

KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EDUCATE TOGETHER AND VEC SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOLS

Differences between any two school models can be best understood by visiting the two different schools and experiencing the “look and feel” of each. Educate Together recognises that there a range of different VEC schools in operation around the country, and that to give an overview which accurately represents all VEC schools is impossible - that is not the aim here.

This is an outline of the differences between a typical VEC “non-designated” community college and an Educate Together school. This is based on our direct experience of participating in Boards of Management of community colleges under the patronage of Co Dublin VEC and on Educate Together parents’ views as expressed in workshops and meetings.

	“Non-designated” VEC community college	Educate Together second-level school
PATRON	Patron is a State body, with reserved functions being carried out by a politically appointed committee and executive functions carried out by State employees.	Patron is a Company Limited by Guarantee and a charity, regulated by its Memo and Articles and the Companies Acts, whose decisions are made at General Meetings of its members schools.
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PATRON AND BOARD OF MANAGEMENT	“Top-down” relationship between Board of Management (BOM) and Patron, with BOM a sub-committee of the VEC.	Two-way relationship between BOM and Patron: BOM legally accountable to the Patron for upholding the ethos as defined in the Educate Together Charter. School is member of the Patron body and can affect national policy via the Company’s AGM.
COMPOSITION OF BOARD OF MANAGEMENT	Normally just two elected parent representatives as required by the Education Act. No student representation. Chairperson typically a County Councillor. Members claim expenses for attending Board meetings.	Strong representation of parents and local community and educational interests. Associate student member elected by the student body. Chairperson typically a parent. All members are volunteers and do not claim expenses from the State
ROLE OF BOARD OF MANAGEMENT	The management culture is one in which decisions are generally made by the VEC CEO and/or the Principal and brought to the Board for approval.	School policies are built from the ground up. Issues are discussed and debated at Board meetings and decisions are made with reference to the need to give the needs of learners the highest priority and the obligation to ensure equality for all members of the school community.

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ESTABLISHMENT OF SCHOOL	“Top-down” management approach with key decisions during the establishment phase being taken by the CEO of the relevant VEC and, later, by the Principal.	Participatory democratic approach to management, with a committee of parents guiding the establishment of the school and, in collaboration with the patron and prospective students, the recruitment of key staff.
PHILOSOPHY	Not universally defined.	Defined in the Educate Together Charter and related documents. Reflects values of modern egalitarianism and human rights.
RELIGIOUS / ETHICAL EDUCATION	Schools obliged to provide Religious Education (instruction) in accordance with Circular 74/75, as per the Handbook for Boards of Management of Vocational Schools and Community Colleges.	A comprehensive Ethical Education curriculum permeates all teaching and learning in the school. This is an extension of the primary “Learn Together” curriculum, which is internationally recognised as an example of best intercultural and anti-racist practice.
APPROACH TO CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY	Strictly secular school environment with predominantly academic aims. Cultural and religious diversity seen as irrelevant to the curriculum but acknowledged in activities such as intercultural days.	Deliberate and active exploration of students’ individual cultural and religious backgrounds, enabling students to learn to interact critically across different viewpoints. Diversity seen as a curriculum resource.
INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS AND STUDENTS IN DECISION-MAKING	Parents and students afforded limited, controlled input into decision-making - often on matters such as uniform and fundraising.	Parents and students have central role in all decision-making, including decisions relating to management and student learning.
PRIMARY / SECONDARY TRANSITION	Any students who attended Educate Together primary schools must make a considerable adjustment in the way they participate in the school and in the way that they learn.	Students who attended Educate Together primary schools experience continuity of approach and ethos, minimising any negative effects of transition. Other students and teachers supported in their induction into this approach.
STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS	Hierarchical approach to relationships within the school, reflected in expectations that members will be addressed according to their position in that hierarchy.	All members of the school community respected equally, as reflected in the usual use of first names by all members of the school community.

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PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS	Communication often limited to the parent-teacher meeting, where information about student progress is given by teachers to parents.	A partnership approach, with parents recognised as primary educators of their children, and teachers valued as professional educators. Parents regularly present in the school and drawn on as a resource in the delivery of various aspects of the curriculum.
DRESS CODE	A school uniform is the norm and decisions in this regard are generally taken by the Principal and approved by the Board of Management.	All members of the school community are involved in drawing up an agreed dress code which recognises the rights of all.
COST TO THE STATE	While comparisons are difficult, this is widely held to be the most expensive second-level school type, largely because of the administrative overhead involved in staffing 33 VECs.	Much lower cost to the State if operating as a Community School or Voluntary Secondary School. Current estimates of denominational management bodies are that a Voluntary Secondary School costs up to €200 per pupil per year less to run than a VEC Community College.