

We gather to celebrate the achievements of our Catholic schools. We also renew our commitment to support our schools as they strive for the twin goals of enhancing faith and learning. Such renewal is always necessary so that we do not lose sight of what our schools are about, and we are able to engage in the current debates about education and highlight the outstanding contribution our schools make to the wider society.

Catholic schools exist to proclaim the gospel. Following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, they bring good news to the poor, liberty to the oppressed and a share in God's blessings to all (cf. Lk 4:18-19). For generations of Irish people, Catholic education helped us to make progress in society by providing an excellent education. That has been the mission of our schools and, thankfully, they continue to fulfil that mission in today's world.

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commitment of Catholic schools to open their doors to those in need. Our schools are manifesting the gospel mission to help those in need.

Opening our doors is of little benefit if we do not enable all children to achieve a good education. Recent government statistics, however, show that this is the case. The Minister of Education has led the debate on social inclusion by pointing out that only one third of children on free school meals gain 5 or more good GCSEs, compared with a success rate of two thirds among other children. There is a gap in attainment that needs to be closed and Catholic post-primary schools are doing so. For instance, 41% of children on free school meals in Catholic secondary schools attain this benchmark, well above the regional average. This demonstrates that Catholic schools not only welcome more children from deprived backgrounds, but help more of them to achieve excellence.

Why are Catholic schools so successful? We have a clear vision for education rooted in an understanding of each student as a child of God, loved by God and to be cherished by those who educate that person. That vision is to be shared by the whole school community – parents and pupils, teachers and support staff. Catholic schools succeed when they have the support of parents and the commitment of teachers. Those teachers need to be prepared and educated, to be formed to share the vision and become an integral part of our educational community. Having an autonomous and independent Catholic institution of teacher education in the form of St Mary's University College, working in close partnership with our schools, gives the Catholic community confidence in our teachers that they will be partners with parents in putting the vision of Catholic education into practice.

We celebrate our Catholic educational system all over the world but particularly in our own communities, from nursery to university level, bringing together supportive parents, committed teachers and all our children. We dedicate ourselves to the task of reaching out to all in need and enabling them to excel in their education.