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**La Salle University**

**Loyola Marymount University**

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**Loyola University of New Orleans**

**Manhattan College**

**Niagara University**

**Pontifical Catholic University  
of Puerto Rico, Ponce**

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**St. John's University**

**Saint Louis University**

**The Catholic University of America**

**University of Dayton**

**University of San Francisco**

**University of Scranton**

***CATHOLIC EDUCATION:  
A CALL to CONSCIENCE***

## **Catholic Education: A Call to Conscience**

This Position Paper is the result of a meeting sponsored by St. John's University, New York during which nineteen Deans of Schools or Departments of Education from major Catholic universities across the United States met to consider how to address the diminishing interest in, support for, and enrollment crises confronting elementary and secondary Catholic schools in many parts of the nation.

Catholic elementary and secondary schools are not the responsibility of one particular group, therefore, this paper is addressed to all those who are in positions of leadership and influence, whose connections to education should be limitless, and whose passion is to enhance the lives of children, Catholic and other, by guiding and shaping the nation's Catholic schools.

### **History Is Not Enough**

Historically, Catholic schools have been known and admired for their religious identity, characteristic safety, emphasis on universal values, service to new immigrant populations and those in their families who followed, stability for families within clearly-defined parishes, excellent student achievement, and successful placement of graduates. From the arts to government, from health to the legal professions, from business to education, graduates of the nation's Catholic schools range far and wide across the leadership spectrum of American society.

The old adage goes something like "Forget history and you are bound to repeat it". But in the case of Catholic schools history has not repeated itself, nor does it conform to the meaning of that old belief that if one forgets history all the errors of the past are bound to reoccur; quite the reverse has been true. The diminishing number of young men and women interested in Catholic religious life, and the consequent dwindling number of parish priests who own the responsibility of supporting the schools on-site has left Catholic elementary and secondary schools to transition to a professional staff of paid teachers and school administrators. While this transition had the advantage of involving the laity more deeply into the mission and practices of the Catholic schools, it also brought with it increased costs that have priced many families-Catholic or otherwise-out of a Catholic education.

In recent years, the growth of charter schools has led to additional challenges for the Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Competitors of Catholic schools are not just the above average public or private school, but the emerging charter school movement. Charter schools offer some, but not all, of the advantages of Catholic schools, in that they operate free from much of the bureaucracy with which traditional public schools are known, and that they are perceived as providing safe and well-disciplined learning environments for students. Though the outcomes of charter schools are much in question, the brilliance of their promoters has captured the imagination of many of the same parents who might otherwise have chosen to send their children to Catholic schools, were the schools perceived as exhibiting such qualities. Charter schools, which as public schools are tuition free, give priority to second language learners, to students eligible for free lunch, and to those at risk for not achieving proficiency on State tests. These are the very same populations that find success in the Catholic school. Often, such parents consider Catholic schools against the backdrop of the Charter school option.

The need for support and sustenance, therefore, is more than the sum of the contributions of Catholic schools, above. We have arrived at a point in our history, and taking into account the most recent proposed national legislation affording equal opportunity even to children of undocumented persons, that a new look must be taken at elementary and secondary Catholic schools not just by lawmakers but by cardinals, bishops, Catholic university presidents, deans and faculties of education at Catholic universities, and supportive institutes or centers within those universities. It must be remembered that in another day and age Bishops were exhorted to have a Catholic School in every Parish and the teachers should be paid from the parochial funds. While this is no longer possible, we should not forget the intent of mutual support.

There is a need for basic, comprehensive communication among these constituencies, working together to initiate an American dialogue as vigorous as that underlying discussion of alternate means of educating our children through private and charter schools. Further, this new focus on Catholic schools should take into account that neither the Constitution nor the Bill of Rights makes any reference to education falling under the First Amendment. There is still argument over what this means. Jefferson's "...wall of separation between Church and State..." spoke to the prohibition of any religion seeking to impose its tenets on others. It left completely open the voluntary efforts of parents to choose a religiously based school (Catholic or otherwise) for the education of their children. Over the past two centuries, setting aside the infamous Scopes trial, the irreconcilable result has been the prohibition of most public monies for the use of religiously based elementary and secondary schools while, ironically, allowing such funding for colleges and universities. One might ask if there is some sudden metamorphosis in young people from adolescence to early adulthood enabling them to differentiate individual religious beliefs from the overall public good. And it might be added that, without attempting to provoke a religious debate, if a morally based education delivered by Catholic schools is not needed now, more than ever, to confront the moral crises of our time occurring across the globe.

### **The Commitment of Catholic University Faculties to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Education**

The great English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead stated that "wisdom is the way in which knowledge is held." A similar argument may be made for the ways in which Catholic university school of education faculties demonstrate an inner commitment to the values and external support of Catholic education. Their research, teaching, and service contributes to the ongoing debate about support for Catholic schools as institutions and, more so, for the education of teachers, school leaders, community groups, and politicians to reinvent Catholic K-16 education. There is no validity to any assertion that this violates the principle of "academic freedom." Rather, it speaks to the dual responsibilities of those who choose to teach at any religiously-based institution to the betterment of American society as well as to uphold the tenets of their religious foundations. It affirms independence of thought, but challenges such thought to be of substantive value and service to Catholic education. This service can be construed as, but not limited to, relating the mission of the Catholic university school of education to the broader mission of the university....that of providing leadership in as many ways as possible to 1) infusing Catholic values and strong allegiances to social justice; 2) responding to the heightened need for research on the outcomes of education in Catholic schools (and where they do not measure up to a higher standard of learning, providing new bases on which such standards should be built); 3) encouraging doctoral students to participate in this examination, indeed to write dissertations that address contemporary issues in Catholic education.

Beyond that which already exists in service learning programs at the undergraduate level, faculties should engage their students in assessing how traditional models in Catholic education are succeeding in benefitting society, and how they might be strengthened so as to attract more parents and students to the K-16 Catholic schools. Introducing meaningful research beginning at the undergraduate level could well produce better-prepared graduates as well as an enlightened demonstration of how the "wisdom" of the University can serve not only the larger community, but itself.

### **The Role of the Dean**

The dean is expected to be the leader of his/her education community in many ways. Among his or her chief concerns must be a compelling interest in preserving the early education of Catholic children—those attending public schools as well as those in Catholic elementary and secondary schools. The dean must assemble faculty members who share this interest and are willing to devote the time and energy toward its realization. The dean cannot relinquish the leadership role in this endeavor. Rather, he/she must be directly involved in all activities related to connections between Catholic K-12 and higher education. Moral leadership at the foundation of these K-16 relationships emanates directly from the Office of the Dean.

Leadership for the betterment of Catholic elementary and secondary schools must take its place among the dean's other responsibilities: preparing teachers, administrators, and other school professionals to succeed in a variety of educational settings; ensuring that preparation programs meet and succeed state and professional organization guidelines; and infusing the mission of the Catholic university into the educational experiences of its students.

### **Structures and Incentives to Support Catholic Pre-K to 16 Education**

The Mission Statements of Catholic colleges and universities frequently make strong reference to the preparation of students with the values and academic preparation necessary for participation and success in the social world beyond the walls of the university and certainly to the pre-eminent concern for social justice. Schools and Departments of Education should mirror these concerns in their own claims. But they should also provide evidence that these claims are met. Among the many ways this can be accomplished are:

- creating incentives for faculty to develop courses specifically related to understanding the connections between higher education and Catholic elementary and secondary schools.
- creating incentives for faculty to develop courses for teachers and school leaders that are specifically related to applying the research on the moral aspects of child and adolescent development, and the impact that has on student learning and achievement... Such courses would emphasize and highlight the research related to the moral and ethical components of a person's character that are the foundational qualities for successful 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners and citizens.

- creating incentives for graduate students to conduct research on the moral dimensions of learning and development, the importance of school climate, and the development of values/virtues.
- providing a transition from religious education in the lower grades to more sophisticated instruction in Catholic theology and an introduction to religious practice in other world religions. (These may well be taught jointly by faculties from other programs, departments, and schools across the University.)
- awarding sufficient time for faculties to create such courses and to infuse them with concepts of Catholic values and social justice, eventually leading to new programs and degrees
- encouraging crossing department and school lines to provide truly interdisciplinary courses and programs that probe the Catholic intellectual tradition and its relationship to Catholic education on both local and global levels
- introducing seminars on the most current political, economic, social, and emotional factors influencing Catholic thought, taught by noted scholars in these fields, and providing for intellectual interaction between the scholars, the college or university students, and professionals in the K-12 Catholic schools
- offering support for faculty and graduate students to focus research that responds to the many questions about the perception of, and need for, education in Catholic schools (academic, social, and family participation particularly of new and immigrant populations)
- setting aside sufficient funding for faculty and student attendance and research presentations at local, State, and national meetings that address the above concerns.

To stimulate these initiatives each college or university should coordinate and direct faculty attention to work and study within their walls, but to offer their services to neighboring dioceses and schools, as well. The most common approach is to create an "Institute" or "Center" designed to serve the lower grades. Priorities should be given to partnering with K-12 Catholic schools for field experience, student teaching, and leadership internships for education, nursing, counseling, psychology, etc. These expressions of interest and involvement with the schools should counteract the prevailing surprise of K-12 school leaders when overtures are made to them by their colleagues in higher education. This should be an expectation, as should joint school/university efforts to enlist the support of external funding agencies and individuals in the effort to improve the scope and effectiveness of the Catholic schools

### **Imagining Something Different For Catholic Schools**

On Monday, July 29, 2013, the *New York Times* reported that Pope Francis' trip to Brazil "...was a vibrant display of the Vatican's ambition of halting the losses of worshippers to evangelical churches and the rising appeal of secularism..." (Pope's Trip to Brazil Seen as 'Strong Start' in Revitalizing Church'. p. A5)

In too many parts of our nation the enrollment decline in Catholic schools is no less serious. Recognizing that the assembled group of deans in New York was not fully representative of all university schools and departments of education, the first charge to those seeking to remediate the problem is to reach out to all leaders in Catholic education. But we seek to avoid mere repetitions of old solutions, preferring instead to suggest a few avenues that must now be traversed. The first is to issue a series of challenges; some more easily met than others, but all compelling in their urgency:

- How to create a seamless system of Catholic education, highlighting respect for all who attend and enhancing their spirituality and religious foundation
- How to strengthen outreach programs to nearby Catholic schools, bringing their students to the campus for courses appropriate to their age groups and their talents
- How to establish laboratory schools on the campuses
- How to enhance the image of excellence of Catholic schools through such relationships
- How to use existing and new research by education students at all levels in the colleges and universities to create a climate more competitive with excellent programs and schools in the public and private education sectors
- How to promote Catholic schools, especially to those connected to colleges and universities, as an even richer "charter school" type experience for children, one that stresses universal values, and Catholic intellectual tradition. Charter schools, which as public schools are free, also give priority to second language learners, to students eligible for free lunch, and to those at risk for not achieving proficiency of State tests. These are the very same populations that would find a higher degree of success in Catholic schools connected to Catholic colleges.
- How to help state the case for Catholic K-12 schools to elected officials and others those who can provide funding to transform traditional buildings into facilities that are equal to the academic and technological demands of the 21st century
- How to vastly increase the amount of targeted fund raising for Catholic schools from individuals, foundations, and corporations
- How to augment current efforts to advocate for Catholic K-12 schools in every venue

### **Next Steps**

More than any other single element to tie this all together must be clear and unequivocal statements by the nation's cardinals and bishops, showing that they place a robust and attractive system of Catholic schools as among their highest priorities. Those occupying the "bully pulpits" must stress their full support for the schools and assert the advantages of a Catholic school education to Catholic and non-Catholic audiences. Publicity around declining enrollments and school closures sends a message of its own that echoes in the halls and corridors

of schools once teeming with the nation's new populations, then as now often working class and poor, yet talented and high achieving as a result of their Catholic school experience. The failure of Catholic school leaders to characterize their schools as the models for the charter school movement, and their lack of attention to the qualities of Catholic schools that charter schools have adopted, bringing this to the public consciousness, has been a greatly missed opportunity. It can and should be reclaimed, with the added demonstrably based statement that a Catholic school is superior to a charter school particularly because of its potential and actual connections to its immediate community and its attention to children's emerging spiritual needs. Efforts to guarantee the future of Catholic education will be an adventure and a struggle, but an exhilarating experience whose outcomes can benefit every segment of our society. We must not lose sight of our original mission; that is, to aid those in need and to attend to their spiritual, intellectual, and moral concerns. And an added outcome to Catholic schools of high-quality and inviting scope is the production of what has historically been, within the pantheon of American leaders, some of its finest.