

Effective Leadership for Catholic Schools

In this year's *ABC Notes ~ Effective Leadership for Catholic Schools*, we have looked at (1) bullying among students, and (2) the possibility of feeling bullied by the demand for data and its preponderance. This time we pose the question: Do you ever feel bullied by the demands of others? What makes the demands feel so bullying – so overwhelming – is often not because the requests are unreasonable (although a few could be) but because as people with a vocation not just a job, we realize that we are not only leaders in our school but in the mission of Jesus and his Church. In addition to the faculty, staff, students, parents and parish of St. X Church and School needing me, the whole church is depending on me! And therein lies the truth *and* the problem! Everyone is depending on you, but not as a lone savior. You are part of a Christ-centered community and Jesus has already saved us all and said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.” (Matthew: 18:20)

There is indeed “strength (and Jesus) in numbers” and this brief article encourages you to engage your teachers as colleagues so that both they and you might find greater strength to crush those bullies of isolated fear. When a true spirit of collaboration exists, the combined team of administrator and teachers can begin to stop asking, “What do you want me to do” and ask instead, “What can we do to solve this problem for this child?” Compelling Conversations p.80-81

As you look back on Catholic Schools Week, celebrating *Catholic Schools [yielding] Dividends for Life*, the financial realities of investments and dividends sheds some light on a collaborative leadership model. As an investor you probably do not “go it on your own.” Most of us do not have the time to study the market fluctuations and/or the experiential skill to read those fluctuations. However, neither do we engage a financial planner and leave everything to them. Decisions are made together in formal conversation between you (who know your day to day and future needs) and the more skilled agent who sees a bigger picture. And the decision is not a “once and for all”, but one that, together, you expect to constantly monitor, assess and possibly re-structure.

Why should we think the investment of educational practices and the high dividends of a child's growth are any less needful of such collaborative dialogue and decision? You do not have the time nor all the needed skills to direct the progress of each student, in every curriculum area - yet your name is on every child's report card! Many educational leaders today attest that we need to move from a leadership position of “I have or should have all the answers” to one that creates an environment which celebrates, evokes and even structures honest and trusting dialogue. Such a safe environment allows administrators and teachers to say to one another, “I am not sure how to accomplish success in this matter” and to feel comfortable knowing that whatever decision is reached - just like a financial portfolio - it is expected to be monitored, assessed and changed as new data is reviewed.

Many of the ideas presented here have been sparked from the book Compelling Conversations by Thomasina D. Piercy. (Lead and Learn Press copyright 2006) Her thesis is based on some of the following concepts.

- * We need to recognize, accept and perhaps “oppose the natural drive of leaders in education to take care of all the problems, and to do it fast.” Compelling p.121
- * “As school leaders’ and teachers’ belief in one another increase, beliefs in children also intensify.” Compelling p.90
- * It is the teachers who provide the best suggestions to meet the everyday demands, because they are the experts *in the field* - closest to the daily decision points. Compelling p.123
- * The administrator’s role is vital however, because “close proximity can create barriers to perceiving the long term cause and effect of instructional decisions.” Compelling p.120

You can purchase Piercy’s book or any number of excellent resources but no theory will become effective unless it touches a need you and your school community perceive. In self-reflection and with those with whom you share the mission, you might ask:

- * Have I/we created a professional learning community that evidences more belief in one another as dedicated professionals ~ you for your teachers, they for one another and they for you?
- * Is there a greater spirit of trust now, than in that first week, allowing for an admission of weaknesses and/or strengths without fear of negative judgment?
- * Is the tenor of conversation about students (even in the faculty room) growing more productive, caring and prescriptive?
- * Is the school community more and more focused on each child’s self confidence and progress in all areas of development?
- * Do the students believe that their teachers, administrators and parents believe in their ability to succeed and that they will be given all the help they need to reach that goal?
- * Do you really believe that saying “yes” to all the above is what truly makes a caring, respectful and responsible Catholic school community?

How you make all this happen will be as varied as there are schools. But there appears to be undeniable truth that lack of communication is the root cause [of students not succeeding] and communication is the only path to solve the problem. Compelling p. 6

As Jesus is with us and He is The Word, let us be committed to sharing with our colleagues words that are filled with trust, sincerity and commitment to honor one another’s wisdom as we cherish the precious treasure of each child and of Catholic education.