.

This article explores the historical, political, and economic factors that shaped this transition in governance. It highlights the significant influence of the Catholic Church on Irish educational policy, the hesitance of successive governments to challenge this structure due to financial and ideological constraints, and the eventual internal and external pressures that led to reforms. The impact of Vatican II's call for shared responsibility, economic modernisation under Sean Lemass, and educational reforms such as the introduction of free secondary education in 1967 are examined as pivotal forces reshaping the governance of Irish primary schools.

A common perception is that by the 1960s, a conservative Church was resisting modernisation efforts driven by a pragmatic state. However, this narrative is overly simplistic. In reality, Church leaders frequently engaged in discussions about educational reform, particularly following Vatican II's emphasis on shared responsibility in governance. While tensions undoubtedly existed, the governance transformation was not merely a case of Church resistance versus state progressivism. Instead, it was a negotiated and multifaceted process influenced by economic realities, political considerations, and evolving theological perspectives.

As Catholic education in Ireland marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Boards of Management in primary schools during the 2025 Jubilee Year and looks ahead to the bicentenary of Catholic Emancipation in 2029, these anniversaries provide a unique lens through which to examine the evolution of school governance. Both milestones symbolise a journey of progress, adaptation, and renewed commitment to faith-based education, reinforcing the principles of subsidiarity and shared leadership. These anniversaries serve as moments for reflection on how Catholic education has navigated change while remaining steadfast in its mission to foster an inclusive, values-driven learning environment.

The introduction of Boards of Management was not merely an administrative adjustment but a negotiated response to evolving educational, religious, and political landscapes. By analysing the motivations and challenges behind their implementation, this study underscores the significance of these reforms in the broader context of Irish education. Furthermore, it examines how these governance structures continue to evolve in response to contemporary debates surrounding school patronage, inclusivity, and state intervention.

Recognising the ongoing need for effective and inclusive governance, this article also proposes the development of a participatory framework and toolkit to practically support local engagement in school governance. Such a framework would provide structured guidance, training materials, and resources to ensure that Boards of Management operate transparently and effectively while fostering meaningful collaboration between stakeholders. By leveraging historical lessons and contemporary best practices, this initiative aims to enhance the democratic participation of parents, teachers, and local communities in shaping the future of Catholic education governance in Ireland.

The legacy of this transition remains relevant today as Ireland continues to navigate the balance between historical denominational governance and modern educational expectations. This

article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the journey toward participatory governance in Catholic education, reflecting on its past, assessing its present, and contemplating its future in an evolving educational landscape.

Research focus

To fully understand the developments that led to the establishment of Boards of Management in 1975, it is essential to examine the historical, political, and social forces that shaped this transition.

The study employs a historical-documentary analysis approach to examine the evolution of Catholic school governance in Ireland. By analysing primary sources, including Church documents, government policy papers, legislative acts, and archival records, the research traces the key negotiations and ideological shifts that led to the establishment of Boards of Management in 1975. Additionally, it engages with secondary literature from historians, theologians, and education policy scholars to contextualize these governance reforms within broader social, political, and theological movements.

The three key research questions are:

What historical and policy factors contributed to the establishment of Boards of Management, and what lessons can we learn from this process?

- Which key individuals and groups played a role in the development and implementation of the governance model, and how did their contributions shape its evolution?

- What challenges arose during the transition to Boards of Management, how were they addressed, and what insights can be drawn for governance today?

By addressing these questions, this article explores how shifting economic realities, Vatican II's emphasis on shared responsibility, and increasing demands for educational reform converged to reshape school governance. In doing so, it highlights that the introduction of Boards was not a sudden break from the past but rather the result of a long and complex journey of negotiation, adaptation, and evolving societal expectations.

Church-State Relations and the Governance of Irish Primary Education: Historical Contingencies and Negotiated Reform

Gann (2015) asserts that understanding the historical evolution of governance is crucial in understanding the present 'space' occupied by school governance structures:

"our past legitimises and offers plausible narratives for our present and future" (p.5).

The substantial influence of the Catholic Church in shaping Irish educational policy is well-documented (Coolahan, 1981; Connolly et al., 2023; Hyland & Milne, 1992; O'Buachalla, 1985; Walsh, 2009). Throughout the early twentieth century, church-state relations in education were characterised by a complex interplay between religious authority and political reluctance. While the Catholic Church maintained that education was a moral and religious prerogative rather than a state function, successive Irish governments were constrained by both financial limitations and deep-seated political deference to ecclesiastical leadership. The intersection of ideology and economic pragmatism ensured that primary school governance remained overwhelmingly under Church control.

The Catholic Church's Social Teaching and Educational Authority

The Church's position on education was underpinned by papal social teachings, particularly *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929), which emphasised the primacy of family and religious institutions in education while circumscribing the role of the state (O'Buachalla, 1985). These encyclicals rejected state-driven education models in favour of a subsidiarity principle, whereby governance responsibilities should remain with the smallest, most immediate authorities—namely, families, parishes, and religious institutions (Fleming & Harford, 2014). The Irish constitutional framework reflected these principles, particularly in Bunreacht na hÉireann (Government of Ireland, 1937), where Article 42.2 positioned the state as a supporting rather than primary agent in education. This ideological alignment with Catholic teaching cemented the Church's role as the dominant Patron of Irish primary schools.

The reluctance of successive governments to challenge this structure was not solely ideological but also financial. The state simply lacked the resources to establish a comprehensive national education system. De Valera's government, for instance, resisted pressures to replicate the British welfare state model, as seen in the Education Act (1944), the National Insurance Act (1946), and the National Health Service Act (1948). These measures, which expanded state responsibility for education and welfare, were perceived in Ireland as an overreach into domains traditionally governed by religious and familial structures (Fanning, 2006). In this respect, the Irish government's inaction on education reform was not merely a matter of deference, but also of necessity, given the economic fragility of the post-independence state. Political deference to Church authority was exacerbated by the state's ongoing financial instability. The Irish economy in the mid-twentieth century faced challenges such as high emigration, low industrialisation, and limited public revenues, which restricted the

government's ability to fund education reform (Lee, 1989). Consequently, the government relied heavily on religious orders to provide educational services at minimal state expense. The arrangement proved mutually beneficial: while the Church maintained ideological and administrative control over schools, the state avoided the significant financial burden of developing and sustaining an independent educational infrastructure (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011).

Earlier, Éamon de Valera's reluctance to establish a fully autonomous Department of Education upon assuming office in 1920 was also indicative of these constraints. The Department was only formally established in 1924, and even then, successive Ministers for Education largely viewed their role as subordinate to ecclesiastical authorities (O'Buachalla, 1977). This attitude was famously articulated by Richard Mulcahy in a Dáil debate on July 19, 1956, when he described the Minister for Education as merely a 'plumber' ensuring that the various elements of the system functioned smoothly rather than an authoritative policymaker:

"You have your teachers, your managers and your churches, and I regard the position as Minister in the Department of Education as that of a kind of dungaree man, the plumber who will make satisfactory communications and streamline the forces and potentialities of the educational workers and educational management in this country. He will take the knock out of the pipes and will link up everything. I would be blind to my responsibility if I insisted on pontificating or lapsed into an easy acceptance of an imagined duty to philosophise here on educational matters." (Mulcahy, 1956)

This subservience to religious authorities ensured that, even as other European states expanded public education, Ireland remained committed to a denominational governance model. The political implications of shifting from this arrangement—both in terms of potential backlash

from the Catholic hierarchy and the sheer financial cost—meant that reform remained largely theoretical for much of the mid-century.

The Slow Path to Reform: Political and Economic Shifts

While resistance to state-led education persisted through the mid-20th century, economic and social realities gradually forced policy shifts. In 1946, de Valera commissioned Minister for Education Tomás Ó Deirg to review the educational system. A subsequent 1951 report, chaired by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid of Dublin, made far-reaching recommendations, including an immediate extension of the school-leaving age to 15 (not enacted until 1972) and a further extension to 16 as soon as economically feasible (eventually implemented in 2000) (Fleming & Harford, 2014).

Despite these recommendations, meaningful reform was stalled again by economic constraints and ongoing Church influence. The cost of extending secondary education—estimated at £12 million in the 1950s—was considered prohibitive, particularly given Ireland's ongoing struggles with high unemployment and fiscal austerity (Ó Gráda, 1997). Moreover, any expansion of state-led education provision risked undermining the Church's established authority, making political leaders hesitant to act.

Sean Lemass's rise to the role of Taoiseach in 1959 signalled the start of a transformative era. By the time he took office, he had already established a substantial political career, having served as a senior minister in economic portfolios for more than two decades. He had been instrumental in creating a tariff system intended to promote national industries. The strategy inadvertently resulted in high inflation, a balance of payments crisis, a decline in both industry and agriculture, and mass emigration that exceeded 50,000 people annually throughout the

1950s. Breen et al. (1990) contend that the very survival of the state was at risk during this time. Lemass, as Taoiseach, was resolute in his belief that economic recovery was tied to access to education (O'Donoghue and Harford, 2011).

Education, much like economic policy in the first forty years of the state, was primarily influenced by a nostalgic vision of Irish national identity rather than by the revolutionary agendas that characterised many 20th-century movements (White, 2007). The emergence of a new generation of politicians signalled a departure from the traditionalist approach. The 1960s witnessed six different Fianna Fáil Ministers for Education: Patrick Hillery (1959–1965), George Colley (1965–1966), Donogh O'Malley (1966–1968), Brian Lenihan Snr (1968–1969), and Padraig Faulkner (1969–1972).

Economic and societal changes in the 1960s drove a pivotal shift in education policy. Reports such as the Duggan Report (1962) and the seminal 'Investment in Education Report' (Government of Ireland, 1965) exposed severe educational inequalities. In 1963, out of 55,000 students finishing their education, 8,000 left before completing primary school, and 3,000 more failed the Primary Certificate. Nearly 20% of students exited the system without any formal certification. Of those continuing, 20,000 completed only primary school, 6,000 attained the Group Certificate, 5,000 earned the Intermediate Certificate, and just over 7,000 completed the Leaving Certificate. Secondary education completion stood at a mere 12% (Hyland & Milne, 1992). These disparities were further exacerbated by social class and geography: 46% of secondary school students aged 16–19 came from professional or middle-class families, whereas fewer than 10% hailed from unskilled worker households. In 1967, 31.9% of primary school pupils were in classes of 45 or more, while 73.1% were in classes exceeding 30 students (Coolahan, 1981).

Influenced by human capital theory, policymakers sought to harness the potential of all citizens to drive economic growth (Coolahan, 1981; O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011). This led to a series of major reforms:

- The introduction of free secondary education in 1967, dismantling class barriers to education.

- The establishment of Regional Technical Colleges in 1970 to expand vocational and technical training.

- A revised primary curriculum in 1971 aimed at modernising teaching methodologies.

Simultaneously, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) spurred a re-evaluation of governance in primary education. The council emphasised increased lay participation (Walsh, 2009). Pope John XXIII's election in 1958 was a turning point for the Church, as he initiated Vatican II just two months into his tenure, recognising the urgent need for modernisation. Among its key documents was Gravissimum Educationis (1965), which underscored parents as the primary educators of their children:

"*Since parents have given life to their children, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring, and therefore must be recognised as their primary and principal educators*" (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 1965, Section 3).

This perspective redefined Catholic education as a collaborative endeavour, advocating for increased lay involvement and parental influence in school governance. These changes had a profound impact on Irish education, leading to reforms that shifted decision-making from clergy-dominated structures to more inclusive governance models.

The confluence of Vatican II's emphasis on lay participation and economic policymakers' focus on human capital theory led to structural changes in Irish education. The governance model

evolved from a centralised, clerical-controlled system to one that incorporated broader participation. The transition was not without resistance. Traditionalists within the Church opposed the erosion of clerical authority, while the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) raised concerns about excessive parental oversight in professional teaching matters (Puirseil, 2017).

Tensions in Governance Reform: Challenging Assumptions and Negotiating Change

On June 12th, 1973, the newly appointed Secretary of the Department of Education, Seán O'Connor, addressed the Annual General Meeting of the Catholic Primary School Managers Association (CPSMA) in Athlone. His speech signalled a significant shift in school governance, proposing a new model where governance responsibilities would be shared with parents. Under his plan, school committees would consist of two priests and two parents, with the Principal acting as a non-voting member. In a pointed remark, he warned:

"If your only hope is to hang grimly to all the authority you have, you will not hold on" (*Irish Independent*, June 13, 1973).

O'Connor's assertion suggested an expectation of resistance from Church authorities, yet the presumption proved to be somewhat misplaced. Walshe (1999) notes that the CPSMA's Standing Orders Committee welcomed the proposal, rather than resisting it. Dr. Cathal Daly, then Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, responded positively, stating that the bishops were eager to implement the new structures as soon as possible. Far from being an imposition from an external authority, the proposed governance changes aligned with *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965) and the Irish bishops' own recommendations from 1969.

While the development was framed as a step towards democratisation in school governance, pragmatic considerations also played a crucial role. The introduction of a capitation grant

increase—raising funding to £6 per pupil for schools that adopted a Board of Management structure—provided a strong financial incentive (Hyland & Milne, 1992). Walshe (1999) notes that this represented a 323% annual increase in capitation allocation to primary schools. Additionally, the rapid expansion of urban areas, particularly in Dublin, placed immense pressure on clerical managers, who increasingly sought lay involvement to share administrative responsibilities. In a 2025 interview, Monsignor Dan O'Connor recalled that during the early 1970s, twenty new schools opened on the same day in Dublin, with the Rathfarnham parish alone acting as the "mother parish" to 22 rapidly growing sub-parishes, each requiring its own school governance structure.

Despite broad acceptance from the Church, resistance to governance reform emerged from an unexpected source: the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). Although INTO had traditionally supported the existing clerical managerial system for its stability and clear lines of authority, its primary concern was not just preserving the status quo, but rather the potential interference of parents in professional teaching matters. INTO members feared that increased parental involvement in Boards of Management might undermine teachers' autonomy. However, the promise of additional funding—particularly the capitation grant increase linked to board participation—led to a reluctant acceptance of change. A telling statement from a 1974 INTO meeting encapsulates this hesitation:

"We were willing to put up with poor conditions for the clerical manager but not for parents" (CPSMA Archive, July 1974).

Ultimately, while INTO did not initially support the new governance model, the financial incentives and evolving educational landscape made adaptation unavoidable.

Initial proposals for board composition reflected an effort to preserve clerical authority, with early models featuring four patron nominees and two parent representatives. Negotiations with the INTO on December 1st, 1975, and February 23rd, 1976, led to a further adjustment— teacher representation on Boards. Circular 16/76, issued in April 1976, formalised the composition: for schools with fewer than six teachers, the board would consist of four patron nominees, two parents, and the Principal. Larger schools (with seven or more teachers) would have ten members, including two teachers and six patron nominees. Additionally, parent representatives were given a role in interview panels for staff appointments alongside the Chairperson and Principal. Notably, the INTO only agreed to this arrangement for a three-year trial period, reflecting their persistent concerns about the potential impact of increased parental involvement.

The assumption that reluctance to share authority stemmed solely from the conservatism of the Catholic hierarchy overlooks the broader resistance from other stakeholders. Minister for Education Richard Burke's 1974 speech to the CPSMA Annual General Meeting further illustrates these tensions, as he aimed to reassure conservative voices that religious instruction would remain central to the education system. Citing the still-unrevised *Rules for National Schools* (1965), Burke stated:

"*Of all the parts of the school curriculum, Religious Instruction is by far the most important… then it is in the attitudes, not the principles, a change is called for.*" (CPSMA Archive, 1972–1979).

Additionally, conservative elements within the Department of Education actively obstructed reform efforts. The 1973 disbandment of the Department of Education's Development Branch, which had been leading reform initiatives, suggests that opposition to governance changes was not confined to the Church but was also embedded within the state itself (Hyland, 2014).

Records from 1977–1979 indicate that while the Church ultimately embraced Boards of Management to preserve Catholic identity, tensions between modernisers and traditionalists persisted (CPSMA Archives).

The broader narrative of educational reform in the 1970s challenges the assumption that policy argues change follows a straightforward, progressive trajectory. As Wilkins (2018) argues, reforms are rarely linear but instead emerge from contested power dynamics and ideological struggles. The shift from a clerical-dominated to a more participatory governance model did not mark the end of Church influence but rather a strategic adaptation to preserve its role within a changing educational landscape. Fleming and Harford (2014) characterise this shift as a movement from a "theocentric to a mercantile paradigm" (p. 636), where economic priorities increasingly influenced governance structures. However, historical evidence suggests a more complex picture in which religious, financial, and political forces interacted to shape Ireland's evolving education system.

While the introduction of Boards of Management in 1975 marked a significant shift in school governance, it is incorrect to assume that resistance to this change came primarily from the Church. In fact, historical records suggest that the Catholic hierarchy, particularly the Irish bishops, had already been advocating for greater lay participation in school governance in alignment with Vatican II's emphasis on co-responsibility (Gravissimum Educationis, 1965; Walshe, 1999). Rather than resisting reform, the Church played an active role in shaping these governance structures to ensure they aligned with Catholic values while promoting a more participatory model of school leadership.

Ultimately, while the state gradually increased its role in school governance, it did not entirely displace the Church's influence. Instead, the governance reforms of the 1970s represent a negotiated settlement between competing interests—balancing modernisation with continuity,

economic incentives with ideological imperatives, and increased lay participation with the preservation of religious ethos. The contested nature of these reforms underscores the complexities of policy change in Irish education, where strategic compromises, and shifting alliances continue to define the evolution of school governance.

A Contested and Negotiated Process

Educational reform in Ireland was thus not an inevitable linear progression but a negotiated process shaped by ideological commitments, financial constraints, and the balance of power between Church and state. By the late 20th century, as Ireland underwent economic modernisation and increasing secularisation, the landscape of educational governance began to be further questioned. However, the foundational structures established through Church-state negotiations in the state's early decades continue to influence contemporary debates on school patronage and governance. Understanding this history is essential for evaluating current discussions on pluralism, inclusivity, and the role of state intervention in Irish education.

These dynamics remain relevant for understanding contemporary governance arrangements.

For example, McGraw and Tiernan (2022) highlight the slow pace of divestment of schools from church patronage in Ireland today, with only eleven schools transferring patronage between 2013 and 2019, despite broad agreement in state and church policy on the need for greater diversity. They attribute this to a disconnect between national policy and local considerations: while diversity of patronage is viewed positively in principle, resistance often emerges at the local level. The lesson of history teaches us that the narrative is rarely straightforward.

Local trust in schools remains strong, as noted in the Genesis Report (2019), which found that 78% of Irish Primary School parents were satisfied with their child's school. This aligns with

the OECD's emphasis on the importance of local governance in fostering stakeholder engagement (Burns & Koster, 2016). Kingdon's (1984) model of policy change underscores the need to frame governance reform as a shared "problem" requiring political will, clear articulation, and practical solutions to ensure effective implementation. Addressing local concerns within a participatory framework could bridge the gap between national policy and local realities, providing a democratic space for meaningful dialogue and collaboration. The clear articulation of such engagement would require both a clear participatory framework and a practical 'toolkit' for Board members. Such a resource may include practical training materials, vignettes, examples and templates to promote active participation.

Historical legacies of denominational governance remain influential yet increasingly contested in Ireland's changing social landscape. Connolly et al. (2023) also argue that shifting demographics, economic factors, and evolving religious attitudes necessitate re-evaluating governance structures. While these shifts present challenges, they also create opportunities. For example, established parish and diocesan networks could facilitate collaboration through horizontal governance models, such as school clusters or soft federations (Theisens, 2016). Furthermore, the concentrated control of schools by a small number of patron bodies—Churches, Educate Together, An Foras Pátrúnachta, and Community National Schools—could simplify the coordination of governance reforms.

In considering reforms or supports for Boards, it is essential to recognise the interplay of national policy and local needs. A participatory framework and toolkit would offer a practical approach to fostering inclusive, democratic conversations that address issues such as board professionalisation, denominational influence, and tailored training. By leveraging local trust and existing networks, Ireland has the potential to build governance structures that reflect both

national aspirations and local realities, advancing equity and effectiveness in school management.

The Holy Spirit and Participative Democracy in Catholic School Governance

Understanding participative democracy in school governance from a Catholic perspective helps clarify a school's ethos as part of the Holy Spirit's work in the Church. When patrons, parents, teachers, and the wider community take part in governance, they help shape the school's mission in line with Catholic values (Grace, 2002). This process is not something to fear but an opportunity to share responsibility for faith-based education (Francis, 2013).

Catholic Bishops hold a legal and pastoral responsibility under Canon Law to oversee Catholic education, ensure doctrinal fidelity, appoint religious educators, and regulate Catholic schools within their diocese (Code of Canon Law, 1983, Can. 794, 803, 805, 806). The governance model of Catholic education is reinforced by the participatory nature of the early Church, as demonstrated in the Acts of the Apostles. Early Christian communities operated through collective discernment and shared decision-making, as illustrated in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-29), where the apostles and elders convened to debate and agree upon doctrinal matters (Bruce, 1988).

The concept of shared governance in Catholic education is further rooted in the monastic traditions of the Church, particularly in the Regula Benedicti (Rule of St. Benedict). St. Benedict's emphasis on consultation within the monastic community—

"Let the abbot call the whole community together and explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course" (RB 3:1-2)

This reflects a long-standing tradition of participatory leadership in Christian education and administration (Benedict, 1948). This principle highlights the importance of involving diverse voices, including teachers, parents, and local communities, in the governance of Catholic schools today. This participatory ethos, rooted in the Gospel, aligns with contemporary calls for Catholic school boards to embody a model of governance that is inclusive, dialogical, and mission-driven (Groome, 1998).

A Catholic school's ethos is not merely a tradition; it is a living expression of the Gospel, nurtured through dialogue, prayer, and shared mission (Groome, 1998). Encouraging participation strengthens Catholic Social Teaching, particularly the principle of subsidiarity, which ensures that decisions are made at the most local level by those directly involved (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005). This approach helps school governance reflect the community's needs while remaining true to Catholic education.

This perspective is important in discussions about school divestment. Rather than seeing divestment as a top-down threat to Catholic identity, it should be understood as a bottom-up process led by the Holy Spirit within local communities (Byrne & Devine, 2018). When schools commit to participative governance, they can discern the best way forward in faith and trust.

By embracing participative democracy within subsidiarity, Catholic schools affirm their mission as places of faith, inclusion, and shared responsibility. This approach ensures that decisions about patronage and governance come from open dialogue and a commitment to the

common good (Sullivan, 2001). In this way, Catholic education remains a beacon of hope, guided by the Holy Spirit and deeply rooted in Church teachings.

As the Catholic Church marks the Jubilee Year and the fiftieth anniversary of Boards of Management, these milestones provide an opportunity to reflect on the past and plan for the future. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of Catholic school governance requires a careful balance between preserving the faith-based ethos of schools and adapting to contemporary expectations of transparency, inclusion, and democratic decision-making. The history of Catholic school governance shows that change is possible, but it also reminds us that reforms

If Catholic education is to remain a "Pilgrim of Hope," it must ensure that governance structures are transparent, inclusive, and mission-driven. This requires rethinking lay participation, supporting board formation, and fostering a culture of shared responsibility.

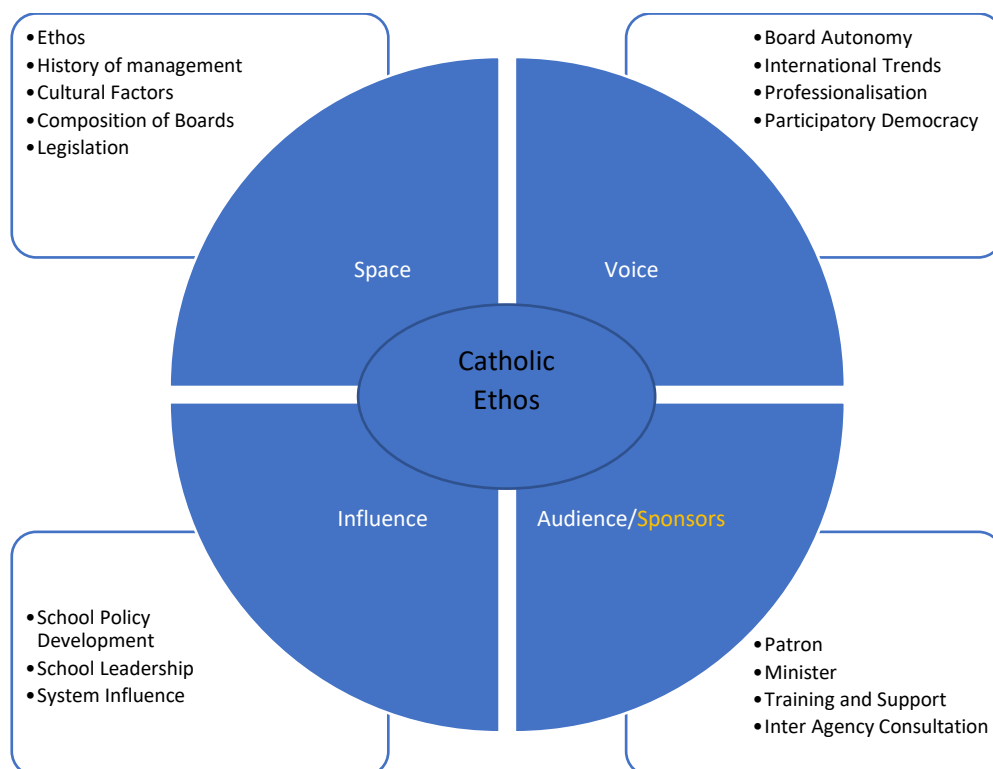**A Participatory Framework: A Future Plan.**

As outlined, the history of Boards of Management in Irish Catholic schools reflects a delicate balance between ethical and pragmatic considerations, blending Catholic social values with economic realities.

The introduction of Boards in 1975 was not merely an administrative reform but a response to multiple pressures: Vatican II's emphasis on lay participation, the growing financial demands on schools, and the influence of human capital theory, which framed education as essential to national economic development (Coolahan, 1981; Fleming & Harford, 2014). This fusion of theology and policy illustrates that governance structures are not only about efficiency but must also align with the Church's mission of service, justice, and subsidiarity

(Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005). Just as the introduction of Boards sought to combine faith-driven values with operational viability, our approach to supporting Boards today must likewise be both ethical and pragmatic.

To strengthen participatory governance, we propose adapting the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007)—originally designed to amplify the 'voice of the child' in decision-making—to ensure that Boards have the space, voice, audience, and influence necessary to fulfill their mission. The **Lundy Model is built on four interdependent elements**:

Space
- Ethos
- History of management
- Cultural Factors
- Composition of Boards
- Legislation

Voice
- Board Autonomy
- International Trends
- Professionalisation
- Participatory Democracy

Influence
- School Policy Development
- School Leadership
- System Influence

Audience/Sponsors
- Patron
- Minister
- Training and Support
- Inter Agency Consultation

Catholic Ethos

1. **Space** – ensuring that decision-making environments allow for meaningful engagement. In the context of Boards, this means creating structures where all members, including parents, teachers, and community representatives, have a clear and respected role in discussions about school governance.

2. **Voice** – ensuring that individuals can express their views freely. Boards need platforms, such as structured consultations, feedback mechanisms, and training programs, to enable members to articulate concerns, propose solutions, and contribute to school leadership.

3. **Audience** – ensuring that those who hold decision-making power genuinely listen to what is being expressed. This means that Board discussions should be valued by school Patrons, the Department of Education, and policymakers, rather than being viewed as administrative formalities.

4. **Influence** – ensuring that voices lead to tangible change. The key challenge for Boards is ensuring that their insights translate into action, whether in school policy, teacher recruitment, or curriculum decisions.

This model aligns with Catholic principles of co-responsibility and subsidiarity, fostering governance structures that respect the expertise of educators, the input of parents, and the faith-based identity of Catholic schools (Walsh, 2009). However, for participation to be effective, it must be practical, structured, and supported. To operationalise this vision, a practical participatory toolkit should be developed, equipping Board members with structured training, governance templates, and real-world case studies to enhance their effectiveness.

The **Small Schools Project** provides a valuable setting for piloting this framework, allowing Boards to test participatory strategies in a structured and supportive environment (Department of Education, 2024). By embedding participatory governance in Catholic

education, we ensure that Boards of Management remain not only administrative bodies but true "Pilgrims of Hope," journeying together in faith, inclusion, and shared leadership (Francis, 2024).

Conclusion

As we mark the Jubilee Year and reflect on the fiftieth anniversary of Boards of Management, we do so as **Pilgrims of Hope**—recognising that governance in Catholic education is not a static structure but a continuous journey. The establishment of Boards in 1975 was not merely a bureaucratic reform; it was the product of historical negotiations, evolving Church teachings, and societal change. This journey reminds us that the governance of our schools is not just about administration but about mission—ensuring that education remains a space where faith, community, and excellence come together.

However, if we are to navigate the road ahead, we must first understand where we have come from. The history of school governance in Ireland teaches us that change is rarely linear or uncontested. It is shaped by dialogue, adaptation, and the balancing of tradition with contemporary needs. As we look to the future, the role of Boards of Management must continue to evolve in a way that remains faithful to the Gospel while embracing transparency, inclusion, and shared responsibility.

The Jubilee theme of **Pilgrims of Hope** calls us to walk this path with confidence, trust, and openness to renewal. Governance in Catholic education must not be a passive inheritance but an active, mission-driven commitment to the common good. Just as the early Church discerned

its way forward in faith and unity, so too must Boards continue to engage, learn, and respond to the changing needs of our schools and society.

As we commemorate these milestones, we also anticipate the upcoming bicentenary of Catholic Emancipation in 2029—another defining moment in the history of faith, education, and governance in Ireland. The struggle for Catholic Emancipation was ultimately a call for inclusion, participation, and the right to contribute fully to civic and religious life. In the same spirit, our proposal for a participatory framework and governance toolkit offers an opportunity to empower our Boards of Management, ensuring that they remain equipped to meet the challenges of the future while staying true to the core mission of Catholic education.

The evolution of school governance in Ireland illustrates that reform has always been a negotiated process, balancing tradition with emerging societal needs. Just as the introduction of Boards of Management in 1975 represented a shift towards lay participation, the next phase of governance must embrace a structured and participatory model to ensure continued inclusivity, transparency, and faith-driven leadership.

By strengthening participatory governance, fostering lay leadership, and remaining anchored in the values of faith-based education, we can ensure that our schools continue to be beacons of hope for generations to come—upholding the legacy of the past while embracing the promise of the future.

Proposed Next Actions Based on the Article

1. **Develop a Participatory Framework for Governance**
    - Design a **structured framework** to enhance the participation of parents, teachers, and community members in school governance.

- Ensure the framework aligns with **Catholic Social Teaching** and the principles of subsidiarity and co-responsibility.

2. **Create a Governance Toolkit for Boards of Management**

   - Develop **training resources**, governance templates, and best-practice guidelines for Board members.

   - Include **case studies and real-world scenarios** to support effective decision-making.

   - Offer digital and in-person training programs for new and existing Board members.

3. **Prepare for the Bicentenary of Catholic Emancipation (2029)**

   - Use this milestone to reflect on the evolution of **Catholic education governance** and plan for future reforms.

   - Organise **conferences, discussions, and publications** to advance thought leadership on participatory governance.

4. **Encourage Local and National-Level Implementation**

   - Pilot participatory governance strategies in **selected schools**, particularly in rural or small school settings.

   - Work with **diocesan networks and educational bodies** to scale successful governance models nationwide.

Final Action Step:

Form a Working Group to oversee the development of the participatory framework and toolkit, ensuring Catholic school governance remains **inclusive, mission-driven, and future-ready**.

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