

# Genesis

CEP  
SSS  
APTCS

*Articulating a new positioning for Catholic education in Ireland.*

22 September 2021



The focus of today's session

**Overview of the primary research conducted in 2019.  
Implications of the research for strategy.  
Recommendations on the 'brand narrative'.**

- 1. Objectives and methodology**
- 2. What we mean by 'brand'**
- 3. Being Catholic in contemporary Ireland**
- 4. School choice, satisfaction, and divestment**
- 5. What makes a school 'Catholic'?**
- 6. A Catholic advantage?**
- 7. Conclusions & considerations**
- 8. Positioning and brand narrative**

Genesis

Objectives, and  
methodology

1



**DEVELOP A ‘REPUTATIONAL  
(BRAND) STRATEGY’ TO DEFINE  
AND ARTICULATE WHAT  
‘CATHOLIC’ COULD MEAN IN  
MODERN IRISH EDUCATION.**

To do so through a process of consultation, engagement and reflection with those involved and committed.

**1 Kick-off workshop**  
with PWG

**Briefing meetings** with  
Seamus Mulcrony, David  
Kennedy, Alan Hynes, Ferdia  
Kelly, John Curtis, Deirdre  
Matthews

**Review** of relevant papers,  
reports and documentation  
provided by PWG and  
interviewees

**12 Depth interviews**  
with Principals  
(7 Primary, 5 Secondary)

**14 Depth interviews**  
with Chairpersons  
(8 Primary, 6 Secondary)

**5 Depth interviews**  
with key Stakeholders  
(INTO, IPPN, ASTI, DoE, Bishop  
of Kildare & Leighlin)

**4 Focus groups**  
with parent (2 in Mullingar, 2 in  
Dublin)

**500 Parents Surveyed**  
Nationally Representative  
telephone survey

**Desk research**  
to inform thinking and thought  
process



# Genesis



What we mean when  
we talk about 'brand'

2

1. Our sense of how we will **position** ourselves in our sector to achieve our goals and objectives
2. Brand acts as a beacon to guide our **strategic** choices about how we compete with alternatives
3. Provides a call to action for the organisation to **galvanise**, work together, and deliver on shared objectives
4. Defines what we will stand for in the **minds of the people we are trying to reach**
5. Sets out a 'proposition' (essentially, a **promise**) for the people we are trying to reach
6. **Motivates and mobilises** people to choose us over alternatives
7. Positively **engages** all key stakeholders
8. Determines how we will **deliver** our proposition on a sustainable basis

**WE ALL BELONG HERE  
IN THIS PLACE. AT THIS TIME**  
WE BELONG NOT BECAUSE OF WHO WE ARE OR WHERE WE COME FROM  
BEING HERE MEANS BELONGING  
BELONGING MEANS KNOWING YOU'RE PART OF A COMMUNITY  
A COMMUNITY THAT HAS A PLACE FOR ALL  
WHERE POTENTIAL IS NURTURED  
WHERE INDIVIDUALS BECOME TEAMS  
WHO HONOUR THE LEGACY OF THOSE WHO WENT BEFORE  
AND STRIVE TO BUILD A LEGACY OF THEIR OWN

**SOME OF US PLAY**  
SOME OF US USED TO PLAY. SOME OF US NEVER PLAYED

**WE ALL BELONG**  
BELONGING MEANS HAVING A VOICE  
MEANS BEING ABLE TO SAY WHAT YOU THINK IS RIGHT

**BEING LISTENED TO**  
BELONGING MEANS RESPECTING EACH OTHER  
MEANS BEING THERE FOR EACH OTHER

**ON THE PITCH. OFF THE PITCH**  
BELONGING MEANS ROLLING OUR SLEEVES UP AND DOING WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE  
WE ALL BELONG WHETHER IT'S OUR FIRST DAY OR OUR HUNDRETH YEAR  
WE ALL BELONG HERE BECAUSE THIS PLACE BELONGS TO US ALL

**OUR GAA**  
**WHERE WE ALL BELONG**





Genesis

# Being Catholic in contemporary Ireland

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# The spectrum of being 'a Catholic' in Ireland today

The complicated relationship means there is flexibility and fluidity in the term

Nos.

Defined by

## Spectrum of belief and practice

CSO – 9.6%

Our Sample - 13%

46%

20%

22%

No Belief or No Practice

Belief with minimal or occasional practice

Belief with regular practice

Regular Mass attendance

- Lapsed / agnostic / atheist – multiple self-definitions
- Reject institution and teachings
- Dislike Church involvement in any / all public institutions – education, health etc
- Often feel 'frustrated' with lack of diversity or choice in schooling

- Card carrying Catholic
- Catholic with a 'small c'
- Belief in Jesus, and God
- Belief in Christian values
- Believe that Christian, and Catholic values form the basis of their (and their children's) morality, and moral judgement
- Belief in the positive power of religious practice
- Belief that religion is powerful in a time of need
- Question elements of Catholic practice and teachings
- More likely to feel that general Mass doesn't 'speak to them', or feel relevant – attend on occasion, at festival time (Christmas / Easter), and sacraments
- Conviction, not convention
- Like the 'best parts', but 'choice' is very important

- Catholic with a 'capital C'
- Power of the sacraments
- Power of confession
- Power of self-reflection, and sacrifice
- Spiritual and social connection of parish involvement

- More likely to have greater adherence to the Church's teachings on all areas

These two groupings have a shared belief in the power and benefit of having a Christian foundation to live life, but, with a scepticism of rigid, perceived negative institutional instruction from 'the Church'

## How it feels to be a Catholic in modern Ireland

Catholics often no longer feel confident expressing their religiosity

Many discussed feeling **embarrassed**, and even ashamed, to admit to being a *practicing* Catholic.

Many spoke of being wary of mentioning it, or talking about it in social / work environments (including schools!) to **avoid** 'difficult conversations'

Many use '**distancing**' tactics – 'I believe in a God / a higher power / in Christian values', but not 'Catholicism', 'the Catholic Church'

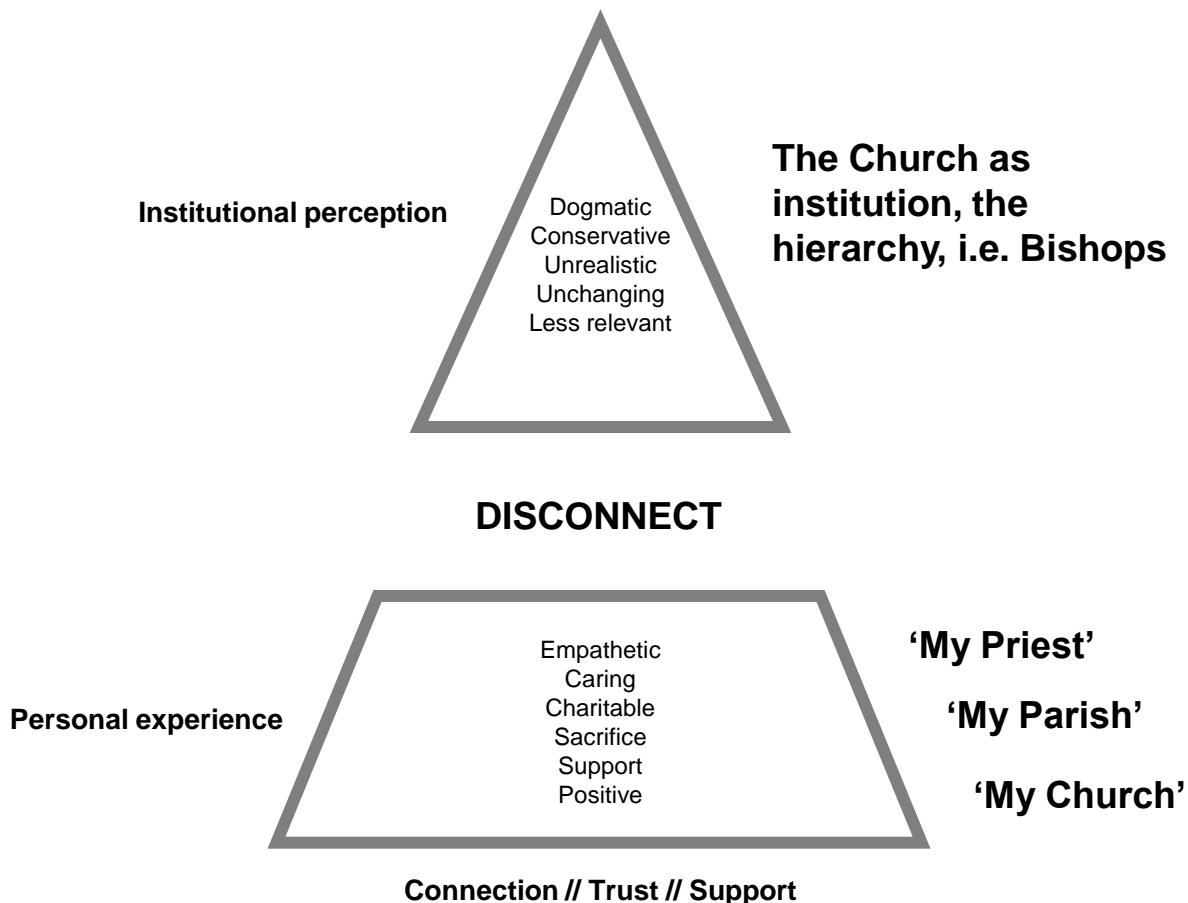
Many felt that the Church were often a 'representation' for **all that was wrong with Irish society in the past** (and to a certain extent, the 'present') – male dominated, punitive towards women, traditional / conservative, controlling, abusive, 'deaf' (does not listen to lay), closed (*brushing under the carpet*)

However, for many, there is a clear **delineation between the institutional experience and the personal experience** of Catholicism, and the Church

At the personal level, there is often a very different experience of what it means to be a Catholic, and for many, it represents the Church and Catholicism on its best day – caring, charitable, supportive etc.

There were some examples of parishes where the local Church's values and behaviours were more in line with the 'old institution', but these were typically led by older, more socially conservative priests.

**Many 'mourn' the fact that the representation of the Church and Catholicism in the public sphere (media, debates etc) is the 'institutional' face**





# Catholicism, however, can still be an important *cultural* component for many Irish families

Recognition that many lean on their faith in 'times of need', and for important life events

## Tradition, history, and connection

- Parents have a strong desire to **'pass on a solid tradition'** – something that is unwavering in a world that is often uncertain
- Catholicism can act as **a marker of reflection for the most important moments in life** – birth, marriage, death, Christmas with family etc. They recognise that this may be 'hypocritical', but they don't want their Church to turn on them for retaining a more selective version of their faith
- In conversation, some parents told us they believe in the power, (sometimes beauty), of Mass, and its ability to create space and time for reflection, and they want to be able to pass this on to their children.
- Belief that the benefits of what Catholicism, and Catholic practice can bring is:
  - Reflection
  - Stability / grounding, in an uncertain world
  - Support
  - Moral values (right from wrong)
  - Social connection
  - Charity / empathy
  - Anchoring
  - Values and ideals





## A key strength of raising children in the Catholic faith is the building of resilience

It acts as a solid foundation in what is uncertain times

### The building of resilience

Many parents point to a very contemporary issue for their children – a dearth of meaning, focus on material goods, and a relative **'emptiness'** in much of what is seen by their children as aspirational – celebrity / fame, money / material wealth, accumulation of things, self / ego-centric, fixation on looks / extreme health / dieting, social media culture etc

Parents worry about **anxiety, bullying,** (as well as depression), if not amongst their own children, then amongst their peers and social circles.

Parents believe that there is now a **'lack of resilience'** amongst a younger generation as they lack attachment to any kind of higher purpose or reason. The impact is that it can make **'times of crisis'** overwhelmingly difficult.

For parents across the 'belief spectrum', the values of a Christian faith (tolerance, respect for one another, kindness, forgiveness), and the community that comes with Church, was felt to build the networks, the purpose, and the **resilience to help in a time of need.**

*I feel what this generation are in danger of missing out on is that building of resilience...something bigger than themselves, their phones! Something that they can return to in dark times. That's when the Church really comes into its own*





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**School choice,  
satisfaction,  
and divestment**

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# Statistical Snapshots

1. Those who 'never go to Mass', or only go for sacramental events (1 in 5) are less likely to be satisfied with school choice, will place far less emphasis on any form of religious practice or faith formation, and will be more likely to want a multi/non-denominational choice of school, and more likely to want to restrict the Church in the sphere of education.

2. **Perhaps surprisingly, Dublin, and 'city regions' do not seem to differ in any significant way when it comes to satisfaction in relation to school choice, satisfaction of current school, and likelihood to have chosen an alternative type of school (multi/non denominational). They were broadly in line with the rest of the country.**

3. **People living in cities were somewhat more likely to agree that the Church should have 'no role' in influencing the ethos of the school; however, they also over-indexed when it came to wanting the Church to play a more active role – showing that cities can be places of extremes.**

4. Two particular patterns emerged in the data.

The first - women were much more likely to over-index in placing value on ethos building and religious practices than men were.

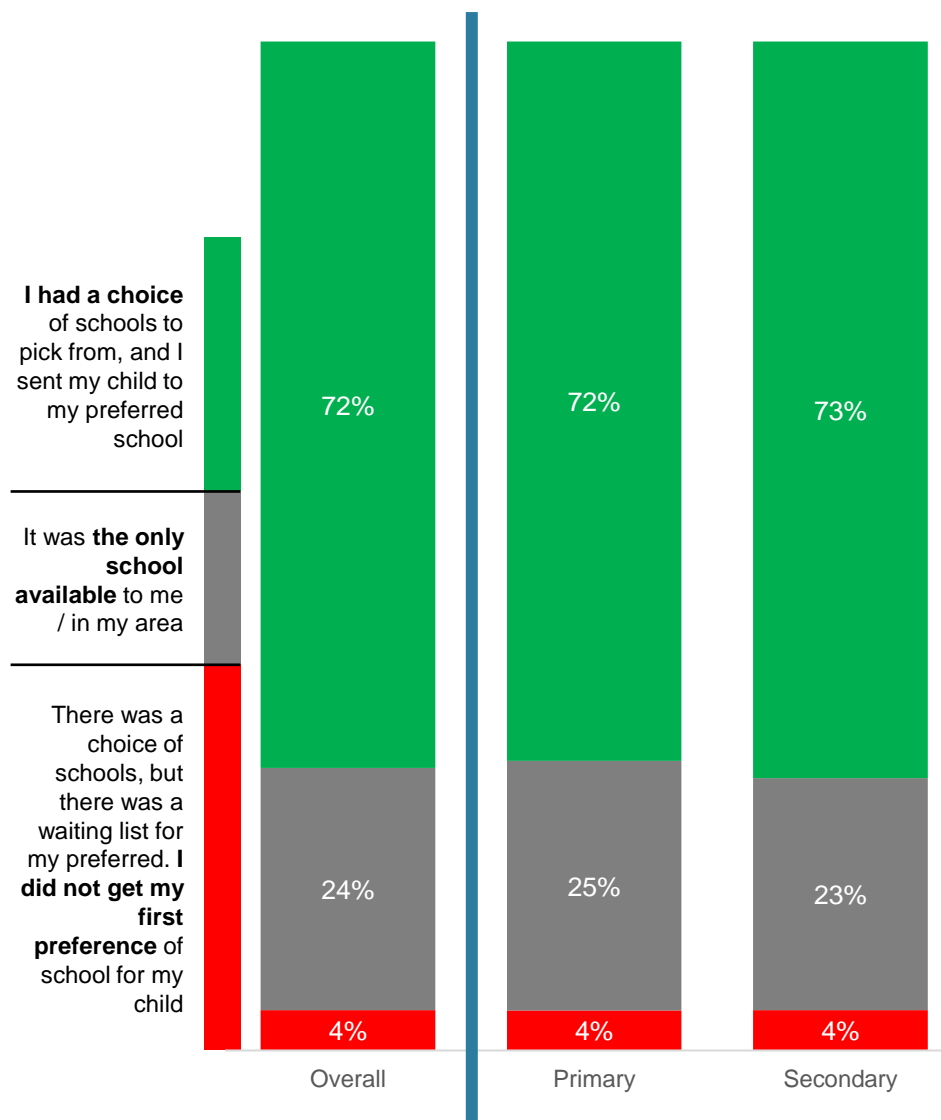
**The second – at both ends of our age spectrum – those younger (18-35), and those older (55+) – there was a tendency to be more sceptical of the Church and religious practice in schools generally.**

Possibly a result of a 'secularising process' in younger people, and a cynicism amongst older people who potentially carry more negative emotional associations around 'The Church'.

## The overwhelming majority of respondents at both primary and secondary level report that they felt they had 'choice', and could send their child to their preferred school

Even in Dublin and those living in cities, there is a broad stated agreement that parents could send their children to a preferred school.

The only divergence is those respondents who select as 'never going to Mass' (13% of the total sample) – a significantly lower percentage (59%) did not get their preferred school



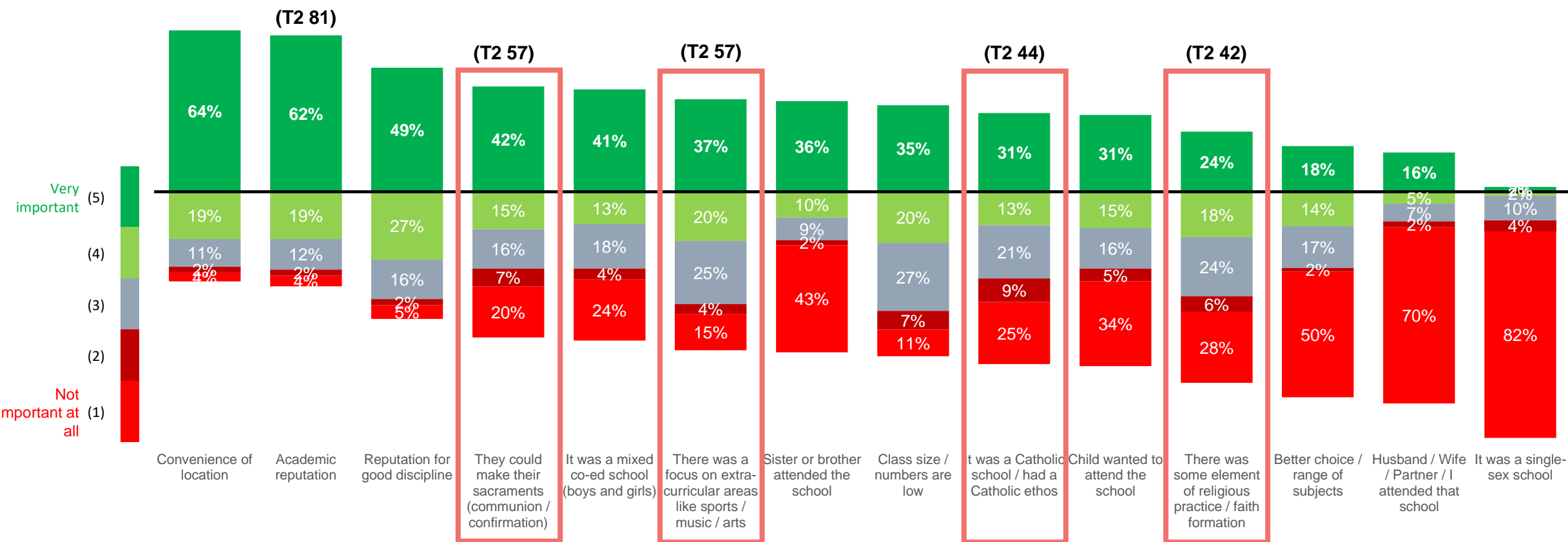
Sent child to preferred school by demographic **TOTAL**

Region	
Dublin	71%
Rest of Leinster	74%
Munster	69%
Connacht / Ulster	78%
Area size	
A city	70%
Town (10k plus)	81%
Rural (under 10K)	70%
Church attendance	
Mass once a week	68%
Mass once a month	82%
Sacraments and occasional Sunday Mass	73%
Sacraments only	76%
Never go to Mass	59%

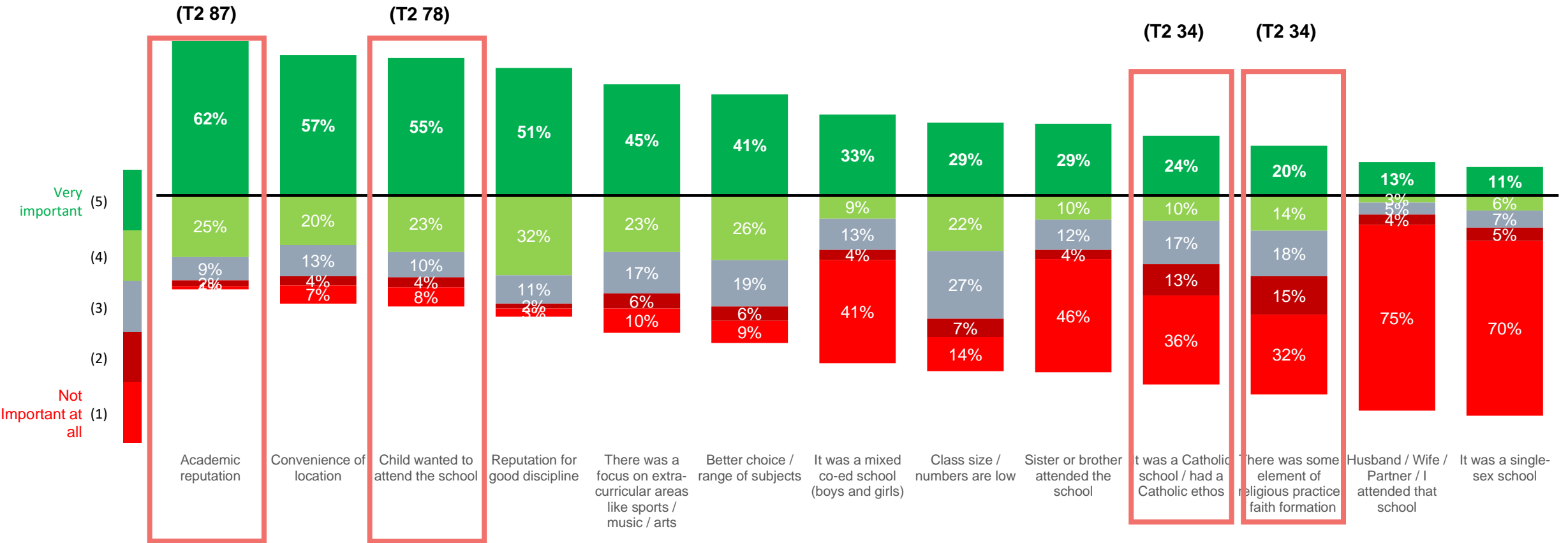
Q. When it came to choosing a school for your child, which of the following statements best applies?

When it came to factors that *influence* school choice, it's clear that location is hygiene, and academic reputation and discipline are key.

However, parents often show a somewhat contradictory or conflicted rationalisation. Only 44% rate being a 'Catholic school / having a Catholic ethos' as very important (scoring a 4 or 5), yet 57% felt that making sacraments was important (in-line with a focus on extra-curricular areas like sport and music).



The importance of being a Catholic School, or having a Catholic Ethos falls to 34% for second-level, with faith formation falling to 34% in terms of importance. Unsurprisingly perhaps, academic reputation comes to the fore as a key driver, and we start to see a greater influence of the choice of the child (2<sup>nd</sup> highest consideration with T2 score).



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**What makes  
a school  
'Catholic'?**

**5**



**What's the most  
important value you  
believe should apply  
to a school with a  
Catholic ethos?**

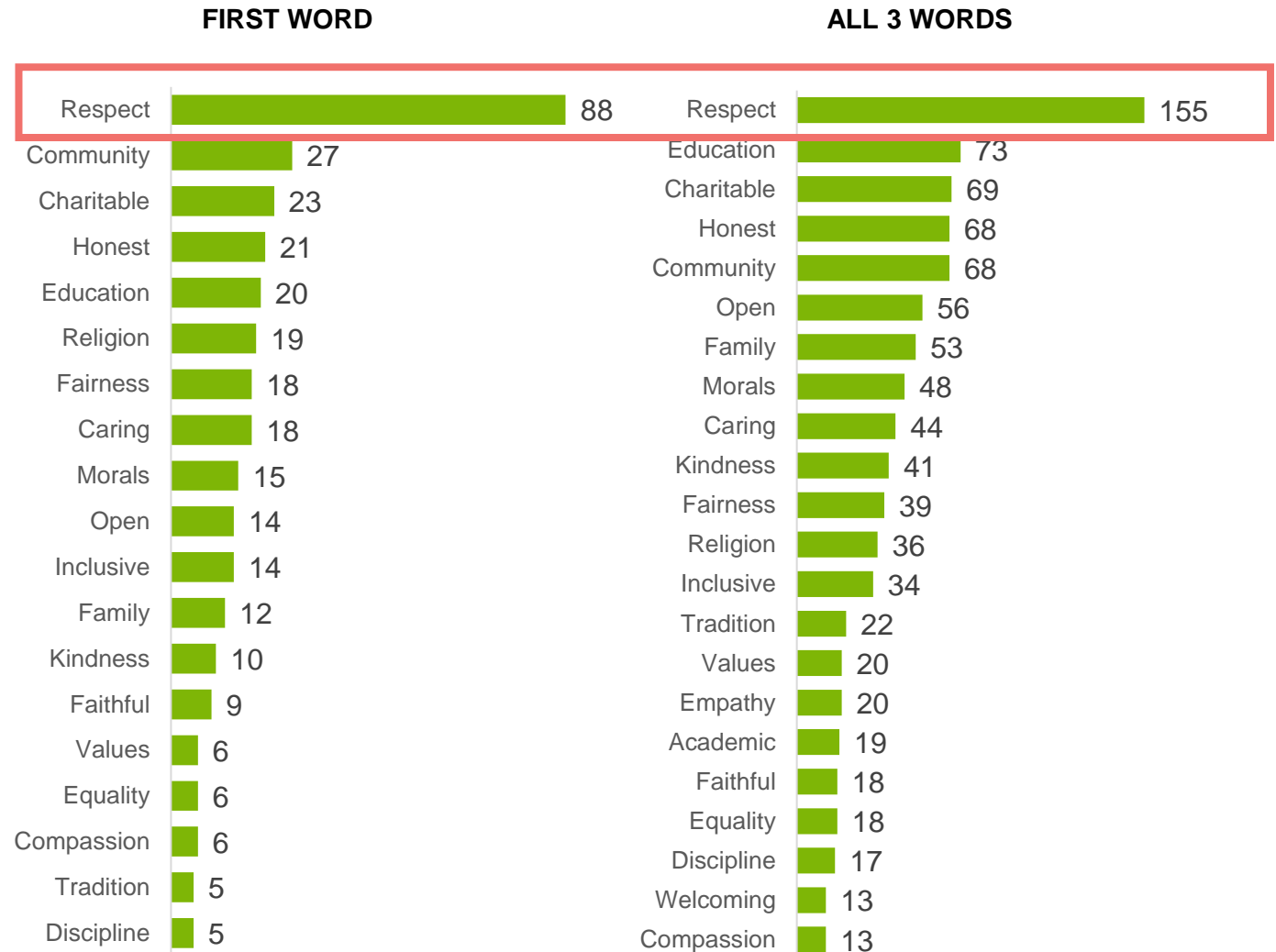
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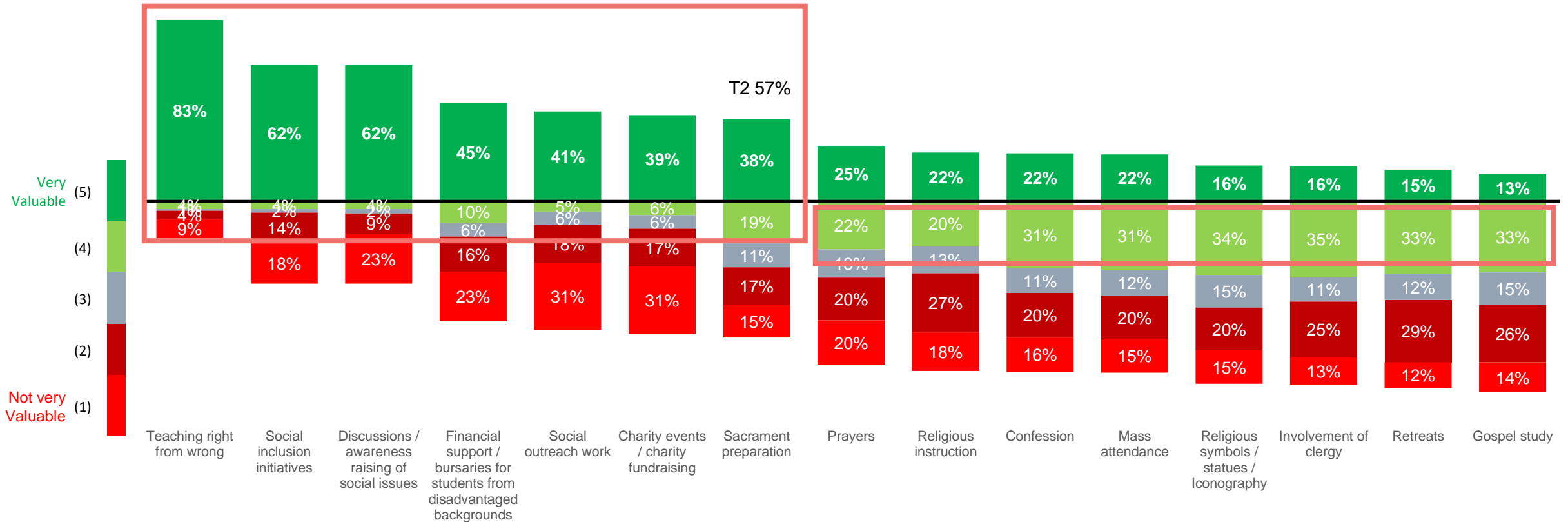


**When it comes to values that parents want to see in a school with a Catholic ethos, 'Respect', 'Charitable' 'Community', 'Honest', and 'Open' come to the fore**

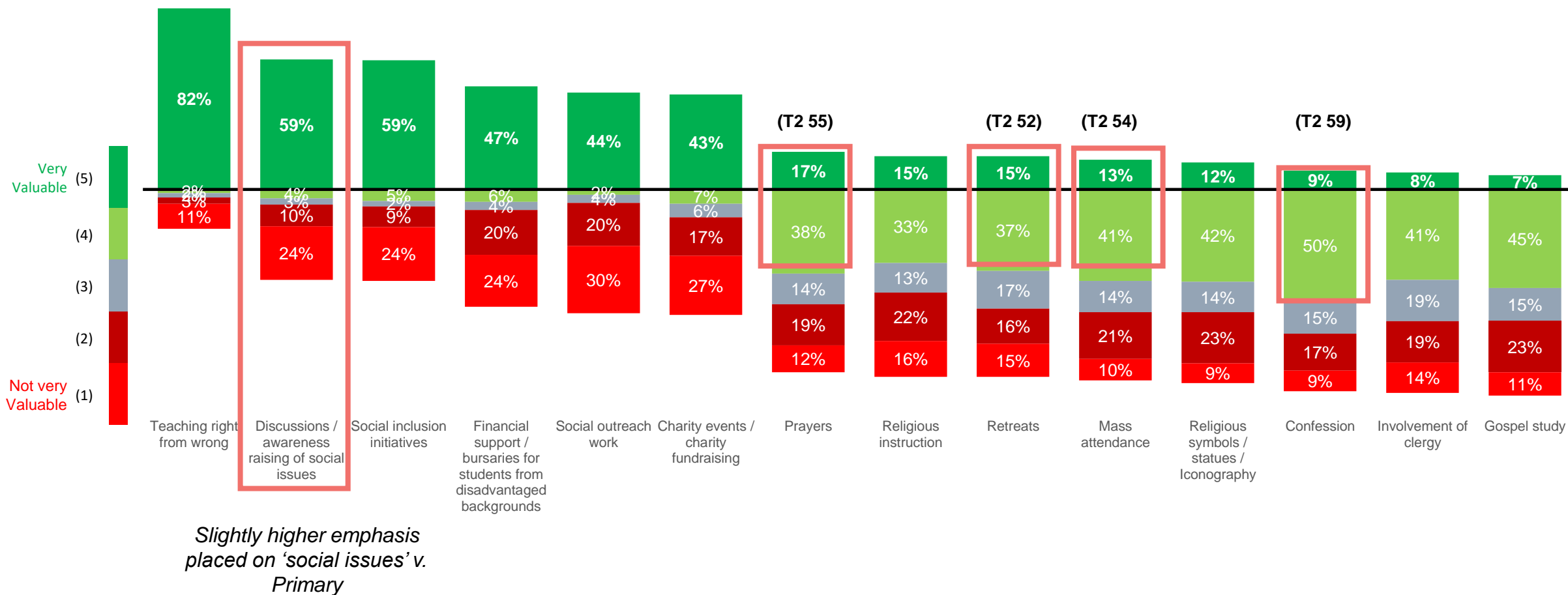
The values and ethos that parents are looking for in a school with a 'Catholic ethos' are firmly rooted in the idea of respect for one another, community, and having a caring, fair, and overall empathetic world view.



The practices and activities on which parents place the most value at primary school is rooted in them wanting to give their children the opportunity to develop a moral compass, an ethical foundation, and a social conscience. Sacrament preparation has an important role, however, we can see a fragmentation of opinion around other aspects of Catholic practice.



At second level, we see a similar theme emerging, with some fragmentation occurring across the typical Catholic practices, and, what can be interpreted as general ambivalence.





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# A Catholic advantage?

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**The emphasis in Catholic schools on the search for meaning, and their position between the family, the state and the market, means that the education provided in such schools will never be simply to further the ends of the state, nor simply to meet the needs of the market, but will continue to be an informed examination of the place of the individual within his or her community and society.**

*Paul Meany*





## What parents believe Catholicism can bring to their child's education

Foundational support, to help in 'whole-person' development, and building resilience in times of crisis

### Spiritual Guidance / Moral Foundation

A moral compass to navigate their life with, inform decisions, and be a 'solid citizen'

### Ritual and tradition

Parents believe it is both valuable and important to hold on to core rituals and traditions, namely the sacraments. Provide structure and meaning to life.

### Tools of resilience

Tools, approaches and ways of thinking (prayer, mindfulness), to help them in difficult and challenging times

### Community

Sense of belonging, social network development in the parish, a focus for giving of your time and energy – commitment

### Self Reflection

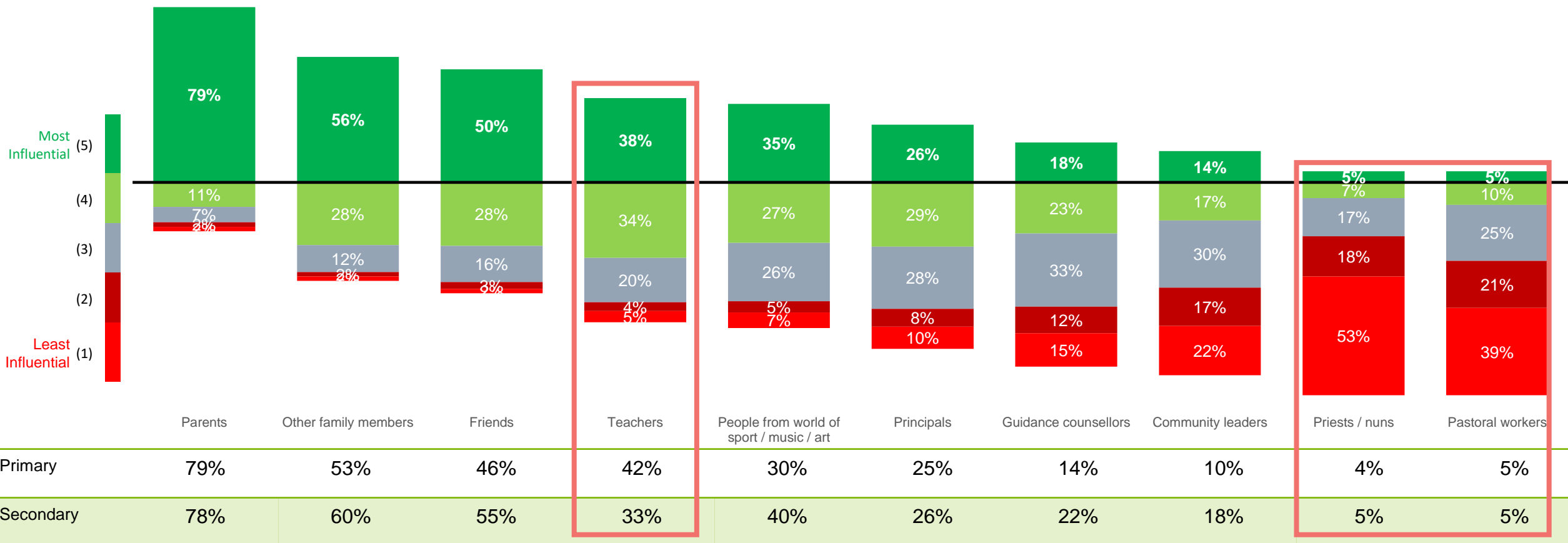
On one level – quiet / peaceful head space. Other level - opportunities to self-reflect, challenge their own behaviours, challenge 'ego' and self-centeredness

### Sense of Justice

A focus on inequalities, and a fight for justice, whether it is housing, income, or climate action



Parents consider themselves as the key 'guidance' figures for children when it comes to addressing the pressures and challenges of modern life, however, teachers are the most important when it comes to individuals outside the immediate social network of family and friends. Religious leaders are considered to have little to no influence.



*Teachers are a key actor and influencer in education when it comes to helping children*

## Catholic advantage?

**We are seeing something very contradictory, but very human, when it comes to people's general attitudes and behaviours.**

**On the one hand, parents are happy with their current school, and many are happy for the Church to have some role in developing the school ethos. They believe that Catholic schools can instil values rooted in respect, community and giving. They value that Catholic schools can excel at the teaching of right from wrong, and about social inclusion.**

**However, they are turning away from, and placing much less emphasis and importance on the traditions and practices that define 'Catholicism', and they are looking for more engagement on, and learning of, other religions and broader spiritual practices such as 'mindfulness'.**

*Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself;  
I am large, I contain multitudes.  
Walt Wittman, 1892*

Genesis

# Conclusions & considerations

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## Conclusions and considerations

1.

**There is a new interpretation of 'Catholic' for Irish people** which is about the development of a moral compass, having an awareness of social justice, social inclusion, and having care for self and for others. It is less reliant on religious practice, sacraments and tradition.

2.

**This new interpretation is both desired and relevant to parents who are choosing [and preferring] a Catholic ethos in their child's school.** Contrary to popular (media) belief, Dublin, and the rest of Leinster does not appear to differ in any major way from the rest of the country when it comes to satisfaction with school choice, satisfaction with their current school, and maintaining some role for the Church in the development of their local schools' ethos.

3.

**It is clear that the advantages a Catholic ethos can bring to a school are 'foundational' and 'developmental' in terms of morality and ethics** – building a 'whole' person of empathetic and charitable conscience, something that may not be achieved if left wholly in the hands of the state. However, will Catholic schools have to become more universalistic (and potentially 'Christian generic') when basing their ethos in relatively 'bland' language? Or will they become more Catholic 'specific' with greater emphasis on Catholic

practices – still retaining inclusivity and respectfulness for all – but more 'urgently Catholic' in their approach, their philosophy, and their expectations of students and parents?

4.

**While parents have the ultimate responsibility for helping their children address challenges, they also give schools a very clear mandate for social and moral development, and for navigating the complexity of childhood.** They are doing this in the understanding that their school holds a Catholic ethos. Teachers are a key touchpoint. They potentially hold the credibility, and the permission to help bridge a gap between moral and social conscience development, and faith formation.

5.

**The Church, and Catholicism on its 'best day'** represents a focus point of hope, community, care, charity, respect, and ultimately a sense of greater purpose that builds resilience and leads to a more fulfilling life. Parents recognise the importance of instilling this purpose, and a greater sense of 'why' for their children.

This should be seen as an invitation, and a clear opportunity for the Church, if it can seize it.

*Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how' - Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning.*



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# Positioning and brand narrative

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## Brand Strategy Summary

### Why

*Our schools exist to nourish the mind, enrich the spirit, and give support all, so that through the presence and love of God, they can live a happy, fulfilling life, full of meaning, connection, purpose, and possibility.*

### How

- Catholic schools are unique, and joyful places, that celebrate a living tradition.
- This tradition helps to guide not just *how* we teach, but also, what *inspires* us to teach, and *what* children and parents *experience* by being part of our special community.
- We instil intellectual rigour, critical questioning, and independence of thought. We encourage dialogue, understanding, empathy and respect for the self and others.
- And we invite parents and children into a way of being in the world, that helps them to notice, to see, and to experience the love of God in everything.
- This is core to our unique approach to education; it means that children and young people connect to the presence of God, everywhere. We believe this helps children grow to be resilient, confident, and purposeful, with a responsibility to care for the self and others.

### What

Yes, we educate, but we do so much more...

We help inspire.

We support.

We help to nurture.

We help to connect.



**The world** is full of wonder, excitement and opportunity, but it is also complex, challenging and sometimes fraught.

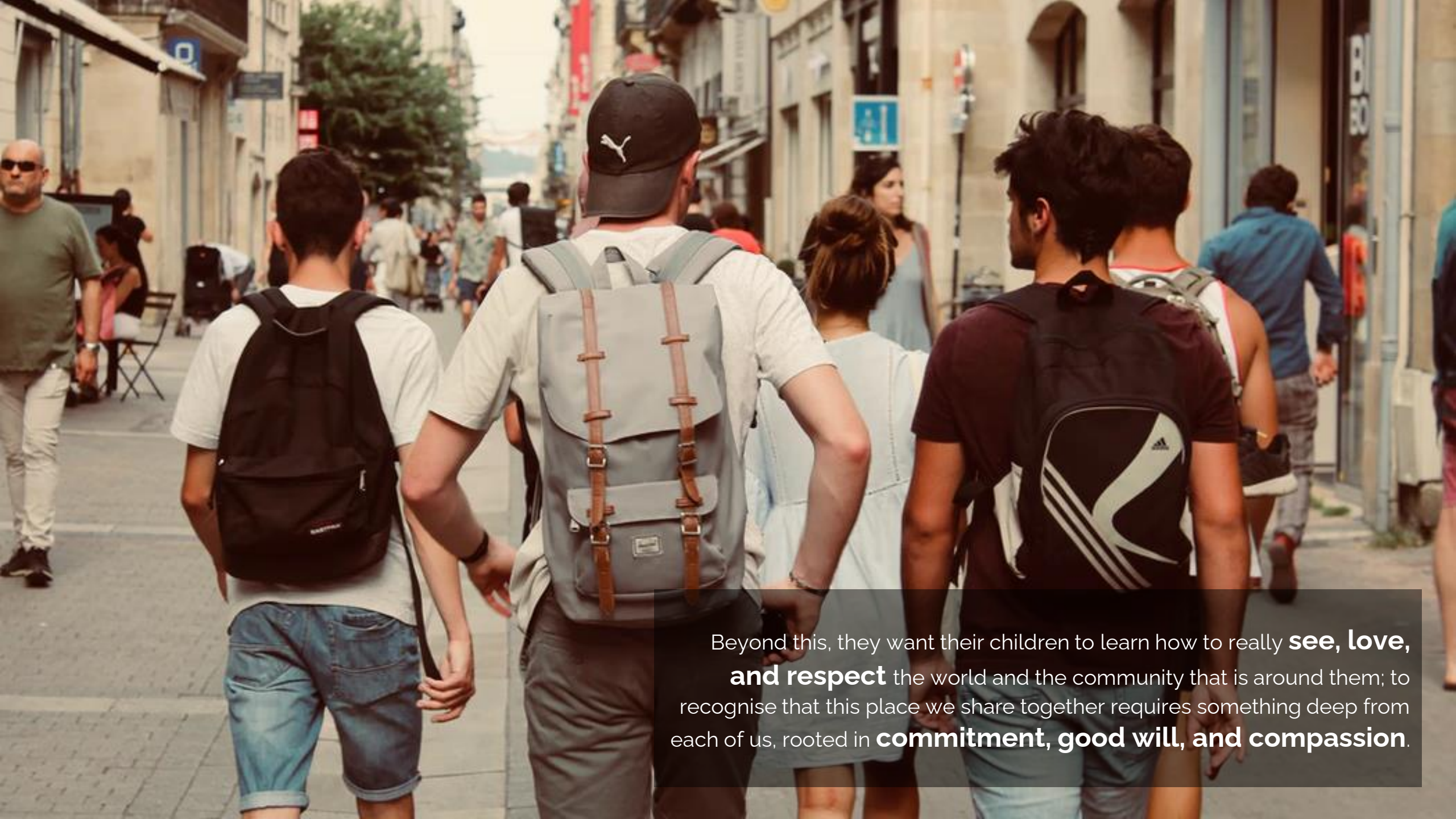




When parents think about **the role of education**, they are seeking to ensure not only that their children will learn, but that they will learn to thrive - in every sense.

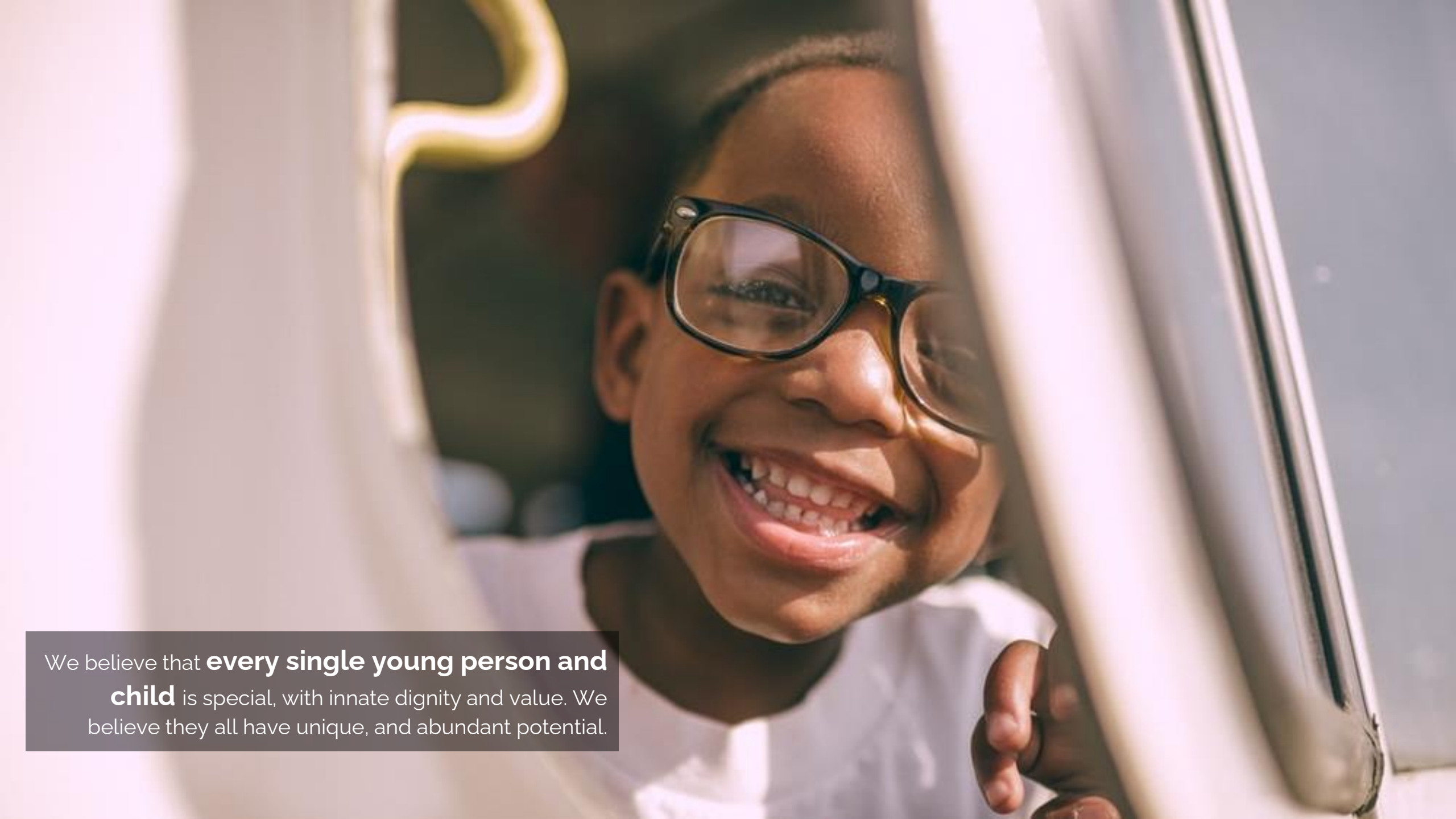
Parents want their children to **discover** their own personal purpose, so that they can become their very best selves.





Beyond this, they want their children to learn how to really **see, love, and respect** the world and the community that is around them; to recognise that this place we share together requires something deep from each of us, rooted in **commitment, good will, and compassion.**

How do we believe we can help?

A close-up photograph of a young boy with dark skin and short hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a white collared shirt. He is smiling broadly, showing his teeth, and looking out from a car window. His hand is visible, resting on the window frame. The background is slightly blurred, showing the interior of the car and a yellow handle.

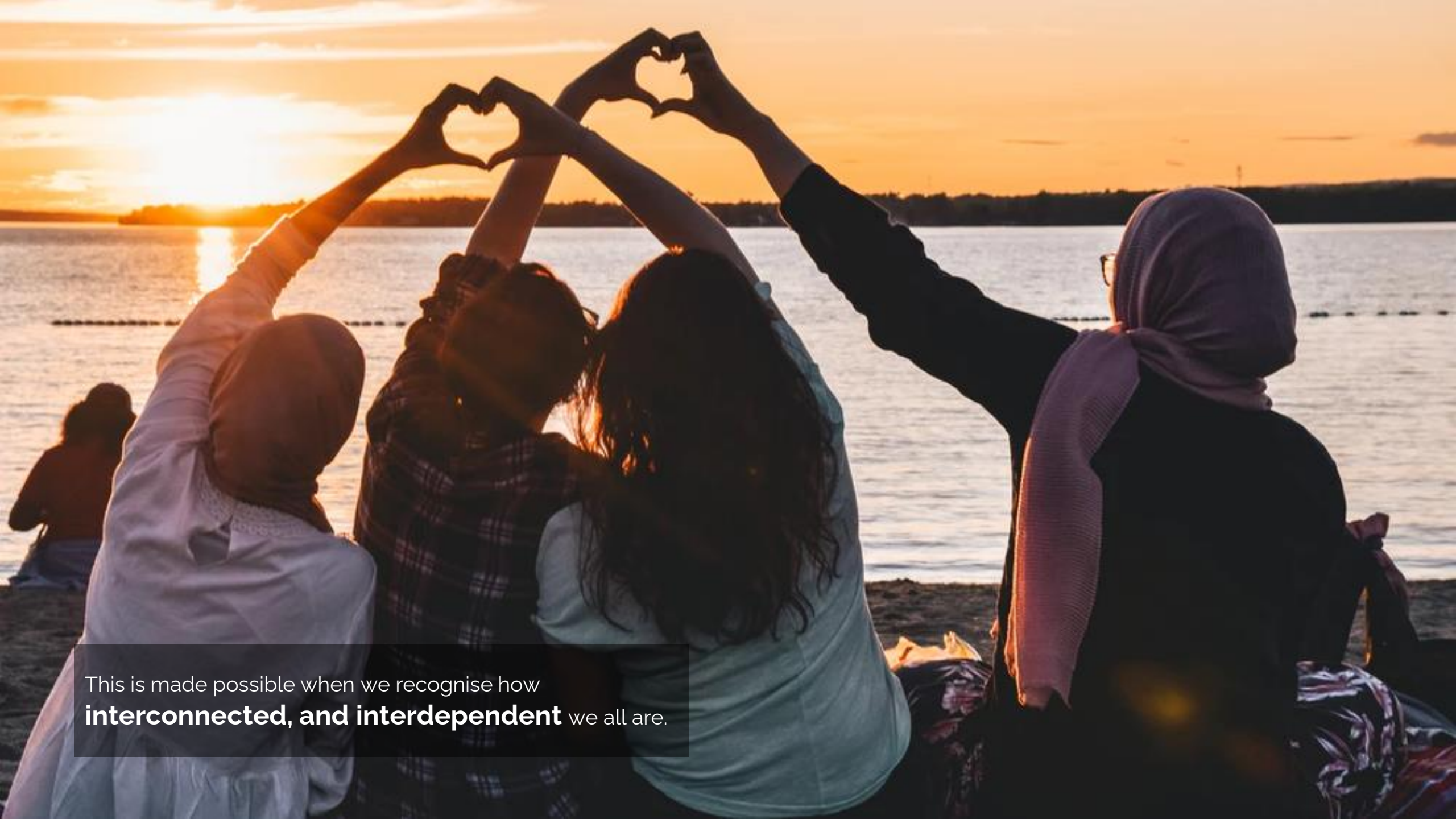
We believe that **every single young person and child** is special, with innate dignity and value. We believe they all have unique, and abundant potential.





We believe that by carefully nurturing and helping young people to develop their own potential, they can become their **very best self**, so that they can **build and live a good life**.



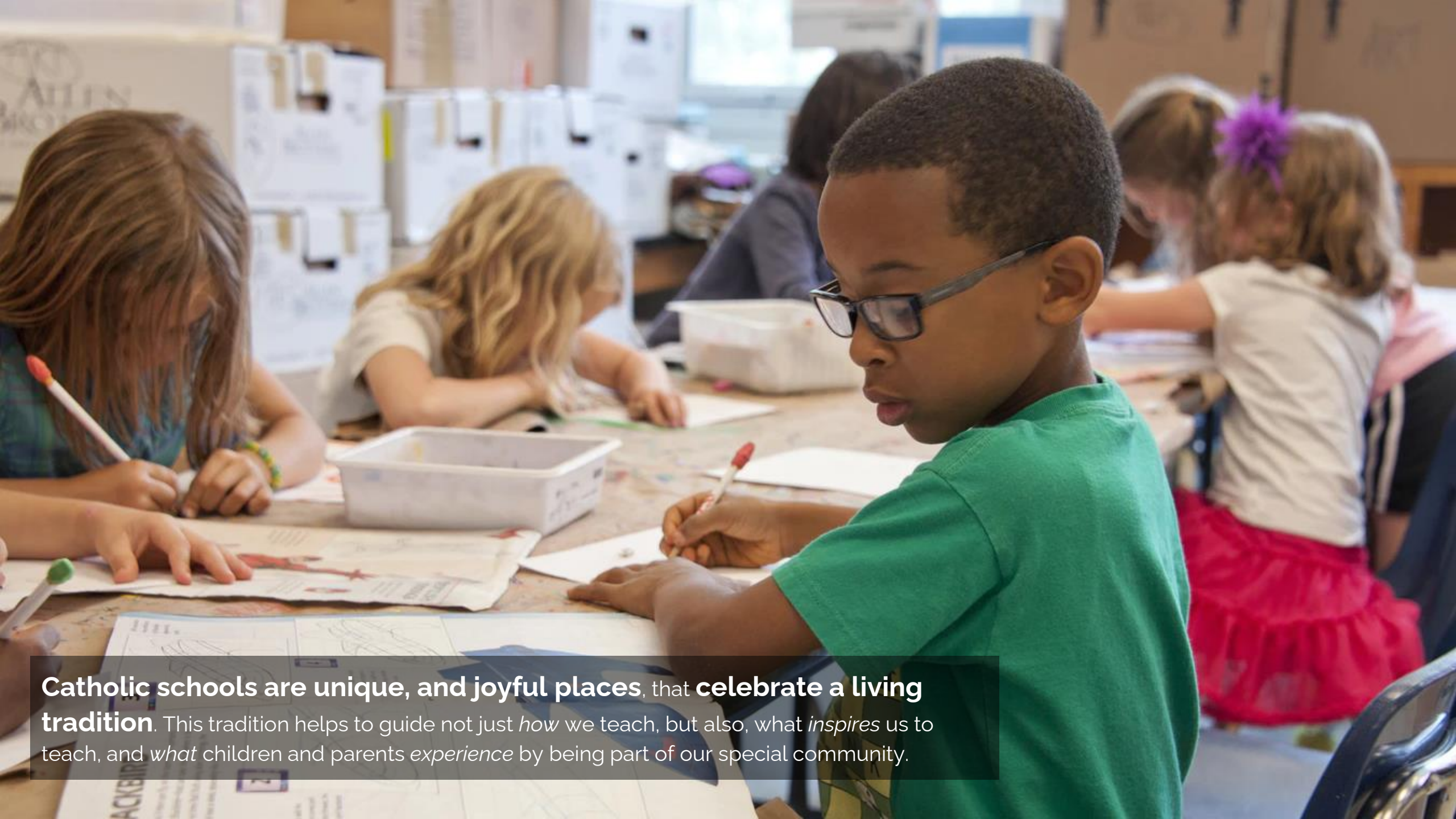


This is made possible when we recognise how **interconnected, and interdependent** we all are.

**Our schools exist to nourish the mind, enrich the spirit, and give support to all, so that through the presence and love of God, they can live a happy, fulfilling life, full of meaning, connection, purpose, and possibility.**







**Catholic schools are unique, and joyful places**, that **celebrate a living tradition**. This tradition helps to guide not just *how* we teach, but also, what *inspires* us to teach, and *what* children and parents *experience* by being part of our special community.





We instil **intellectual rigour, critical questioning, and independence of thought**. We encourage **dialogue, understanding, empathy and respect** for the self and others.





And we invite parents and children into **a way of being in the world**, that helps them to **notice, to see, and to experience the love of God in everything**.





This is core to our **unique** approach to education; it means that children and young people connect to **the presence of God, everywhere**. We believe this helps children grow to be **resilient, confident, and purposeful**, with a responsibility to care for the self and others.



Our approach...

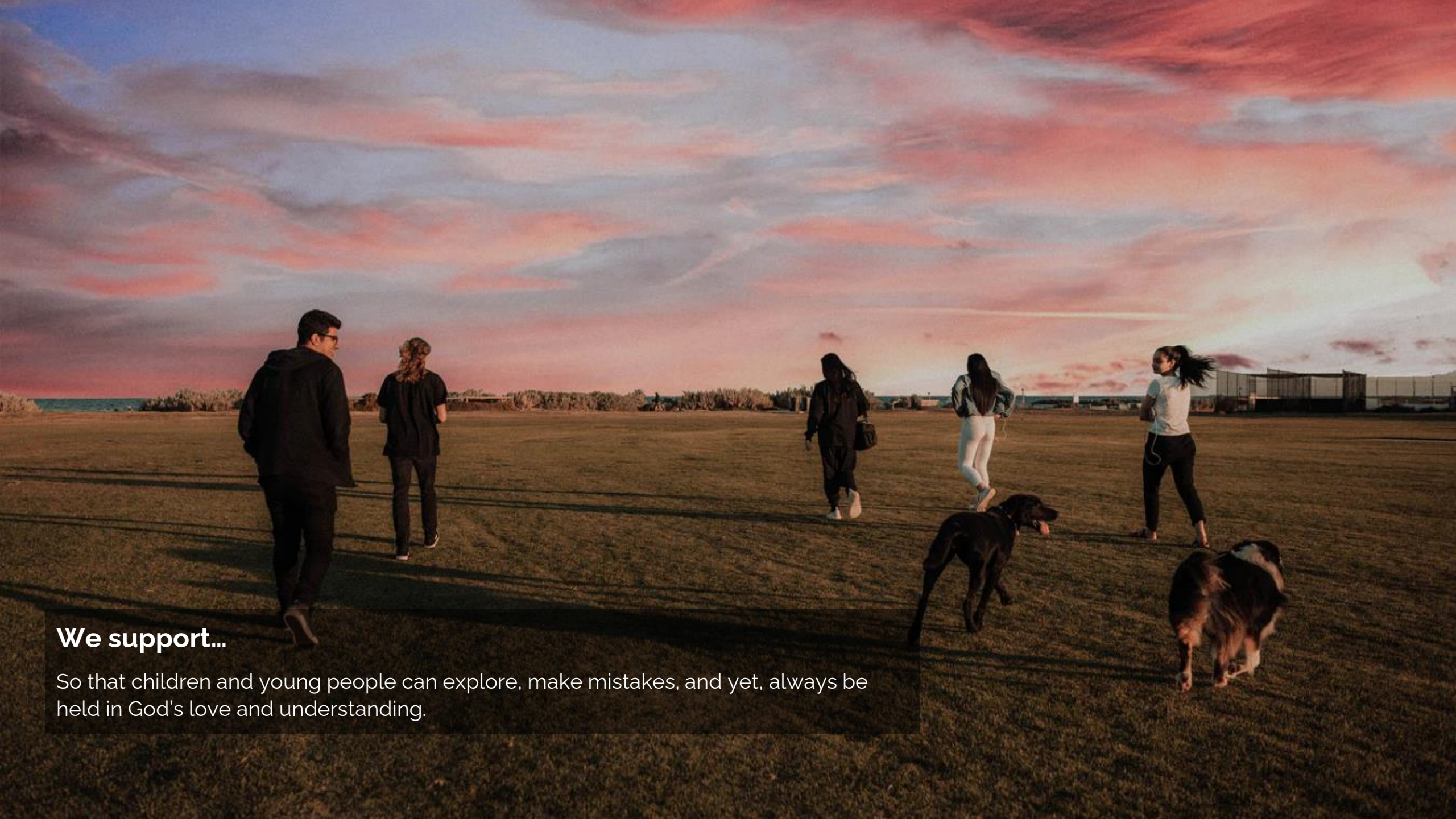




**We help inspire...**

So that children and young people can find their way in life through ever deepening and widening relationships with others, and an awareness of the love of God in their lives





**We support...**

So that children and young people can explore, make mistakes, and yet, always be held in God's love and understanding.





## **We help to nurture...**

A deep sense of gratitude, empathy, and compassion for others, while building confidence, respect, and commitment to the self.





## **We help to connect...**

Children, young people, and parents to the presence and love of God; and to connect the individual to that which is greater than themselves - to the school, the neighbourhood, the community; to the diversity of people from all backgrounds, faiths and beliefs; and to the fraternity of the world around us, so that we can all see our shared humanity.





**We are holistic** - a rich and full education that is both broad and deep, appealing to the head, heart and hands.





**We are a community** – the volunteers, educators and parents that help make our schools the special places they are.



**We are passionate** – about the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus Christ, which are as relevant today as they have ever been: justice, compassion, respect, wonder, love, and joy.





**We are inspired** – by the presence and love of God in our schools, and evident in how we act, teach, and respond.





**We are inclusive** – welcoming everyone, from everywhere. Seeing all, and hearing their voices.



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