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Better Together

Strengthening the Relationship Between Parish and School

A parish with a school? A school with a parish? Or a parish school? Which of these best describes the relationship between your school and parish or local parishes?

There is ample guidance that speaks to the importance of the integration of the identity of the Catholic school with that of its parish or parishes. The Congregation for Catholic Education (The Catholic School, 2000, par. 12), a Vatican document on Catholic education, stated the following about Catholic schools:

By reason of its identity, therefore, the Catholic school is a place of ecclesial experience, which is molded in the Christian community. However, it should not be forgotten that the school fulfills its vocation to be a genuine experience of Church only if it takes its stand within the organic pastoral work of the Christian community. In a very special way the Catholic school affords the opportunity to meet young people in an environment, which favors their Christian formation. Unfortunately, there are instances in which the Catholic school is not perceived

as an integral part of organic pastoral work, at times it is considered alien, or very nearly so, to the community. It is urgent, therefore, to sensitize parochial and diocesan communities to the necessity of their devoting special care to education and schools.

Pope Francis has charged us with a renewed mission of evangelization in *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel. As educators in Catholic schools, this is not something faculty and staff can do alone. It is through the relationship with the parish and families that Catholic schools will most successfully spread the Joy of the Gospel. John B. Kostoff (August 24, 2012) in his *Catholic Register* article writes:

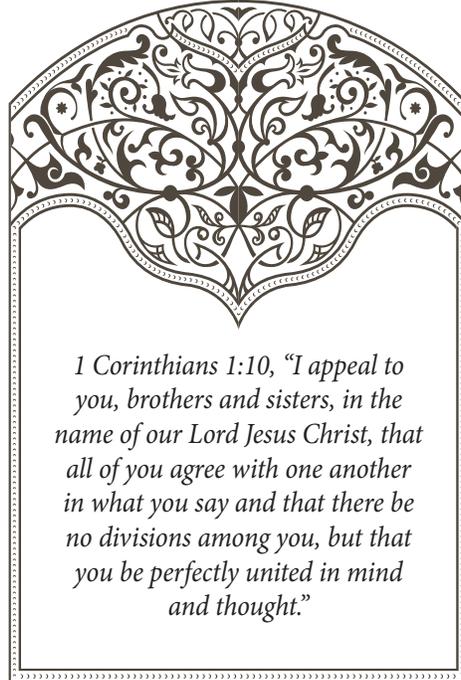
Catholic schools exist to assist committed families and their parishes to celebrate and live their faith in our communities. But people sometimes say this triad of school, church and family is no longer functional. Yes, it can be challenging to keep all the partners working in harmony, but it is a challenge we must never abandon because the result of failure is a weakening of our faith community.

Catholic School Management supports the strengthening of the partnership between parish and school, whether in a parish school, regional school or order-owned or sponsored school. According to Killeen (2017), “Work in Catholic education shows a significantly strong correlation in family attendance at religious service and participation in Catholic education. Of those studied, families with the highest level of participation in religious services were the most likely to have children participating in Catholic education.” This indicates the strong symbiotic relationship between parishes and Catholic schools. A strong relationship not only brings families closer in faith, it helps to build enrollment in schools and participation in parish life, thus making each stronger through working together.

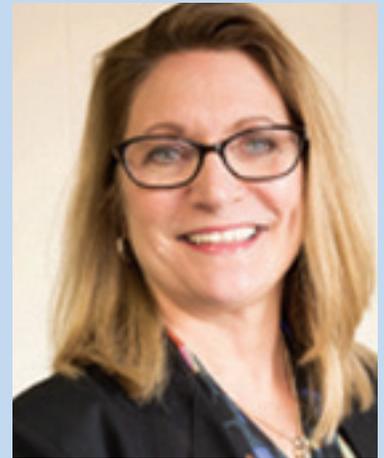
When examining the early Church and how Jesus lived with His disciples, we find there are six consistent elements of their life together. These include: **welcoming, celebrating, learning, reconciling, serving** and **praying** with each other and the larger community. A recommended approach is to seek the same outcomes in parish-school relationships.

Welcoming

When new families enter Catholic school communities, meeting others and learning about activities that can draw them into the life of the parish will help them stay in the school. A sense of belonging is important in recruitment and retention.



- Encourage new families to attend Mass on Sunday as they discern enrollment in the school.
- Provide parish registration information and parish contacts to newly enrolling families.
- Invite new families to parish activities such as Coffee and Donuts, Breakfast with St. Nick, Bible Study.
- Assign each new school family, that is also new to the parish, a school “mentor family.”
- Introduce new school families to the pastor.



About the author ...

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Dr. Julie C. Delaney has 35 years experience in Catholic education. She is in her twelfth year as a Catholic school administrator, currently serving as the principal of St. Paul the Apostle Catholic School in Davenport, Iowa. In 2011, St. Paul the Apostle was recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School by the United States Department of Education.

Dr. Delaney earned her bachelor’s degree from the University of Iowa in 1983 in elementary education. In 2006 she earned a master’s degree from Western Illinois University in educational leadership, and her Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska in 2016, in educational leadership and higher education. Her research focuses on turnaround school leadership.

Dr. Delaney has presented nationally on the topics of turnaround leadership, women in leadership, and moral and spiritual leadership. Her second love, after Catholic education, is science education. In this area she has conducted numerous teacher workshops and presented at national conferences on environmental issues instruction.





Celebrating

Joyful celebrations bring the school and parish together as a faith community. Examine current events in both areas to look for opportunities to engage parishioners in school celebrations and school families in parish celebrations. Below are a few examples as food for thought:

- Invite parishioners and priests to holiday celebrations – Christmas programs, Thanksgiving Dinner for parish seniors, Living Stations of the Cross, etc.
- Pair up senior parishioners with students who have out-of-town relatives for Grandparents Day.
- Capitalize on graduations. Invite high school seniors back to their elementary schools, in cap and gown, to share their plans with the younger students.
- Plan a parish and school staff combined Christmas party.
- Offer a Veterans’ Day celebration honoring parish veterans.

Learning

Engaging people of all ages in learning is a powerful tool in building relationships, especially learning people’s stories.

- Train students to interview senior members of the parish to learn about their childhoods, faith stories or family stories. There are endless possibilities.

- Allow parish volunteers to come into the school to listen to students read, help with flash cards or tutor (following local norms for volunteers).
- Schedule Bible studies so that teachers and parish staff can participate together.

Reconciling

Chances are that in a school and parish organization, there have been misunderstandings or tensions over programs, use of space and the day-to-day workings of such busy enterprises. What are some of those areas that need reconciliation in the parish-school relationship?

- School and Religious Education sharing of teaching space?
- A calendar in which one group feels slighted or pushed out?
- Spaces in the parish or school that appear “forbidden” to other groups?
- An indication to one group or another that finances are not equitably shared?

Once areas have been identified where there are tensions or misunderstandings, schedule an opportunity for conversation with the group or person that can help with a solution. Options can be as simple as

- Joint parish and school calendar meetings.
- Discussions of space, concerns that have arisen and, if needed, procedures put in place to prevent future problems and proactively address future concerns.

- The drafting of formal use agreements.
- Representation of the school on the Parish Finance Committee to include both school administration and a School Board representative.
- Representation of the school on the Parish Council. Here too, this could be school administration, a faculty member or School Board member.

Serving

Putting faith into action is part of the rich Catholic tradition. Service provides an avenue to engage students, faculty and parishioners toward a common goal. Reflect on the service projects and various collections undertaken by parish and school communities. Can they be combined? Consider some of the following:

- Canned food drives
- Warm clothing for the homeless
- Meals for the homeless
- Angel trees with gift suggestions for needy children at Christmas
- Cards for shut-ins at various holiday times

For more ideas, see the recent issue of CSML on *Faith in Action: Community Service and Service Learning Programs*.

CSM SERVICES	Strategy		Planning		Leadership	
	School Assessments Program Audits Enrollment Marketing	Mission Clarification Advancement Alumni Capital Campaigns Feasibility Studies	Enrollment Technology Annual Fund Development	Marketing Communication Social Media Plans Strategic Planning Financial	Governance Administrative Structure Search Board Training/ Development Professional Mentoring	Workshops and Webinars Retreat Facilitation Keynote Presentations Individual Seminars and Series

Praying

Prayer is the fuel for mission and binds together school and parish communities as followers of Christ. There are a multitude of ways to incorporate prayer into the relationship between school and parish. Below are a few to consider:

- Spiritual bouquets for pastors and priests made by students
- Invitations to parishioners and parents to attend all school Masses
- Parish prayer opportunities publicized in school communications (weekly Masses, reconciliation opportunities, Advent and Lent special services, etc.)
- Adoration hours during the school day so students can attend
- Prayer partners with school and parish staff
- Retreats that include school and parish staff

No matter the configuration of a Catholic school, whether a parish school, regional school, diocesan school or order-owned or sponsored school, there are ways to create a bridge. Pastors are extremely important in achieving the goal of enhanced relations. Along with the pastor, there are other gatekeepers and personnel at the parish who can be instrumental in having a solid relationship.

There is one final group to get involved to strengthen the relationship and that is the parishioners. It is especially important to link with those parishioners who don't have children in the school or who have children who graduated from the school.

Pastor and Priest Relations

- Invite the pastor to greet families at registration.
- Include welcome letters from both the pastor and principal in marketing materials and when communicating with newly accepted students.
- Involve the pastor in the opening faculty meeting to pray with and bless the faculty.
- Feature the pastor on the school staff webpage.
- Include seminarians in the school's daily prayers.
- Recognize the priests on their birthdays and on special occasions with student-made cards, memory books or artwork.
- Provide priests a menu of ways to be involved in the school to accommodate varying personalities and comfort levels.

Parish and School Staff Relations

- Welcome parish staff to faculty retreats and celebrations or, better yet, don't designate retreats and celebrations as "school." The school is under the umbrella of the parish.
- Conduct weekly parish meetings that include school administration along with parish staff.
- Encourage parish staff to participate in the school's leadership team-building experiences.

Parish

- Link parish and school websites and ensure a consistent look.
- Arrange registration times to coincide with the weekend Mass schedule.
- Insert articles and information in the parish bulletin and newsletter that seek to advance the value of the Catholic school education by going beyond announcements for events and enrollment activities.
- Incorporate parish events in school communications.
- Seek parishioners to volunteer at the school (following local norms). Retired parishioners have time and wisdom to share.
- Invite the parish to Catholic Schools Week activities, especially open houses and book fairs.
- Ask parishioners to judge science fairs, STEM fairs, speech contests and spelling bees.

In his research on the sustainability of Catholic parish elementary schools, Killeen (2017) states, "Consistent through the research was the importance of the cultivation of partnership."

In an era of declining enrollments and church attendance, strengthening the relationship between the school and parish is a win for the entire faith community.

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