

## Educational Symposium 2007 – “*Common Threads*”

### Position Paper: Quality Catholic Education

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In his recent book, *The Best Schools* (2006), Thomas Armstrong contrasts what he considers to be two opposing schools of thought about what makes schools excellent. He refers to the two approaches as “discourses”, ways of thinking and talking about characteristics, goals, and measures of school effectiveness. The “academic achievement discourse,” Armstrong argues, focuses narrowly on test scores and academic skills, ignoring or diminishing the importance and centrality of individual needs and the development of a student’s full potential. Making money, says Armstrong, is the ultimate goal of academic achievement. On the other hand, Armstrong claims, the “human development discourse” acknowledges that some learning cannot be measured objectively, that growth is more important than achievement, and that happiness is the goal. While this brief synopsis casts Armstrong’s ideas in a much too simplistic framework, I find troublesome his implication that we must choose between “academic achievement” and “human development.” Not in Catholic schools where we can define “achievement” – the learning that happens in our schools – to include social, emotional, and spiritual development; where we can design valid ways to measure this “harder to see” learning; and where we can thus engage in standards-based development of full human beings. In my experience, the tendency to allow this false dichotomy to shape decisions presents one of the major obstacles to quality 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholic education.

I have been involved in Catholic education all my life. I believe our world desperately needs Catholic schools with their deep commitment to faith formation, moral development, social justice, and servant leadership. I also believe deeply that it is unconscionable to ask parents to make a choice between faith-based education and academic excellence. We cannot expect to (or act as if parents should be willing to) accept less qualified teachers, fewer critical resources, less effective instruction, or outdated curriculum in exchange for instruction in the faith or a caring environment. In 2007, these can never be trade-offs. The stakes are too high. To continue to impact our world – in response to the incarnational message of Jesus – we must be better than “good” in every dimension of our programs. Quality 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholic education requires that we be truly excellent in everything.

What is excellent? Consider Michael Fullan’s challenging description:

The new mission for schools is to achieve 90-95 per cent success. This is what it will take for societies to thrive in the complex world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And the goal is not just about literacy and numeracy scores. It is about learning to learn, about becoming independent thinkers and learners. It is about

problem solving, teamwork, knowledge of the world, adaptability, and comfort in a global system of technologies, conflict and complexity. It is about the joy of learning and the pleasure and productivity of using one's learning in all facets of life pursuits. (*Breakthrough* , 2006. pp.2-3)

And we at this symposium would add: It is about integrating faith and culture and making Jesus the center of our lives.

What will it take to provide this kind of quality education? Based on reading, research, reflection, experience, prayer, and dialogue, let me posit some key elements.

In quality Catholic schools:

1. Principals are learning leaders who spend *at least* 60% of their time working with teachers to improve teaching and learning.
2. Teachers work during the school day in professional learning teams that share responsibility for improved learning and high achievement for each student.
3. Teachers agree on important standards-based learning and use feedback from common assessments to adjust teaching to meet each student's needs.
4. Teaching and learning reflects best practices, knowledge of how learning occurs, and understanding of today's learners. Thus, instruction is interactive, engaging, collaborative, performance-based, hands-on, real-life oriented, networked, appropriately digital, and differentiated.
5. Professional development is given priority and is tailored to help teachers improve learning.
6. Collaboration at all levels is modeled and taught.
7. Curriculum includes digital age literacies – writing and verbal literacy; visual and information literacy; basic scientific, mathematical, economic, and technological literacy; multicultural literacy and global awareness – and the development of expert and inventive thinking, complex communication skills, leadership, and personal integration and productivity skills.
8. Schools use both standardized and curriculum-based (classroom) measures to provide teachers, students, and parents with concrete information about what is learned and how to improve.
9. Students learn in “an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced, service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of God is cultivated.” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*, 2005)

Stated even more concretely, in quality 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholic schools, we would expect to see even more teaming, collaboration, arts, writing, digital exploration, differentiated instruction, problem-based learning, service learning, “internships,” field trips – both real and virtual, performance assessments, peer and self-assessment, interdisciplinary products and performances, global emphasis, and spirituality.

How do we do this? Some [challenging] thoughts for discussion:

- Agree that we will be excellent or we will close.
- Act on the belief that when we are excellent, we will thrive.
- Form partnerships across parish and individual school boundaries.
- Use technology to share curriculum, lesson plans, assessments, and materials.
- Use technology to share qualified teachers and to expand curricular and co-curricular offerings.
- Make learning the number one job of everyone connected to Catholic schools, from the archdiocese to the individuals in each school community.
- Hold each other accountable for results; publish results; use results to shape decisions.
- Build a vision that is irresistible and then find the right people to implement it.

I believe that Catholic schools hold a tremendous opportunity to model for the country and the world what it means to be “the best schools” that Armstrong seeks – schools that simultaneously hold students to standards of high achievement and that nurture and develop –also with rigor – the spiritual, social, and emotional skills that our networked, global world needs and so often finds lacking. To provide quality Catholic education, all stakeholders must be well-informed *learners* with the will to do what needs doing, and not settle for less.