The New Catholic School Leadership: Principals and Pastors Working Together

By continuing to redefine their roles in the area of Catholic school leadership, principals and pastors can achieve a partnership with regard to school issues that is both nurturing and dynamic.

Connie H. Urbanski

Leading a school in today's diverse and challenging society is a daunting task. It requires an administrator with unwavering vision, passionate advocacy for his or her school, focus on the bottom line, the ability to prioritize, swift and definite decision making and the skill necessary to communicate those decisions to an often unreceptive audience. Add to these tasks the need to garner the approval and support of the parish priest before any decision can be finalized and you have some idea of the often overwhelming, but equally gratifying, world of the Catholic school administrator.

True autonomy often can be nonexistent for an administrator working at a Catholic parish school. The pastor is in charge of all facets of his parish, including the school that is part of the parish. Because the hierarchy in a parish school places the pastor above the principal (Walch, 1996), acting upon decisions and policies can become cumbersome. For most administrators, action on a particular issue entails researching the topic, determining the correct course of action and employing strategies to best execute the decision with as little dissension as possible.

Father C. Tim Meares, pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, visits on the playground with students from the school.
For the principal of a parish school, however, it is necessary to first attain the approval of the pastor before continuing with the process. This additional layer can result in complications.

Priests who become pastors of parishes with attached schools are consulted about their wishes with regard to taking on such a parish. If a priest is strongly opposed to being assigned to a parish with a school, his preferences do impact his assignments. Therefore, in most cases, pastors who work in parishes with schools can be assumed to be either supportive of Catholic schools or at least unopposed to them. This should ensure the parish school principal a certain level of involvement and interest on the part of the pastor.

However, often pastors are too busy with their own overwhelming responsibilities to be available readily to the principal. Thus, the necessity of procuring the pastor’s support and keeping him informed of matters of significance becomes difficult for logistical reasons alone. If a matter requires immediate action, and the pastor is insistent upon being a part of the decision-making process, such action is delayed, often to the detriment of the school, and usually to the frustration of the principal.

Further, many pastors have no formal training in educational administration. Although they may bring to the discussion a firm moral compass, knowledge of human nature and years of experience as a priest, sometimes they are unaware of best practices in education. For some personalities, discovering that there may be a new and previously untapped way to frame issues can be disconcerting. For the pastor and the school administrator to view the same issue through different lenses can create a difference in opinion that may result in misunderstanding on one or both sides.

**Forming a Powerful Partnership**

Yet, for some administrators, having a sounding board who can be trusted and who also has the best interests of the school at heart can be extremely gratifying. The pastor who is willing to be as available as possible and the principal who can welcome a different perspective can form a powerful partnership. Together, their synergy can provide both a system of checks and balances and a blend of secular and spiritual focus for the school community.

In recognition of the strength of this partnership, the Diocese of Raleigh recently began a series of formal principal-pastor meetings organized by the diocesan superintendent of Catholic schools and Bishop Michael Burbidge. The meetings are an attempt to create a more even distribution of resources in a diocese that includes both urban Catholic schools with student populations numbering more than 1,200 and struggling rural schools whose student body may include fewer than 100. Urged by the principals of some of the struggling schools to unite to address the problem as a systemic responsibility, this diocese has been looking for answers to questions, including how to attract students to schools located in non-Catholic areas and how to address financial challenges creatively without
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Commitment to Continue the Dialogue

One significant result of the meetings was the commitment of both pastors and principals to a series of meetings to continue the dialogue over the future of Catholic schools within the Diocese of Raleigh. As stated by the principal of one of the struggling schools, "I have always felt isolated, working at
The school welcomes students of diverse backgrounds and works in partnership with parents to maximize each student's spiritual and intellectual growth.

the only Catholic school in my county or even within 50 miles. Although I talk to the pastor about the issues the school faces, and he has really accepted his role as my primary resource, it wasn't enough. We needed more. This meeting, seeing that the pastors and other principals were concerned with our future, has made an impact on me. It has made me even more committed to Catholic education. We are not alone. We are Catholic in every sense of the word. We are in this together."

Just as Catholicism draws strength from its universal nature so, too, can Catholic school administrators tap into that universality for wisdom and support.

For the Diocese of Raleigh, this unity between pastors and principals has resulted in the identification of a four-point Action Plan, the focus of which is to offer support to all diocesan schools, but most particularly to schools that are in need. This plan includes a comprehensive marketing strategy, research into alternative sources of funding, more effective distribution of diocesan funds and the creation of a support team that would advise the schools that appear most vulnerable.

Despite the creation of this response plan, the Diocese of Raleigh does not intend to drop the dialogue between pastors and principals, recognizing the constructive nature of an ongoing conversation between these two vital components of a parish school.

For Catholic school administrators, it is this sense that their responsibility can be shared with their pastors and, if needed, with their diocese, that is a sustaining force. Just as Catholicism draws strength from its universal nature so, too, can Catholic school administrators tap into that universality for wisdom and support. By continuing to redefine their roles in the area of Catholic school leadership, principals and pastors can achieve a partnership with regard to school issues that is both nurturing and dynamic. This partnership will reap benefits for their schools, their dioceses and for Catholic education as a whole.

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