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Christian Dallavis

*University of Notre Dame*, [dallavis.1@nd.edu](mailto:dallavis.1@nd.edu)

Andrea Cisneros

*University of Notre Dame*, [acisner2@nd.edu](mailto:acisner2@nd.edu)

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## **“A new model of sponsorship and collaboration”: The University of Notre Dame ACE Academies**

Christian Dallavis and Andrea Cisneros  
University of Notre Dame, Indiana

*This article describes the Notre Dame ACE Academies initiative, a university-school partnership program that provides comprehensive support to schools through a unique governance structure. The authors describe how the university's experience of an earlier partnership initiative informed the development of the Notre Dame ACE Academies model and the rationale for establishing of a new governance model for the program. ACE developed a framework for partnership and collaboration designed to create and sustain a strong Catholic school culture with high academic standards. The program provides resources and formation to support principal and teacher efforts to enhance academic achievement, and the program ensures the schools' long-term viability through responsible stewardship and strategic advancement efforts focused on maximizing parental choice scholarship opportunities. The key lever to enact these transformations is a new Catholic school governance structure, in which pastors and bishops formally share certain critical responsibilities with the university and other community stakeholders through the establishment of a board of specified jurisdiction. By taking responsibility for the areas of financial oversight and support and evaluation of the principal, the board ensures growth in academic achievement and school sustainability.*

Catholic schools in the United States historically have enjoyed strong pastoral and academic leadership. For two centuries, the educational opportunities provided in parish and diocesan schools have been made possible by the work of bishops, pastors, and religious communities charged with leading Catholic schools. Dioceses and parishes often contracted with religious communities to provide school leaders and teachers, and the charisms of those religious communities shaped the clear and coherent school cultures that held students to high standards of achievement and promoted strong faith formation and moral development (Cook, 2004).

In recent decades, however, the traditional model of parish schooling has faced a variety of challenges that threaten the sustainability of Catholic

schools (Hamilton, 2008). In the absence of robust communities of vowed religious men and women dedicated to staffing Catholic schools, the leadership of urban Catholic schools has often fallen to over-worked pastors, or lay people who have not had the benefit of religious formation. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) suggested in its 2005 pastoral statement on Catholic schools, *Renewing our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*, it has become increasingly difficult for bishops and pastors to ensure that teachers and school leaders “be grounded in a faith-based Catholic culture, have strong bonds to Christ and the Church, and be witnesses to the faith in both their words and actions” (p. 9).

More than 40 years ago, the bishops of the United States recognized that the traditional model of one-parish/one-school governance and sponsorship would eventually warrant revision. In the 1972 pastoral letter, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the bishops presciently noted that the Church “must be open to the possibility that the school of the future, including the Catholic school, will in many ways be very different from the schools of the past” (USCCB, 1972, p. 35). In particular, the bishops (USCCB, 1972) encouraged openness to reconsidering the relationship between parishes and schools, suggesting that, in the future, “new models of sponsorship and collaboration” may be desirable (p. 35), and encouraging Catholic schools to engage in “partnership with institutions of higher learning” (pp. 33–34), a suggestion the bishops echoed three decades later in *Renewing our Commitment* (USCCB, 2005). The Notre Dame ACE Academy (NDAA) partnership initiative described in this article is one example of an innovative partnership between K-12 Catholic Schools and a Catholic institution of higher education.

### Developing the Notre Dame ACE Academy Partnerships

In this article, we outline the development of the Notre Dame ACE Academy initiative, a partnership designed to serve as one such “new model of sponsorship and collaboration” that seeks to help dioceses and parishes ensure that school leaders and teachers are “knowledgeable in matters of our faith, are professionally prepared, and are committed to the Church” (USCCB, 2005, p. 10). We describe how the experience of Notre Dame’s first foray into university-school partnerships, the Magnificat Schools initiative, informed the creation of the Notre Dame ACE Academy program. Next, we discuss how we developed the unique model of Catholic school governance

utilized by the NDAA. We believe this model is a key lever for effecting comprehensive and lasting changes and improvements in Catholic schools.

The Notre Dame ACE Academies are K-8 schools that operate in partnership with the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) and the University of Notre Dame. Currently, there are five NDAA schools in the United States: St. Ambrose, St. John the Evangelist, and Santa Cruz in Tucson, Arizona; and Sacred Heart and St. Joseph in the Tampa Bay area in Florida. The mission of the Notre Dame ACE Academies—to provide a Catholic education of the highest quality to as many children as possible—is designed to respond to the bishops’ call to “provide an exceptional educational experience for young people—one that is truly Catholic and of the highest academic quality” (USCCB, 2005, p. 1).

Schools participating in the NDAA program receive a number of supports in the areas of Catholic identity, teaching and learning, and stewardship. Provisions of the program include teacher and administrator professional development relating to Catholic identity, leadership, and instructional practices; strategic planning and consulting; and support from ACE faculty and staff in administration, finance, and advancement. These benefits are a result of the program’s unique collaborative approach to school sponsorship and governance, which allows pastors to delegate some responsibilities to a regional NDAA board (Alliance for Catholic Education, 2013). The ND ACE Academy model of governance is discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections of this article.

The Notre Dame ACE Academies re-imagine Catholic school governance in order to address contemporary challenges. With the support of bishops, superintendents, and pastors, ACE seeks to develop a sustainable model of urban Catholic schooling for low-income communities, establishing NDAA partner schools as demonstration sites that illustrate what is possible when pastors, bishops, and Catholic institutions of higher education enter into meaningful and lasting partnerships in which all parties have a substantial investment in the school. In the next section of this article, we describe in detail the culture of one NDAA school, providing a vivid picture of the outcomes of the partnership’s attention to three foundational pillars: educational excellence, community, and faith formation.

### **Ensuring strong, positive, intentional Catholic school culture**

At Sacred Heart Catholic School in Pinellas Park, Florida, each child wears a uniform shirt that identifies him or her as a student in a Notre Dame ACE

Academy; on dress-down days, the children wear t-shirts with an interlocking ND on the front and their goals—"College & Heaven"—prominently displayed on the back. At Sacred Heart, the root beliefs of the principal and faculty are summarized in three phrases: "*God is good, all the time*," "*Jesus is the center of our lives*," and "*Spirit of excellence in all we do*." These phrases are displayed prominently in every classroom. Flags flying outside each classroom identify children not by grade but by the year they will graduate from high school and go to college. The four-year-old preschool class, for example, is known as the "Class of 2026." Every student greets every visitor by name and, after the third or fourth time in the building, visitors can expect a series of high fives, handshakes, and hugs. If asked why, the children will all explain: Names are important. Jesus called the disciples by name, and using names is a sign of respect and love. They learned this belief from their principal during one of his morning assemblies, and it is reinforced by every adult in the building.

Each of the five NDAA schools has its own history and character, with different populations, types of relationships to their neighboring parishes, and histories. Visitors to the schools, however, will observe a key consistency at the heart of the model: Everything that happens in the school is intentional. Everything—from the arrival of the first teacher in the morning to the locking of the doors at night—is thoughtful and purposeful. Every environmental feature—every banner, sign, t-shirt, policy, procedure, and ritual—is connected explicitly to the school's beliefs, values, and purpose. In the Notre Dame ACE Academies, principals and teachers work actively to develop and maintain a strong, positive, intentional Catholic school culture, and this culture is the defining feature of the Notre Dame ACE Academy model of university-school partnership.

Having a strong, positive, intentional school culture is not unique to the Notre Dame ACE Academies. Dozens of schools across the nation enjoy strong school cultures, many of which have been described by researchers and scholars in recent years (Carter, 2000; Carter, 2011; Chenoweth, 2007; Notre Dame Task Force, 2009). The implementation of best practices in different schools is neither innovative nor unique, but replicating the elements of a strong school culture in a new context is quite difficult. Differences among schools in populations, resources, personalities, and histories all pose challenges to any attempt to export best practices from one school context to another.

In the Notre Dame ACE Academies, the details of each school's culture differ, reflecting each institution's particular history and mission, and the particular vision of its leader. The schools do, however, have three things in common. First, each school uses a shared conceptual structure to define school culture. This structure includes an animating principle rooted in a Catholic worldview ("God in all things"), the articulation of a shared purpose ("Making God known, loved, and served"), a set of core values ("Seek, Persist, Excel, Love, Serve"), and an articulation of shared root beliefs determined at the school level. These core cultural elements inform every operating norm and environmental feature. Second, each school goes through the same process of explicitly articulating how each aspect of its environment and every operating norm reflects at least one element of the particular school culture. Third, and most importantly, each school has adopted a governance structure that not only supports principals' efforts to create and maintain a strong, positive, intentional Catholic school culture, but also holds them accountable for doing so.

Before examining in detail the unique governance structure implemented through the NDAA partnership initiative, we will describe its origins and development. The next sections of this article discuss a previous university-school partnership program supported by Notre Dame, the Magnificat Schools. An overview of the program model and a portion of the initial program evaluation, identifying early lessons learned from the partnership, can be found in Dallavis and Johnstone (2009).

### **Magnificat 2.0**

The Notre Dame ACE Academies owe much to the experience of the Magnificat Schools, Notre Dame's first university-school partnership program. Launched in 2006, the Magnificat Schools program was a grant-funded initiative designed to provide a suite of services to three Catholic schools serving under-resourced communities in three different cities for five years (2006–2011). The Magnificat schools were St. Ann Catholic School in Chicago, Illinois; Holy Redeemer Catholic School in Washington, DC; and St. Adalbert Catholic School in South Bend, Indiana.

Shortly after establishing the Magnificat Schools, Notre Dame received unsolicited requests from more than two dozen dioceses and schools across the country, all seeking to become the home of the fourth Magnificat School. These requests for immediate Magnificat expansion suggested a widespread



need at the school and diocesan level for school support, especially for schools that serve low-income communities. In conversations with prospective partners, it also became clear that the most under-resourced Catholic schools needed support in ways that exceeded the capacity of the Magnificat design. To fully address the needs of many of the inquiring schools, a much more comprehensive partnership model would be necessary.

Given the scope of apparent needs at the school level, ACE's leadership elected to delay Magnificat's expansion until program evaluation efforts could be conducted to ensure that future partnerships would benefit from the experience of the pilot partner schools. ACE secured funding to support this program evaluation and research, and a new faculty position was created to develop what was then internally being called "Magnificat 2.0."

In 2010, after an intensive 18-month period of reviewing the Magnificat experience and researching high-quality schools, university-school collaborations, effective networks, and exemplary school models, ACE renewed its commitment to university-school partnerships by launching the Notre Dame ACE Academies. The new program—which had become so different from Magnificat as to warrant a new name—was designed to support clusters of Catholic schools in each of three key domains of schooling: (a) Catholic identity; (b) stewardship and administration; and (c) teaching and learning (Alliance for Catholic Education, 2013).

### **Learning from Magnificat**

The Magnificat effort focused on strengthening the academic quality of partner schools through the infusion of curricular resources, support in their implementation, on-site support from a part-time instructional coach, and periodic support in professional development. Dallavis and Johnstone (2009) have shared an overview of the program model and a portion of the initial program evaluation, identifying the program's early lessons learned. The primary lessons included the strong positive value of instructional coaching, the need for greater support for school operational management and school finances, the desire among teachers and principals for greater professional networking and collaboration opportunities, and the need for clarity in communicating the identity, mission, and expectations of the partnership. At the end of the five years of support, these initial findings were further informed by the divergent experiences and outcomes of the three Magnificat Schools.

St. Ann Catholic School in Chicago saw significant gains in academic

achievement, teacher retention, and financial stability. A strong principal and an empowered school board worked hard to leverage the school's relationship with the university, attracting resources, volunteers, and attention to the school by engaging with the 17,000-member Notre Dame Club of Chicago and the Chicago ACE Advocates community of more than 200 Catholic school supporters. As of 2013, St. Ann continues to thrive, with enrollment at its highest point in decades—at 240 students—and academic achievement results that show consistent growth in core subjects like math and reading.

Student achievement at Holy Redeemer in Washington, DC had been on the rise in the first two years of Magnificat partnership. As at St. Ann, strong school leadership—in both the principal's office and the boardroom—were key elements in improving the quality of the school academically and in strengthening the financial position of the school through enrollment gains. Together, historical financial challenges and demographic shifts in the community had made long-term sustainability more challenging. When the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program was eliminated in 2010, many families pulled their children and the school was forced to close its doors.

At St. Adalbert in South Bend, a series of leadership transitions made it difficult to effect lasting change. Since the inception of Magnificat in 2006, two pastors and five different principals have led St. Adalbert. The school struggled to strengthen academic achievement—though it earned an “A” grade from the state of Indiana in 2010 and 2011 (Indiana Department of Education, 2013). Financial stability, however, proved elusive despite the academic gains, and enrollment remained dangerously low until the establishment of the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program in 2011. The academic gains reflected in the strong state report cards also proved tenuous, and in 2012, academic achievement declined sharply. The school received a “D” from the state in 2012. In 2013, a strong new principal and pastor, along with the state scholarship program, have infused new life and hope in the school, facing the difficult challenge of raising their state accountability grade head-on.

While the three schools gained substantial benefits from certain elements of the Magnificat partnership, other challenges ultimately led to very different outcomes across the schools. The lessons reported by Dallavis and Johnstone (2009) largely held true through the remainder of the program. Surveys administered to teachers, students, and families in Magnificat Schools revealed other areas of strength to be leveraged as well as domains that required deeper investment. For example, Magnificat School teachers reported



that they drew encouragement from the sense that they were not alone. This sense of belonging to a larger group suggested that future efforts promote more cross-school interaction and more explicit development of connections as a network. Also, teachers reported not fully understanding the relationship between the school and the university, and so future partnerships should focus on communicating the mission and vision and relationship clearly. Finally, instructional coaching proved to be a valuable and effective way to improve teacher efficacy and strengthen student achievement, and investments in instructional resources and curricular materials enhanced teacher morale and improved student learning.

In two of the schools, however, the benefits of instructional coaching and new resources provided by Magnificat were overshadowed by the difficulties of leadership turnover and financial instability. At St. Adalbert, the challenges presented by frequent leadership transitions prevented lasting improvements from taking hold, whereas at Holy Redeemer, years of financial difficulties made it impossible for the school to survive the demise of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. In light of these experiences, ACE leadership determined that any expansion of university-school partnerships must address the two key concerns that plagued two of the three Magnificat Schools: school leadership and school finance oversight.

### **Learning from Others**

At the same time that ACE was conducting an evaluation of the Magnificat initiative, it was also exploring the landscape of university-school partnerships and high-performing schools and networks. University faculty visited other colleges and universities that devoted significant time and energy into K-12 school partnerships and spent hours interviewing principals, teachers, and professors engaged in building partnerships between colleges and K-12 schools. Colleagues at Boston College, for example, provided significant insight based on the school's experience of working with St. Columbkille Partnership School, a K-8 Catholic elementary school in Brighton, Massachusetts, whose enrollment had grown 65% in its first three years after engaging in a comprehensive partnership with the Lynch School of Education at Boston College.

ACE also consulted with leaders of national networks of schools to learn more about how to respond to teachers' desires to collaborate professionally across schools. Leaders from the Cristo Rey Network, the NativityMiguel

Schools, and the Hope Christian Schools provided insight into developing networks of faith-based and Catholic schools, while leaders from the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), YES Prep Public Schools, and the Achievement First charter schools helped ACE understand how charter management operators and foundations develop as franchises.

ACE faculty visited stand-alone exemplary schools to learn more about the types of support schools might need to effectively serve children from low-income communities. Faculty spent many days visiting classrooms in schools like Milwaukee College Prep and St. Marcus Lutheran in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Holy Rosary-Mt. Carmel and Transfiguration in New York City; and St. Rose of Lima in Denver, Colorado. All told, ACE faculty visited more than 100 schools and spoke with leaders of a dozen school networks to determine the types of support that would be needed to effectively serve prospective partner schools.

The schools showed great diversity in many areas. Some schools were ethnically diverse; others served exclusively (or nearly exclusively) Latino or African American children. Some school leaders had many years of experience; others were in their first year or two on the job. Some schools boasted dozens of veteran teachers, whereas others were staffed almost entirely with recent college graduates. Some school leaders credited their schools' success to novel programs like corporate work-study, innovative dual language approaches, digital hybrid instruction, graduate support programs—or to longer years and longer school days. One school leader credited a portion of his success to a Brazilian martial arts program he had implemented in place of traditional physical education. Some schools were Catholic, some Lutheran, and others public. Across this great diversity of contexts, each of the effective schools that Notre Dame faculty visited shared the common features of strong school leadership and intentional school culture.

In private schools, an additional key feature emerged: schools either had robust fundraising partners or programs—such as the Big Shoulders Fund in Chicago or the Children's Scholarship Fund in New York—or they effectively implemented parental choice scholarships—such as the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program or the EdChoice Scholarship Program in Ohio.

The results of the 18-month study of exemplary schools serving low-income communities echoed the findings from the Magnificat experience, in which leadership turnover and financial distress had weakened school support efforts. These observations also confirmed findings reported in the research literature on effective schools, which suggested that the quality of

school leadership is among the most important elements to impact student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Lantzi, 2008; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008) and that the development of intentional school culture is related to student achievement (Carter, 2011).

### **Academics and Finances**

Evaluating Magnificat and examining other schools, networks, and partnerships informed the development of the conceptual framework for the Notre Dame ACE Academies. In particular, two core objectives became clear. The first was educational: The partnership must ensure that Catholic schools serving under-resourced communities are “of the highest academic quality” (USCCB, 2005, p. 1). The second is financial: The partnership must ensure the sustainability of Catholic schooling for low-income families by supporting the US bishops’ long-standing efforts to increase parental school choice through “constitutionally permissible programs and legislation” (USCCB, 2005, p. 13).

First, ACE examined teaching and learning interventions in high-performing schools to develop a suite of supports to enhance teaching and learning at partner schools. After consulting the research literature on effective school turnarounds, ACE faculty worked to ensure that each academic initiative within the Notre Dame ACE Academy framework leverages one of five domains of school improvement, as articulated by Bryk, Bender Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010):

1. Leadership: Well-prepared leaders committed to constant improvement drive the Notre Dame ACE Academy culture.
2. Instructional Guidance: In Notre Dame ACE Academies, all students are prepared to be college-ready, and partner schools implement a research-based approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment designed to prepare all students for success in high school and college.
3. Professional Capacity: The Notre Dame ACE Academy culture is a culture of continuous improvement and all faculty and staff are engaged in a program of on-going faith formation and professional growth.
4. Family/Community Involvement: The Notre Dame ACE Academy culture is communally-oriented and dedicated to forming “persons-in-community” (USCCB, 1972, p.4).

5. **Learning Climate:** The Notre Dame ACE Academies are safe places where students are held to high expectations for achievement and are personally supported and cared for by their teachers and peers.

In the area of school finance, ACE recognized opportunities in places like Milwaukee, Florida, Ohio, Arizona, and Pennsylvania, where public-private partnerships, including scholarship tax credits and direct scholarship/voucher programs, had greatly expanded the capacity of urban Catholic schools to sustain educational excellence, especially in low-income communities. In order to demonstrate the capacity of these partnerships to sustain high-quality, low-cost educational excellence in urban Catholic schools, ACE leaders decided to limit the establishment of Notre Dame ACE Academy partnerships to geographic areas in which legislation supports families who choose to educate their children in Catholic schools via tax credit or direct scholarship programs. In this way, the Notre Dame ACE Academy model encourages support for these programs, which the bishops have long argued “will help parents to fulfill their responsibility in educating their children” (USCCB, 2005, p. 12).

### **Governance**

Each school and network leader we consulted warned us, however, that the academic quality and financial stability of the schools would ultimately rest on the quality of the school leader. Throughout its tour of high-performing schools and networks, ACE noted that all of the schools shared two traits—strong school leaders and strong school cultures. Some of the networks of Catholic schools and charter schools had attempted to codify their culture by articulating a canon of key features, which are called “pillars” (KIPP), “mission effectiveness standards” (Cristo Rey, NativityMiguel) or “core values” (YES Prep, Achievement First).

Each network leader expressed the same challenge to implementing the pillars/core values/mission standards across schools and sites—quality leadership. In particular, the question of who has the responsibility for hiring, supervising, and evaluating school leaders emerged in every conversation, at every school, and in every network.

### Exploring Models for Catholic School Governance

The Magnificat Schools, and the majority of the schools seeking to be the fourth Magnificat School, were all traditional parish schools. In the traditional parish school governance model, the pastor holds the governing authority for the school: though, in many cases, an advisory board—often composed entirely of parents—is assembled to advise the pastor and principal on policy and programmatic issues. The degree to which an advisory board—or any partner—influences the daily life of the school depends on the strength of the board and the willingness of the pastor and principal to heed advice.

ACE's experience in the Magnificat Schools suggested that pastors were often over-worked and under-prepared to bear the burden of governing large and complex operations like schools. As long as full responsibility for the support and supervision of school leadership remained solely with the pastor, the capacity of any partnership to effect transformative improvement would remain limited. If ACE wanted to ensure that a strong school culture could be established and maintained, the program would need to be able to ensure strong school leaders would be hired and supported. To ensure high quality leadership, ACE determined it would need to explore the possibility of adopting new governance options that would ask pastors and bishops to share some responsibility for leadership selection, formation, and evaluation.

ACE explored the different governance options employed by networks, other university-school partnerships, and dioceses that had adopted alternative governance arrangements. One national network leader, Cristo Rey's then-CEO Rob Birdsell, described partnership options as being on a continuum of governance options that range from "low power" and influence on school operations to total control, or "own-and-operate." This notion of a continuum of governance options became a helpful heuristic for evaluating existing schools, networks, and partnerships.

#### Traditional Governance Model

The traditional parish school model falls at the extreme end of the "low power" side of the spectrum Birdsell described. In these schools, the board has no actual responsibility and only serves in an advisory role. Also at the "low power" of the spectrum are the more informal school partnerships; for example, the relationship that some universities have with nearby K-12 schools to provide student teachers, or to offer occasional professional development. In

these relationships, the university provides the service to the school and there is little or no expectation that the university will play a role in the governance of the school. Both sides may end the relationship at any time, and changes in the partnership have no bearing on the fundamental identity or sustainability of the school.

ACE had seen in the Magnificat experience the challenges of loose partnerships. The program could secure substantial resources and implement the best educational practices, but if strong school leadership could not be guaranteed, success would be unlikely. For ACE to make the level of significant investment that would be needed to effect school transformation—given the enormous importance of the school leader—the relationship between the university and the school would need to move farther along the governance continuum.

### **School Networks and Clusters**

Further along the spectrum, we find clusters and networks of schools, including Cristo Rey, NativityMiguel, and KIPP. In these cases, a network, foundation, university, or other entity offers schools a brand and resources as long as the schools adhere to a particular set of expectations—the pillars or mission effectiveness standards. If a school fails to adhere to the standards, the network may withdraw its support and the brand name. The effect of such a divorce varies depending on the depth of the partnership. These relationships are often less ones of governance than of management contracts or, in KIPP's case, licensing agreements.

In these partnerships, the effectiveness of the partnership is a function of the capacity of the university, network, or foundation to provide enough support to member schools to ensure that they can all meet high standards as well as the network's willingness to enforce those high standards. In other words, the network has to provide enough resources to be sure that schools effectively implement the model, but it must also be willing to kick a school out of the network when it fails to live up to the model's expectations.

### **Control by Partner Organizations**

At the “own-and-operate” end of the continuum of governance, we find schools that are either deeply dependent on foundations, universities, charter management operators, or nonprofit corporations—or are owned and oper-



ated by them entirely. These entities hire and fire school leaders directly, and as a result they maintain tight control over school leadership and quality. In these cases, the owner bears full financial responsibility for each school it operates. This is the model adopted by many charter school operators as well as many private faith-based schools. The challenge at this end of the spectrum is the enormous amount of time, money, and energy that must be devoted to each school by the partner entity. ACE sought to develop a university-school partnership that could eventually become replicable and scalable, and the cost of the human and financial resources needed to engage in this sort of deep partnership is prohibitive.

### **Boards of Limited Jurisdiction**

Somewhere along the spectrum are boards of limited jurisdiction, a term used to describe the boards employed by an increasing number of Catholic schools in recent years. In many dioceses, pastors and bishops have established boards to which they delegate real responsibility for some elements of school operations, moving away from advisory boards toward more true governing bodies. ACE visited several dioceses that employed various forms of boards of limited jurisdiction, learning from the experiences of Catholic schools in the dioceses of Scranton, Pennsylvania; Burlington, Vermont; and St. Augustine, Florida.

The location of each of these schools on the governance spectrum is determined by the “limit” the pastor or bishop places on the board’s jurisdiction. In Catholic schools, the jurisdiction of the boards is necessarily limited because, according to Canon 532 of the Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church (*Code of canon law*, 1983), there are certain responsibilities that pastors and bishops, as “juridic administrators,” are not at liberty to delegate. According to the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), the juridic administrator does have the power to delegate certain other responsibilities (O’Brien, 1987). In the case of parish schools, the juridic administrator is the pastor. In the case of diocesan schools, it is the bishop. The NCEA (O’Brien, 1987) outlines 13 responsibilities that must be either taken up by the pastor or delegated to a board or other entity.

### **Specified responsibilities for the governance of a Catholic school**

1. Catholic identity of the educational program
2. Religious education program

3. Sacramental preparation program
4. Temporal goods of parish, including facilities
5. Hiring, supervision, evaluation of the school leader
6. Planning: establishing a mission statement, goals, and strategic plans
7. Policy development: formulating policies that give general directions for administrative action
8. Financing: developing plans and means to finance the education program, including tuition and development and fund-raising plans, allocating resources according to a budget, and monitoring spending and plans
9. Public relations: communicating with the public about the school programs; recruiting students, promoting the education program
10. Evaluation: determining whether goals and plans are being met
11. Hiring, supervision, evaluation of school staff
12. Education program: establishing and supervising curriculum and instruction and all education programming
13. Discipline: evaluating and managing student behavior

In the sections that follow, we review two common models for dividing these responsibilities in Catholic schools before presenting the unique model utilized by the Notre Dame Ace Academies.

### **Traditional governance models**

The NCEA provides a suggested division of labor in its primer on governance (O'Brien, 1987), with each responsibility in a traditional parish school model assigned to the board, the pastor, or the principal. (See Figure 1). In the traditional parish model, responsibilities 1 through 4 are reserved for the juridic administrator (bishop or pastor) by the Code of Canon Law (Canon 532). The pastor retains nearly all administrative responsibilities, delegating only responsibilities 11 through 13, which pertain to school operations, to the principal. Consultative boards may be formed to make non-binding recommendations to the pastor and principal, particularly regarding responsibilities 6 through 10.

Throughout the course of ACE's research on governance options, the most traditional model of Catholic school governance was rarely mentioned—the delegation of school operations by a pastor or bishop to a religious community. In the history of many Catholic schools, pastors played almost no role in

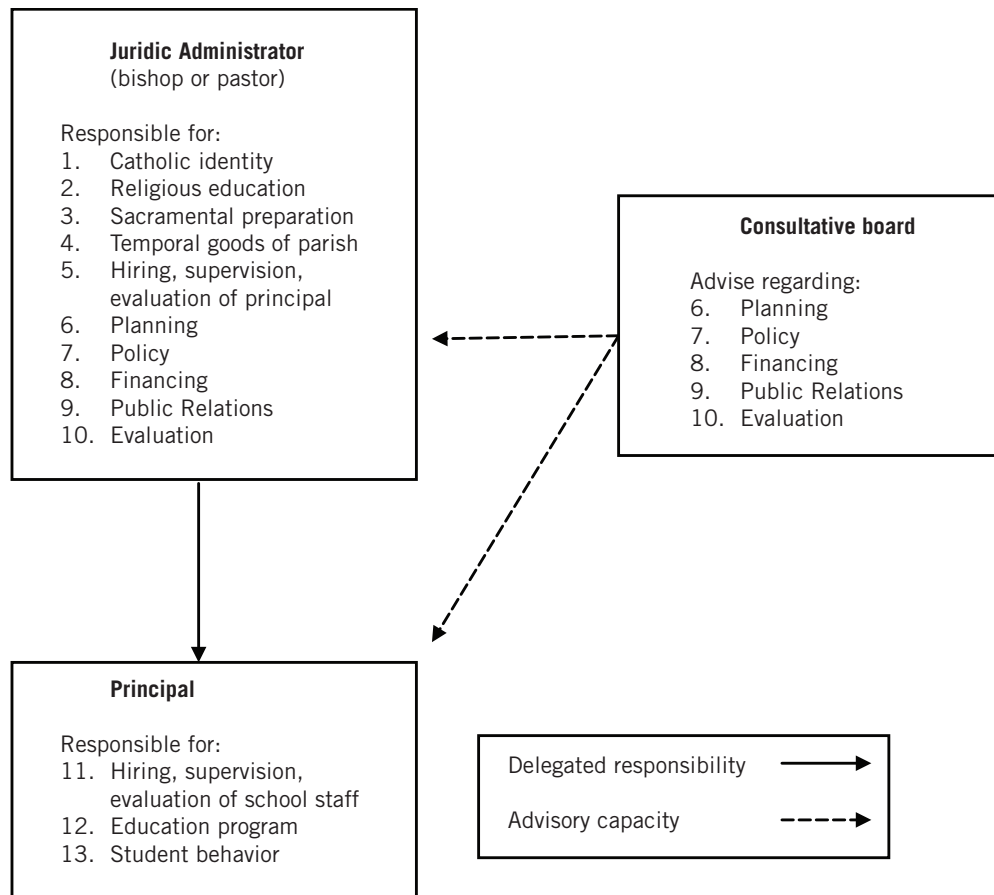
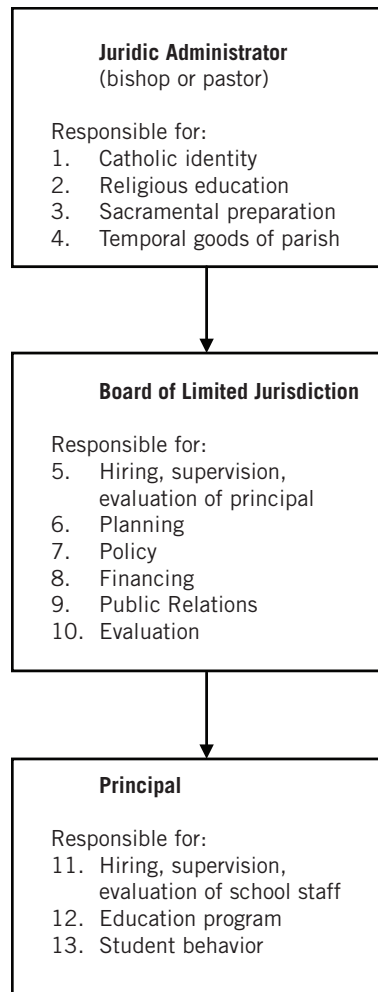


Figure 1. Responsibilities in a traditional parish (or diocesan) school model

the governance of the school; instead, they invited a religious community to staff and support the school. Pastors turned school operations over entirely to the sisters and brothers, and new principals were selected and supported by the religious order. At St. Ann in Chicago, for example, the parish's founding Polish pastor invited the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth to lead and staff the school when it was established in 1903, and a sister of that community served as principal for the next 100 years. Technically, the schools remained traditional parish schools. While the pastor canonically retained his ability to hire and fire the principals, in practice he delegated that responsibility to the superior of the religious community, who both supported her principals and held them accountable for ensuring school quality.



*Figure 2.* Responsibilities in a parish (or diocesan) school with a board of limited jurisdiction.

### **Board of Limited Jurisdiction**

In NDAA's board of limited jurisdiction model, the juridic administrator creates a board that is delegated specified responsibilities for governing the school, including hiring, supervising, and evaluating the principal and for all other areas of school governance except for those which are specifically reserved to the pastor/bishop by Canon Law. (See Figure 2). The board is

delegated, by the juridic administrator, responsibilities 5 through 10, and the principal is delegated responsibilities 11 through 13.

### **The ACE Academies Model**

After a thorough review of the experiences of different networks, school operators, and other university-school partnerships, ACE elected to establish a single board of limited jurisdiction to govern a cluster of schools in a diocese. Unlike most modern boards of limited jurisdiction, however, the Notre Dame ACE Academies model is deliberately and explicitly patterned after the traditional parish relationship with a religious community. With this governance structure, ACE seeks to combine the benefits of a traditional parish school in which the pastor contracts with a religious community to recruit, train, and support school leadership with the value provided by a board of limited jurisdiction. In this partnership, ACE provides services similar to those offered by religious communities: recruiting, training, and supporting school leaders to help them implement an educational program that reflects a particular school culture and charism, which is dedicated to educational excellence, the experience of community in Christ, and faith formation in the Catholic tradition. This governance model, which is ultimately collaborative, is intended to free pastors to focus on the pastoral life and Catholic identity of the school while empowering local community members to greater participation in the life of the Church through the board.

In the ND ACE Academy model, the juridic administrator retains canonically reserved responsibilities and delegates the rest to a board of limited jurisdiction comprised of diocesan officials and members of the NDAA leadership team. The board in turn delegates school operations responsibilities to the principal. (See Figure 3). The juridic administrator retains responsibilities 1 through 4. A school leadership committee of the Notre Dame ACE Academies Board is delegated responsibility 5, which includes hiring, supervising, and evaluating principals of all the ND ACE Academy schools in the diocese. The principals oversee the education program, taking on responsibilities 11 through 13. The board oversees all other areas of school governance, including planning, policy development, financing, public relations, and evaluation, and the board provides consultation to the school leadership committee regarding hiring, supervising, and evaluating the principal.

Ultimately, this model proved appealing to prospective dioceses and parishes—and to the university—because it represented the most collaborative

approach to school governance. From the diocesan perspective, the model promotes collaboration among the leaders of the diocese and parishes, lay community stakeholders, and the university. By delegating certain responsibilities to the board, the pastors and bishop gain the benefit of collaborating with community leaders and the expertise and resources of the university. From ACE’s perspective, because research suggests that school success is dependent on strong leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Liethwood & Jantzi, 2008; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), the board

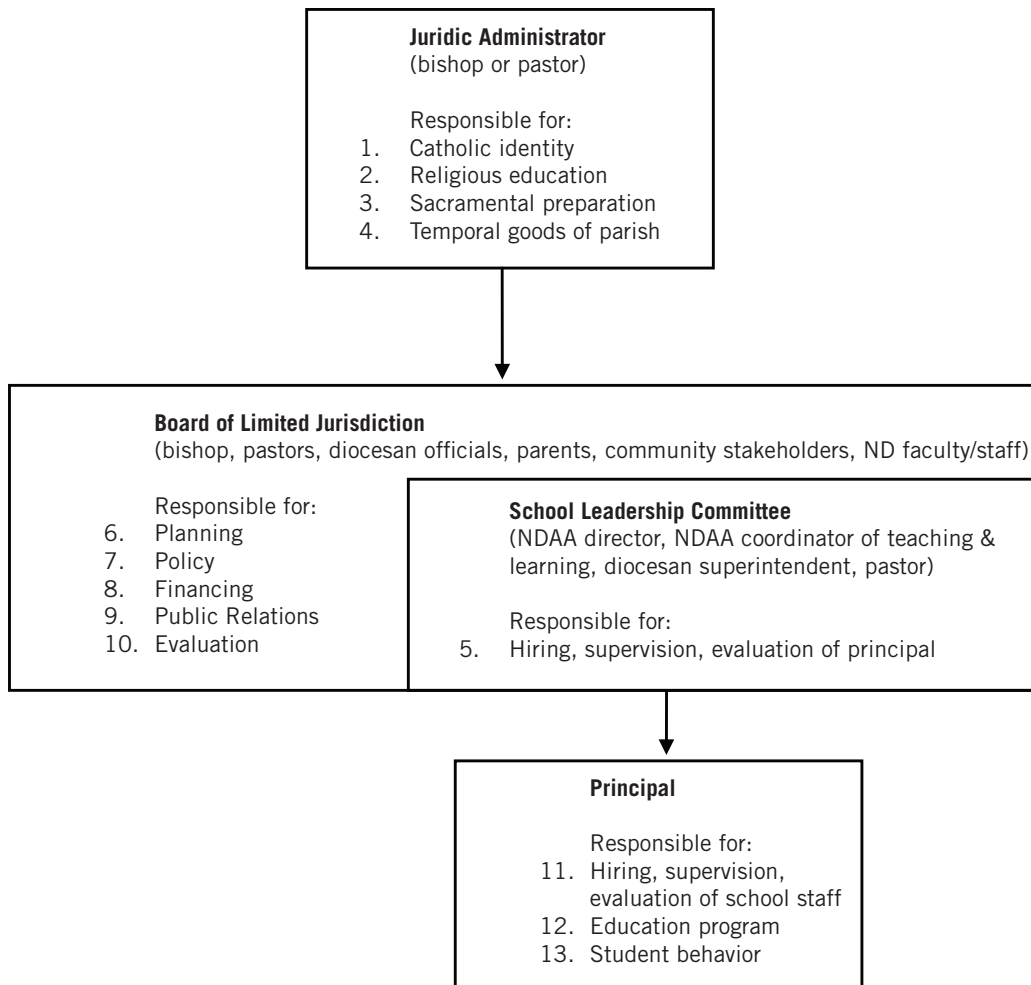


Figure 3. Responsibilities in the ND ACE Academy model.



mechanism that allows members of the Notre Dame faculty and staff to play a meaningful role in the hiring, supervision, and evaluation of school leaders is critical. The structure of the board in this model ensures that university resources will be effectively utilized, with hope that the model will illustrate what is possible when pastors, bishops, and Catholic institutions of higher education share a substantial ownership stake in schools serving low-income communities.

### Conclusion

In January 2010, the bishop of the Diocese of Tucson, Gerald Kicanas, announced the new partnership model when he invited ACE to designate St. Ambrose, St. John the Evangelist, and Santa Cruz Catholic Schools the nation's first "Notre Dame ACE Academies." Bishop Robert Lynch of the Diocese of St. Petersburg invited ACE to establish two additional Notre Dame ACE Academies in Florida in 2012. In these new and more comprehensive partnerships, ACE enhanced many of the effective elements of the Magnificat Schools program, especially in the areas of instructional guidance and professional capacity, while making changes to address the most critical challenges the Magnificat Schools encountered.

The partnership continues to develop through on-going evaluation and analysis, identifying strengths and areas for improvements. The academic program, rooted in Bryk et al.'s (2010) five levers of school effectiveness, has demonstrated early success in student achievement gains thanks to an infusion of research-proven curricular resources, targeted professional development, on-site instructional coaching, and teachers' informed use of data. The financial model, which bolsters partner schools' sustainability through best stewardship practices and the effective use of state tax credit and voucher programs, has likewise seen success in Arizona, where ACE has secured more than \$3 million in new parental choice scholarships for families who wish to provide their children with a high-quality Catholic education in the Notre Dame ACE Academies.

To date, the governance model has proven effective as well. The school leadership committee of the ND ACE Academy board in Tucson has conducted performance reviews of each principal each year and provides support and resources in an ongoing program of professional formation. Although some principals had never received a performance review before, they have

generally welcomed the insight and recommendations from the 360 degree feedback model employed by the ACE faculty members on the school leadership committees, who gather constructive reviews of principal performance from students, teachers, parents, and board members. In Spring 2013, the ND ACE Academies program completed its third and fourth principal searches. To date, all of the school leadership committees' hiring decisions have been unanimous, and each principal hired by the committee has proven to be a driven, committed leader whose vision is transforming school culture and academics.

There remains significant work to be done to truly transform the partner schools, but the extent to which the ND ACE Academies have already increased their capacity to effectively serve their students and welcome more children to their classrooms is encouraging. The partnership's unique governance structure remains outside the awareness of students and parents most of the time, as they focus instead on the school culture, academic rigor, and affordability of the schools. These more salient features, however, are successful largely because of the governance structure. By empowering both pastors and principals to serve their schools to the best of their ability while also keeping school leaders accountable for their continued growth and success, the Notre Dame ACE Academy boards attend to a critical lever for transforming schools. Indeed, this model of governance enables all the members of a school's community to lend their gifts to the continuation of a great legacy: Catholic education of the highest quality provided to as many children as possible. ACE expects to continue to refine the program, in order to further develop a model for the sustainable operation of contemporary Catholic schools.

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*Christian Dallavis is senior director of leadership programs in the Alliance for Catholic Education at the University of Notre Dame. Andrea Cisneros is associate director of the Notre Dame ACE Academies at the University of Notre Dame. Correspondence about this article can be sent to Dr. Dallavis at [dallavis.1@nd.edu](mailto:dallavis.1@nd.edu).*