

**1 February 2022**

**To: Independent Review of Education Panel**  
**From: Board of Governors, Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School**

### **Context**

Due to parental desire for an additional Catholic Grammar School to serve the needs of pupils in South Belfast, Aquinas opened its doors in 1993 with an enrolment of 110, and at present there are 893 pupils. Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School is a growing and successful Catholic Voluntary Grammar School which is part of a worldwide family of over 200,000 Catholic schools.

Aquinas is a Diocesan Grammar School under the Trusteeship of the Bishop of Down and Connor and the St. MacNissi's Educational Trust who own the land and buildings. The Board of Governors is appointed by the Trustees and the Department of Education and includes parent and staff representatives. The school is wholly managed by our Board of Governors whose commitment makes a significant contribution to the successful functioning and direction of the school.

The Sectorial Body which represents Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School is The Governing Bodies Association who provide policy information, advice and support for their member schools and present their views to the Department of Education, educational stakeholders, politicians and the media. We understand that the GBA have already submitted a paper to The Independent Review of Education.

### **A Catholic School**

The key distinguishing characteristic of Aquinas is that it is a Catholic School. The Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School Community is very proud of its holistic Catholic ethos. This ethos permeates throughout every strand of school life. It is embodied in the daily life of each pupil, teacher and member of the support staff, and is experienced by parents or friends attending the wide variety of events which take place throughout the school year.

Our ethos is palpable in the mutual respect that is evident between all members of our community. As a Catholic school we welcome students from a wide variety of backgrounds – respecting and reflecting the different faith backgrounds in our society. Nevertheless, we are Catholic in our welcome and in the Gospel values we practise in our daily life, in relationships within school, in the local community and beyond.

We strive to ensure that all pupils are treated as unique individual members of our school community, helping them with the formation of an authentic faith through holistic education. Catholic education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges us to be inclusive and welcoming of all who wish to be a part of our school community.

Our school welcomes students from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. At present 119 or 13.3% of our pupil population are Non-Catholic, coming from a range of religious affiliations or no particular affiliation. [Hindu (38), No Religion (38) Other Christian (11), Muslim (13), Presbyterian (4), Quaker (3), Church of Ireland (2), Buddhist (1), Congregational Church (1), Elim (1)]

Our school welcomes and supports children with statements of Special Educational Needs and currently educates 50 such pupils; 5.6% of our total enrolment. These pupils have a wide range of challenges and are valued as an integral part of our school. The care afforded to all pupils, the engagement with their parents and the flexibility of the delivery of their learning reflects our inclusive ethos. Aquinas is recognised as achieving excellence in the care of statemented pupils.

Our ethos requires us to strive for excellence in both teaching and learning and pastoral care. We wish our students to be equipped to access pathways to the next stage in their educational journey and also to contribute to and shape the communities in which they live for the common good. This is achieved through our high expectations of all staff and reflected in strong leadership from school leaders, who are in turn supported and challenged by our Board of Governors. Our school community shares our high expectations for our children and through the engagement of all stakeholders, Aquinas continues to grow as a learning school.

We provide opportunities for all our students to develop and challenge them to grow in their personal journey, developing an acute awareness of Catholic Social Teaching and their role in society. This journey and growth in understanding is facilitated through a range of methods including:

- Working with St. Vincent de Paul and Trócaire – to support and understand the issues in community and wider world
- Extra-curricular activities to enhance holistic development
- Opportunities to take part in religious celebrations and show leadership – St. John Paul II award, Faith in Action group, prefects, mentors to younger pupils, Eucharistic Ministers, Lectors, musicians etc.
- Faith Retreats
- Sharing our facilities with the local community
- Involvement in Shared Education

### **The Voluntary Principle**

The Governors have a firm sense of leading Aquinas and helping set the strategic direction of the school, providing support and challenge to the school Principal and leadership team. The Governors have particular responsibilities often exercised through sub committees, to deal with curriculum, pastoral care, finance and admissions, with certain governors involved in child protection. The Governors help construct the School Development Plan, outlining priorities for upcoming years. All staff are employed by the Board of Governors, and they are crucially involved in appointment of staff, which is of particular importance.

The functions of the Board are audited twice each year – both internally and externally – and the Board's close involvement with the school ensures that there is appropriate planning and reaction to events which may arise throughout the year.

Of key importance is the Voluntary Principle. Though all Governors serve on a voluntary basis, it is clear that devolution of decision making powers, and the associated responsibility and accountability to our Board of Governors, combined with their strong involvement with our school brings real experience and excellence in ensuring that Aquinas continues to successfully provide for the needs of all our students within our Catholic ethos.

### **Parental Choice**

What we offer and the experience of our students, clearly resonates with families in the wider community who consider Aquinas as a possible suitable post primary school for their children. We are regularly heavily oversubscribed and indeed have had to seek Y8 Temporary variations for the last 3 years and another in September 2022:

Year	Admissions No	Total Applicants	Number not offered Places	Temporary Variation in Y8
2019/20	130	237	107	20
2020/21	130	207	77	20
2021/22	150	357	207	40

The right for parents to choose a particular school for their child is enshrined in legislation and a core sentiment of Catholic Education.

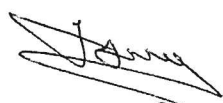
As a Catholic school it is our belief that parents should have this right to choose the school that best suits their needs and philosophical beliefs.

### **The Way Forward**

We fully recognise that there are many excellent schools throughout Northern Ireland – including schools of all management types. We know a key priority will be ensuring quality provision of education for all children. We urge the review not to lose some of what we believe to be key strengths of the current provision for nominal political or financial reasons.

Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School wishes to urge the Independent Review of Education to uphold the following key aspects in their recommendations:

1. Protect the rights of parents to choose to send their children to a Catholic School
2. Protect the rights of parents to choose, if it is their wish, an academically selective Catholic School
3. Extend the concept of the Voluntary Principle to more schools.



**Mr Terry McDaid**  
**Chair of Board of Governors**