# Template Policy for Opting Out from Faith Formation

School Name

Date

## Introduction

XXX National School is a primary school under the patronage of **[insert denomination]**. The vision of the school is as follows:

**The following are some sentences from a number of schools' mission statements and visions. Please insert your own school's vision / mission statement or feel free to use one here.**

[To promote the full and harmonious development of all aspects of the person of the pupil including her relationship with God, with people and with the environment as we work in partnership with our parents for the welfare of our students. / It is our aim to lead our pupils towards a sense of their own worth, a pride in our school and town and develop a sense of the love of God. / Committed to the development of the whole person, they hand on Christian values and a shared Irish culture to the next generation. / The vision that underpins a Christian education is rooted in the life of Jesus Christ and emphasises that every person is made in the image of God./ The school aims to promote the full and harmonious development of all aspects of the person: intellectual, physical, cultural, moral and spiritual, including a living relationship with God and other  
people. / The school models and promotes a philosophy of life inspired by a belief in God and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.]

While the faith of the school permeates throughout the school day, there are 2.5 hours per week dedicated to discrete faith formation classes .in the school. This school uses the **[Grow in Love / Do this in Memory / Goodness Me Goodness You / etc.]**  programme.

The school recognises that **[some/many]** of our families do not come from a **[insert denominational]** background. We strive to treat all of our children with respect in our school throughout the day. However, we also recognise that the message delivered from the school's faith formation programme can be counter to the belief system of some families. We, therefore, offer families an option to "opt out" of these lessons.

The school also recognises the diversity of its staff. In line with the [Employment Equality Acts 1998–2015](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1998/en/act/pub/0021/index.html), no teacher or other member of staff will be discriminated against because of their own religious beliefs.

***Either....***

While all staff are expected to uphold the general ethos of the school, it is unfair to expect its teachers to provide faith formation in a faith they do not share. In order to accommodate all out teachers, provisions will be made.

***Or...***

However, all staff are expected to uphold the ethos of the school and must take part in all aspects of the school day.

## Rationale

There are a number of factors that make this policy important for every denominational primary school in Ireland.

The Department of Education and Skills will be publishing its new schools admissions bill soon. Schools will have to outline their practices in terms of how they accommodate children that opt out of faith formation.

The above is grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that "Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status." It also states that "parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child’s parents, legal guardians, or family members." Articles 14 and 30 also refer to a child's right to freedom of religion.

Furthermore, the Irish Constitution (Article 44.2.4) makes express provision for the right to opt-out:

Legislation providing State aid for schools shall not discriminate between schools under the management of different religious denominations, nor be such as to affect prejudicially the right of any child to attend a school receiving public money without attending religious instruction at that school.

Also, Section 30 (2) -(e) of the Education Act 1998 permits you to opt your child out of any subject in the curriculum.

The [Employment Equality Acts 1998–2015](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1998/en/act/pub/0021/index.html) outlaw discrimination in a wide range of employment and employment-related areas. These include recruitment and promotion; equal pay; working conditions; training or experience; dismissal and harassment including sexual harassment. The legislation defines discrimination as treating one person in a less favourable way than another person based on any of the following 9 grounds including religion. (Employment Equality Act, 1998)

In light of these, this school sets out the following policies with regards to faith formation during the school day.

## Content of Policy

This policy covers situations where a pupil or teacher opts not to participate in faith formation classes or certain religious practices. It does not cover the following areas:

* Enrollment: it is assumed that the child is enrolled in the school before wishing to opt out. The Enrollment Policy describes how the school prioritises enrollment of pupils.
* Other Curriculum Subjects: The ethos of the school must permeate throughout the school day. This means that many subjects must follow the patron's religious values, including programmes such as Relationships and Sexual Education (RSE), Stay Safe, Walktall, etc.
* Iconography: this school is patronised by the **[insert faith]**. This means that symbolism of the school's faith can be found around the school building.

## Timing of Faith Formation Lessons

Pick one of the following.

* Faith formation classes take place at **[insert time]** each day.
* The time of Faith formation classes is at the discretion of the class teacher. The class teacher will provide information on the time of this class to families at the beginning of the school year, and if there are changes to this, he/she will inform families as soon as possible.
* Faith Formation classes are staggered throughout the school day to allow for children who are opted out to go to a classroom where faith formation is not taking place.
* Faith Formation classes take place at the **[beginning/end]**of the school day to allow families to **[drop in/pick up]** their children **[to/from]** school.

## Provisions made for children that are opted out

This section will vary from school to school. The following are suggestions depending on the context. It is highly recommended that there is a consistent approach throughout the school to avoid any confusion or possible resentment towards particular teachers.

* Unfortunately, the school does not have the required resources to accommodate children that are opted out of Faith Formation classes.
* While children will not be expected to take part in the lessons, they must remain in their seat. No alternative work will be provided for them by the teacher and parents are asked not to provide any alternative work for this time as it may be distracting to the rest of the class.
* While children will not be expected to take part in the lessons, they must remain in their seat. Alternative work will be provided for them by the teacher in consultation with parents, which will be of a non-religious nature.
* While children will not be expected to take part in the lessons, they must remain in their seat. No alternative work will be provided for them by the teacher. Parents can provide alternative work for this time as long as it will not be distracting to the rest of the class.
* Children will be seated at the back of the classroom and will be given work on the computers. They will wear headphones for these activities in order to be able to focus on this work but also so that they are not party to the faith formation class in the classroom.
* Children will be accommodated with alternative work in another teacher's classroom. The work will be provided by **[the class teacher / the parent/guardian]**
* Parents/guardians will be expected to remove their children from school during faith formation classes. No alternative arrangements will take place if children remain in school and they will be expected to take part in the lessons. The teacher will do their best to include them in the lesson with respect to their beliefs.
* As Faith Formation classes take place at the **[start/end]** of the school day, it is expected that children that are opted out will not be in school for these classes. Therefore, no alternative work will be provided.

## Provisions made for teachers that are opted out

This section is relevant to teachers where provisions are made. There is no need for this section for schools that do not accommodate their staff. Please see similar sections and delete as appropriate.

All staff are expected to uphold the ethos of the school and must ensure that pupils are given an education in line with the school's ethos. However, where a teacher wishes to opt out from teaching discrete Faith Formation classes, the school will allow him/her to swap with another teaching colleague for this class. The teacher can explain to the children that he/she is not of the faith of the school and the teacher may be asked to speak about his/her faith to other classes, should he/she be comfortable doing so.

## Prayers

In line with the ethos of the school, prayers are said throughout the school day. If a child is opted out of faith formation, he/she will not be expected to join in with the prayers. However, a teacher will not be expected to intervene should the child join in with these prayers. This is to avoid singling out and embarrassing the child.

Where a teacher or other staff member wishes to opt out of faith formation, he/she will be expected to supervise the class while prayers are being said but will not be expected to say the prayers with the class.

## Uniform

Applicable to schools where there is a uniform AND the uniform contains religious iconography.

The school uniform contains **[insert religious iconography]**. All children must wear the full uniform including the crest **OR**Pupils that have opted out of Faith Formation / religion do not have to wear the crest.

Children from minority backgrounds may **[not]** wear **[insert clothing here]**.

## Assemblies

Assemblies in our school often take on a religious theme in line with the ethos of the school. Prayers and religious songs are sung during this time. As all members of the school community are expected to attend the assembly, no pupil or teacher or other staff member is exempt from assembly.

## Nativity Plays

Obviously the above title should change to whatever performances are done in the school. This section can be adapted to the needs of the school.

This school puts on a Christmas Play based on the nativity every year. The play may be a direct retelling of the story of the birth of Jesus Christ or a story with a theme linked to this story. Children that are opted out of faith formation will not be expected to take part in these performances. However, they will remain in class while children are prepared for these performances. Should a family wish for their children to take part in these performances, they should inform the school in writing.

Teachers can discuss with the principal should they wish to put on a non-religious performance at Christmas time. As long as the performance does not counter the ethos of the school, this may be allowed.

**OR**

Due to the ethos of the school, all teachers are expected to prepare their pupils for a religious-themed Christmas performance.

## Sacraments

(only applicable to Catholic schools - please edit to the ethos of your school if appropriate)

The Sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation are a central part of a Catholic pupil's journey in school and life. Much preparation is done outside of the normal Faith Formation allotted time. Children that are opted out will have the same provisions made for them as they would for regular Faith Formation classes.

While an opted out teacher may not wish to take a sacrament class due to a conflict of conscience, the school will support any teacher that wishes to teach either 2nd or 6th class. However, the teacher will be expected to supervise some religious practices as it will not be practical for him/her to opt out of every aspect of the preparation. Decisions will be made in consultation with management and the teacher.

It is practice for the school to take a photograph of the Communion class each year. While the school does not wish to cause offence to families, it is impossible to include children that are opted out of religion in this photograph.

**OR**

In order to be as inclusive as possible, a photograph of the class will take place in the school with children in their school uniform. This ensures that all children in the class will be in the photograph.

## Graduation

In general, the school's graduation ceremony will have a religious aspect to it. Children that are opted out will not be expected to take part in the prayer service but will be expected to attend the ceremony. Teachers and staff will also be expected to attend the full ceremony. Please see section above regarding photographs.

## Charity Work

The school supports a number of charitable organisations. Many of them are linked to **[insert faith group and change examples, which are based on Christian schools]**, for example, Trócaire and the Shoebox Appeal. Children that are opted out will not be forced to participate.

## Newsletters

In line with the school's ethos, the school newsletter may contain messages, notes, prayers or information about Faith Formation in school. The school does not have the capacity to create separate newsletters for parents of children that are opted out.

## Visits from Church Leaders

The **[priest/reverend/Imam/rabbi]** often visits classes to talk to the children throughout the school year. The school cannot plan for these visits but will do their utmost to ensure that the **[priest/reverend/Imam/rabbi]**is aware of any children that are opted out of religion in the school. However, the school cannot take any responsibility for interactions between the faith leaders and children in the school.

Where rituals take place [**(such as replace with something else if not appropriate: dispensing of ashes on Ash Wednesday)]** the **[priest/reverend/Imam/rabbi]**will be informed of the wishes of families that are opted out. In very rare circumstances, an error may arise, and while the school will do their very best to ensure that no upset is caused, it cannot take responsibility for any such error performed by the visit of a **[priest/reverend/Imam/rabbi]**.

Teachers are not expected to take part in any rituals, which go against their own conscience.

## Visits to [Church/Mosque/Synagogue] or other religious buildings/venues.

This section will vary from school to school. The following are suggestions depending on the context. It is highly recommended that there is a consistent approach throughout the school to avoid any confusion or possible resentment towards particular teachers.

* Where possible, the school will inform parents/guardians of any visits to the **[Church/Mosque/Synagogue]**. However, this is not always possible.
* The school will always contact parents/guardians before any visit to the **[Church/Mosque/Synagogue]**. Parents/guardians will be invited to collect their children at this time. If parents/guardians cannot collect their children, the children must attend the **[Church/Mosque/Synagogue]**. However, they will not be expected to take part in the service.
* The school will always contact parents/guardians before any visit to the **[Church/Mosque/Synagogue]**. Children will remain in school and be supervised in a different classroom.
* Teachers or other staff members that opt out are not expected to attend church services. He/she will supervise another class while a colleague will supervise in his/her place.
* There is no provision for a teacher or staff member to opt out of attending church services. All staff are expected to attend any visits to the **[Church/Mosque/Synagogue]**.

## Religion Inspections

Schools are sometimes inspected by the patron with regards to their provision of faith formation. Often these inspections are unannounced and inspectors will be informed of any child opted out in the classroom where possible. Unfortunately, there is no provision for teachers to opt out of religion inspections.

## Children with Additional Needs

All children, including those with additional needs are covered by this policy. Where a child with additional needs has full access to a Special Needs Assistant, there may be flexibility to withdraw the child during Faith Formation classes.

## Representation on Board of Management

Teachers that are opted out will not be excluded from being eligible as the staff representative on the School's Board of Management.

## Ratification

This policy was drawn up by the Board of Management of **[insert school name]** in conjunction with staff, parents and pupils and was ratified at a Board Meeting on **[insert date here]**.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (Chairperson) Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_