

STRENGTHENING THE HEARTBEAT OF OUR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Preparation and Ongoing Formation of New Administrators

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“Be it known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school.

He is the unseen but ever present teacher in its classes.

He is the model of its faculty and the inspiration of the students.”

This bold declaration is displayed in a prominent place in Catholic schools across the nation. And so it should be. Our schools are, after all, part of the saving mission of the Church. Their fundamental purpose is to form and educate children and young people as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. While our schools strive for academic excellence, they do so as centers of evangelization and catechesis. The responsibility of principals and other school administrators--and, of course, teachers--is to ensure “truth in advertising” so that all who come through the doors of a Catholic school will know without a doubt that Christ is indeed the reason for that school.

My diocesan superintendent of schools identifies the preparation and ongoing formation of administrators as the most critical challenge facing dioceses and Catholic schools today. I fully agree. The faith formation, both initial and ongoing, of our administrators is the most important issue for several reasons. Many potential new school leaders present themselves with good academic qualifications, but frequently hold degrees from non-Catholic colleges and universities. Some have had only minimal theological education or catechesis, if

any, since their own high school years. Often enough, applicants for Catholic school principalships come with teaching or administrative experience gained exclusively in public schools. Such individuals may be highly qualified in educational administration, but weak in their appreciation of the Church's vision and principles for Catholic education.

The major challenge is the formation of new administrators who will be committed and competent for the all-important task of fostering an authentically Catholic culture in our schools. Catholic school principals are given a daunting agenda that goes beyond anything an administrator in the public sector is expected to deal with. Along with all of the administrative responsibilities of any principal—supervision and evaluation of personnel, curriculum, assessment tools and techniques, federal and state education law, to name a few--, Catholic school principals are expected to be spiritual and catechetical leaders. In that capacity, according to the *National Directory for Catechesis*, our principals are called to:

- Recognize all members of the faculty and staff as integral to the faith formation program of the school
- Recruit teachers who are practicing Catholics who understand and accept Church teaching on faith and morals, and who will contribute to the school's Catholic identity
- Supervise the performance of each religion teacher
- Provide ongoing formation for faculty members
- Design a curriculum that supports the school's catechetical goals
- Foster a distinctive Catholic community among faculty, students and parents.

(National Directory for Catechesis, USCCB, 2005, p. 231)

The Church's vision for what a Catholic school administrator should be is clear. And many good things are happening. Dioceses, often through collaboration between the diocesan schools office and catechetical office, offer professional days and other opportunities for the formation of administrators as well as teachers. In many parts of the country, regional gatherings have been an effective way of joining forces and combining

resources so as to provide strong formation for new and continuing principals. Adult faith formation programs such as *Echoes of Faith* are used for school personnel and catechists. Parishes blessed with a well-trained, degreed and certified professional catechetical leader have a ready resource for formation of parish school personnel. There is certainly a formational role for clergy, who have benefited from significant theological education.

The National Catholic Educational Association and the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership offer annual conventions and a variety of other resources for initial preparation and ongoing formation. NCEA offers dozens of excellent publications targeted for new and continuing school administrators.

A number of dioceses are blessed with Catholic colleges that have designed graduate programs for emerging Catholic school leadership. I am delighted with the collaboration between the Diocese of Portland and St. Joseph's College in Standish, Maine, that has resulted in a new Master of Science in Education degree with a Catholic School Leadership concentration, as well as a Graduate Certificate in the same. The curriculum embraces education, school leadership, and theology courses. The programs are intended for K-12 Catholic school personnel who desire to prepare for administrative roles; for current public school administrators moving to a Catholic school; and for current Catholic school administrators who want to upgrade their skills.

Some dioceses can afford to hire an assistant superintendent for catechetical formation. As a result, these dioceses are positioned to develop and implement effective programs of formation for school personnel and students.

All dioceses, however, must address the continuing challenge of providing for the all important ongoing faith formation of Catholic school personnel whose task it is to model and proclaim that "Christ is the reason for this school."