

9-1-2005

## Responses From the Field

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### Recommended Citation

Johnstone, J. V., & Hanbury, K. M. (2005). Responses From the Field. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 9 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0901062013>

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## RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

*In an effort to encourage dialogue and reflection on matters of common concern and interest, we invite responses on selected articles from other educators, who engage the text critically and offer some reflections about its utility and validity.*

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I am a mother whose commitment to placing my children in Catholic schools was non-negotiable. I am also a teacher educator who worked with Catholic schools in an urban archdiocese for more than 20 years. Therefore, Owens' article resonated with me on several fronts. I appreciated the difficulty of remaining a neutral participant observer when, as a mother, the author must have wanted to "fix" problems or perceptions for the sake of her children's school. I fully admit that my maternal instincts and my heritage as a fourth generation product of Catholic schools and an involved member of my children's school parish probably would have biased my own perceptions about the research questions which Owens posed: "Should this school stay open? Can this school stay open? If it should, can it? If it can, should it?" (2005, p. 62).

Although I have no difficulty with such questions and I feel a qualitative approach to these questions is appropriate, I am not convinced that the richness of the qualitative methods employed sufficiently establishes the generalizability of the findings to all urban Catholic schools. However, the study points to valuable lessons in the ongoing quest to strengthen Catholic schools.

### LEADERSHIP IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

In my years of experience working with and in parish Catholic schools, I have had the privilege of relating to many strong leaders. Some were com-

mitted parish priests intent on ensuring that the parish school was the center of evangelization of the next generation of practicing and participating Catholics. Some were gifted school principals who willingly accepted the mantle of spiritual, instructional, and managerial leadership. Still others were lay leaders and parents who shared their energy and talents so that the strategic planning needs and facility needs of the school would be met. When a parish school was fortunate to have all three types of leaders, it thrived. If one or more were missing, the school faltered. Owens correctly points out that the school is a community, grounded in the Catholic faith, but often evaluated by the relevance of the curriculum and the achievement of the students. It is a community within the larger community of the parish and its mission of necessity must reflect that parish community. For this reason, I believe that Owens's reflection of mission is particularly intriguing, "How does each Catholic school contribute to the overall existence of a local functioning community beyond the walls of each individual building?" (2005, p. 71). Without a doubt this question needs to be addressed in any feasibility study of an individual parish school, just as an evaluation of the commitment of the school and parish leaders must be conducted. Lastly, can and should the governance of the parish school remain as is?

## **THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY**

Owens points out that a local Catholic university agreed to partner with St. Jude's as a professional development school and she concludes that, "the partnerships with the parish and university in particular have served to increase the positive perceptions of the school" (2005, p. 69). I question whether this is a sufficient outcome. Currently there are approximately 180 Catholic colleges and universities in the United States that prepare teachers. Many of these colleges and universities were begun with a strong mission for preparing teachers for Catholic schools of the immigrant Church. However, their schools and departments of education have migrated from this mission to the broader preparation of teachers for all schools, and many no longer admit nor recognize responsibility for ensuring the viability of Catholic K-12 education (Watzke, 2002).

It is time that Catholic colleges and universities engaged Catholic K-12 education, and particularly parish K-8 schools and diocesan high schools, in meaningful ways. Partnering with local Catholic schools as professional development sites is a beginning, but it is not sufficient. Catholic colleges and universities need to provide intentional and intensive resources to bear on strengthening Catholic K-12 education. Several have begun this journey. The 13 members of the University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE) are committed to the preparation and placement of teachers in

under-resourced Catholic schools across the country. Members of the Association of Catholic Leadership Programs (ACLP) prepare administrators who serve Catholic education as principals and diocesan superintendents. Sixteen universities commit to the sponsorship of this very journal, the only research journal focusing on Catholic education in the country. Many, many more education programs in Catholic higher education institutions partner with local Catholic schools for professional development sites. Let us commit to deepen these relationships. Let us in Catholic colleges and universities help stem the tide of school closings by bringing our human, intellectual, and spiritual resources to the challenges of this critical problem. Dynamic Catholic schools were available for my children. I would like to see them flourishing for my grandchildren.

The Owens article tells the story of one school in Chicago. Although the study itself may not be highly generalizable, it is compelling in a year in which the Chicago archdiocese announced the closing of 23 schools (Archdiocese of Chicago, 2005). Perhaps the efforts at St. Jude kept it from that list. It is past time for the Catholic community, the clergy, parish members, Catholic school educators, and those of us in Catholic higher education to mobilize before the Catholic school in our parish is beyond salvage.

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Catholic identity has become an issue for contemporary Catholic schools because of a profound change in the context in which these schools exist. Gone are the days that all students are participating members of the Catholic faith, gone are the days that all parents seek first to provide Catholic education for their children, and yes, gone are the days when Catholic chil-

dren could attend Catholic schools without their families having to pay tuition. However, what has not disappeared is the fact Catholic schools should continue. Buetow (1988) tells us in his book, *The Catholic School: Its Roots, Identity and Future*, that Catholic schools should continue not only because they are in existence already but that they are needed to develop faculties in a systematic way, to strengthen the ability to judge, to promote a sense of values, to establish a point of reference. Buetow argues that Catholic schools contribute to the development of the mission of the People of God, to the dialogue between the Church and the human family, to the safeguarding of the freedom of conscience, to the cultural progress of the world, and sometimes to the solution of problems created by public deficiency. The Catholic school points, according to Buetow, to the purpose of leading the young to their human and Christian perfection.

Owens shares with those who struggle with identity issues for Catholic schools in urban areas some thought-provoking insights based upon a case study. The author is correct in reiterating that the roles of the principal, the teachers, and the parents are pivotal to creating a positive and collaborative environment within the learning community of the Catholic school. What was most enjoyable about this case study was that leaders were not afraid to move away from the static atmosphere that this Chicago school once held so firm. The new principal came to lead. The easy way out would have been to say "if it ain't broke then don't fix it." If she had this philosophy then eventually the school would have closed. The principal recognized the school was no longer relevant to the community in its existing form. This case study supports the thoughts of Palmer (1998), who builds upon a simple premise: "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). This case study emphasized the importance of actively involving the pastor, associate pastor, school board, faculty, and parents in the process of re-invigorating the school.

Catholic schools in many urban areas are influenced by social changes. The changes in the populations of urban districts, the decline in the effectiveness of public schools in some places, the increasing individualism, secularism and consumerism in American society as a whole, as well as the segregation of religious and moral thought have offered special challenges to Catholic education. As schools committed to the common good, to a spiritual ideology, and to a preferential option for the poor, Catholic schools have become the education of choice for many poor parents trying to give their children an advantage and for all parents who want their children to receive a value-centered education. Catholic parents still look to the Catholic school to integrate their religious ideals into an excellent academic education. Non-Catholic parents look for Catholic schools to be a community of persons gathered for the purpose of learning secular and religious matters. Today

Catholic schools in most urban areas are increasingly serving a non-Catholic population. When a significant number of students are not Catholic, questions related to the nature of the school arise. This case study conducted by Owens concluded that there was a new and unique way to relate to the environment and the community in which this particular school was located.

What was not totally clear was why this principal and this school chose to put an emphasis on the arts rather than perhaps a particular curricular emphasis. However, the clarification made by the principal and the pastor certainly showed that conversation had taken place not in isolation but in consultation with the archdiocese concerning the identification of the parish school. This was followed by the principal and pastor explaining the concept to the rest of the community. Parents, of course, would be concerned about curriculum and faculty about employment. The principal's vision and direction helped to win the support of the school's community. Jude Academy and Arts Center became a place where faith, community, and service were the identifying marks of the school. It is also interesting to note that most parents, whether Catholic or not, do not ask many questions about how religion courses are taught. The author of this essay is correct in saying that what precipitated the increase in enrollment was that this Catholic school community became a faith-based community. Jude Academy and Arts Center became a place where children felt like they belonged, a place where a community had common values and where all felt nurtured, whether Catholic or not. A truly spiritual environment is one that is inviting, welcoming, and loving to all, no matter gender, nationality, or preference for prayer and worship.

Owens does show us through her study that the parish school can add a new dimension to a parish community. This essay reminds us that a parish is made up not only of the school community, but all the members of the church community. Owens is correct in saying that in order to preserve Catholic schools, there needs to be more global thinking about the Catholic community – a new definition as it were. It is great for the Catholic community in urban areas to recognize, applaud, celebrate, and serve all who share the communal space within a specific boundary. Congratulations are in order for this successful transformation at St. Jude.

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