Ten Tips for Maintaining a Positive, Complementary Relationship between the Pastor and the Parochial School

Practical ideas to bring the rectory and the school closer together

Carol Cimino, SSJ

Ever since the publication of Stephen O’Brien’s (1987) study of the attitudes of bishops and priests toward Catholic schools, there has been a great deal of interest in the subject, especially because more than 2,000 Catholic schools have closed since then, affecting the ministries and fortunes of parishes. In addition, more and more dioceses are moving toward the separation of the ownership and governance of Catholic parochial elementary schools from that of the parish to forming various boards and commissions.

However, because the basic social structure of the Catholic Church in the United States is the parish, schools that are defined as parochial would do well to maintain a symbiotic relationship that recognizes the special benefits that accrue to parishes with schools.

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This article summarizes the results of O’Brien’s and others’ studies in this area and suggests 10 ways that schools can work on maintaining and improving their relationship with their pastor.

In “Mixed Messages, What Bishops and Priests Say about Catholic Schools,” O’Brien surveyed bishops and priests on their perceptions of Catholic schools in four areas: value, effectiveness, funding practices and future structure of Catholic schools. Not surprisingly, bishops and priests who had
attended Catholic schools were positive, and pastors with Catholic schools also were positive. Older priests were more positive than priests out of seminary for from one to five years. Convey’s (1997, 1999) follow-up studies found much the same thing, although the intervening decade had resulted in the young priests becoming pastors and retaining their less positive view of Catholic schools, especially in the areas of value and effectiveness. Subsequent studies have focused on individual dioceses with mixed results, and the attitudes of younger priests toward their role in ministry have also changed from that of service to that of separateness (Rossetti, 2011, CARA, 2012).

In addition, the 2012 CARA (Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate) study found that many pastors:

- Believe that the school is a divisive force in the parish.
- View principals and teachers as being at the opposite end of the political spectrum (also in Kushner and Helbring, 1995, “The People Who Work There”).
- See the school as a financial “drain” on the parish, and are supported in this belief by the demands of other parish ministries.
- Believe that they were trained to be pastoral leaders and not plant managers.
- Fail to see the presence of Catholic school parents and students in attendance at Mass and the sacraments.

It is important that there be strong ties between the pastor and the Catholic school. “When pastors are committed, competent and collaborative, the school and the parish enjoy a symmetry that is unparalleled” (O’Keefe, et al., 2004). The question, then, is how does the Catholic parochial school establish and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with the parish pastor? Here are 10 suggestions for principals, teachers and parents to consider in bringing the rectory closer to the school.

1. Work with seminarians to emphasize the importance of Catholic schools in attracting families with children to the parish and the effectiveness of Catholic schools in the church’s mission to evangelize.

2. Demonstrate the effectiveness of Catholic schools in fostering the Faith. Past ACRE test scores show that even non-Catholics in Catholic schools know more about Catholicism than Catholics who are not in Catholic schools (Convey, 2011). Furthermore, CARA studies show that graduates of Catholic schools tend to attend church more frequently than those that did not attend Catholic schools.

3. School officials need to discuss with pastors the worthiness of Catholic schools to receive parish monies. By the involvement of Catholic school students and their parents in parish ministries, including parish fund-raisers, the parish has the potential to garner more than it gives.

4. Kushner’s and Helbing’s (1995) research showed that teachers and administrators’ political and religious views were more liberal than that of pastors. School administrators
would do well to ask the pastor to conduct the annual teacher and student retreats so that pastors have the opportunity to share their points of view.

Shafer's (2005) and others' research demonstrated that leadership styles differed between pastors and school administrators. School administrators and pastors would do well to dialogue about their perceptions of each person's areas of responsibility, leadership style and perceived outcomes. Only by keeping the conversation going can school administrators and pastors come to an understanding of each other's gifts in this area.

CARA studies suggest that more and more pastors, when given the choice, will choose to pastor a parish without a school because they don't want to fund this very complicated ministry. Dioceses can mitigate this by adjusting the *cathedraticum* so that parishes with schools pay less into this fund, allowing parish resources to be used for building upkeep and tuition support.

Cimino (2004) found that teachers in Catholic schools valued collegiality more than religious formation for themselves. Catholic school administrators would do well to invite the pastor to be an integral part of the school community in order to take a leadership role in the religious formation of teachers.

Ever since school expenses began to exceed parish income, the issue of parish investment has been debated (Harris, 2003). Schools and parishes that collaborate on conducting successful annual funds both benefit from this effort, and stewardship programs that involve parishes should include the parish school parents. In this way, parents, who often feel that their tuition is also benefiting the parish, can grasp the integral relationship between parish and school.

When the parish school publishes an annual report, it can demonstrate to the pastor and the parish its accountability to its constituents, including parishioners. What needs to be done, however, is to separate what it actually costs to run the school, apart from what it costs the parish to have other ministries using the school building and its resources. In this way, parishioners can see the real costs of the school, how much of this tuition covers and what it costs to conduct other ministries.

In parishes with large Hispanic populations and newly-arrived immigrants, the role of the pastor assumes new importance; Father's word carries clout. School administrators need to demonstrate to the pastor his influence and authority with this demographic. In addition, Catholic schools originally were founded for immigrants, with the intention of providing a quality education while maintaining their ties with the Catholic Church. In 2010, the Catholic bishops of the United States committed themselves to increasing the number of Hispanic children in Catholic schools. This can only be done on the local level. Instead of assuming that these families cannot afford the tuition, pastors have the opportunity of finding creative solutions to the bishops' commitment.

The de-coupling of parishes and schools that is occurring in several dioceses may be the solution to the question of the future of Catholic schools. However, since the parish is committed to the formation of the whole person, it would seem that, as has been demonstrated historically, the amicable, mutually beneficial relationship between the parish and the school is what works best. Pastors and principals need to consider seriously their mutual roles and the strength of their bonds.

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References


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
Kindergarteners and their teacher give thumbs up for their class during the school field day.

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. This partnership can result in a strong and responsive school that is guided by a Catholic ethos and a multi-dimensional vision that can best prepare the school for the demands of the present and the challenges of the future.

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
sacrificing educational rigor.

Apparent at the first of these meet-

ings was the pastors’ differing attitudes

both toward the existence of parish

schools and toward their own relation-

ship to the school in their individual

parishes. Encouraged to brainstorm

ways to help schools in towns with

weak economies meet their bills, some

pastors expressed the opinion that

such schools should simply be closed.

Others, however, made constructive

suggestions including group-purchasing

coalitions and shared workforces.

Commitment to Continue the

Dialogue

One significant result of the meet-

ings was the commitment of both pas-

tors and principals to a series of meet-

ings to continue the dialogue over the

future of Catholic schools within the Di-

ocese of Raleigh. As stated by the prin-

cipal of one of the struggling schools,

"I have always felt isolated, working at

OLPH offers a personal experience in Christian living through religious instruction,

prayer, guidance, example and liturgical celebrations."
The school welcomes students of diverse backgrounds and works in partnership with parents to maximize each student’s spiritual and intellectual growth.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help School Photos

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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