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Leadership by the Standards: Constructing a Principal Evaluation Protocol based on the NSBECS

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One of the anticipated results of the wider adoption and use of the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (NSBECS) has been the call for different tools aligned to the NSBECS. Multiple (arch) dioceses and schools have endeavored to construct such tools for their own use. In the state of Wisconsin, the Catholic Conference has aligned their entire accreditation process with the NSBECS in a effort to guide Catholic schools towards excellence in all areas of school self-understanding, programming, and management. In 2016 Dr. Kathleen Cepelka, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee created a task force of principals and other school leaders under the direction of Associate Superintendent Susan Nelson to craft a Teachers' Evaluation Framework based upon the NSBECS and the other best practices on teacher evaluation currently in use. I had the good fortune to serve on this task force that completed its work in 2018. Dr. Cepelka then asked me to engage school leaders and others in the field of leadership evaluation to create a similar tool/framework for principal evaluation. Last October at the Catholic Leadership Summit in Jacksonville, Florida I presented a *Principal Evaluation Protocol* to an audience gathered at the Summit. The tool is the result of wide consultation and a deep reading of the NSBECS and other literature on job evaluation in both Church and secular circles. This article describes the construction of the *Principal Evaluation Protocol* with a particular emphasis on the utilization of the NSBECS as the guiding document in the process.

In the summer of 2017, a group of administrators from across the Archdiocese of Milwaukee gathered at Marquette University at the Institute for Catholic Leadership to discuss the task of evaluating principals from the perspective of growing in their professions through a formative encounter with the letter and spirit of the NSBECS. These administrators represented Catholic elementary and high schools; urban, suburban, and rural schools; archdiocesan, Dominican, Jesuit, and School Sisters of Notre Dame institutions. They also represented various tenures of experience in Catholic

schools, in public schools and in business, While each viewed the the task at hand through a particular lens, they coordinated around shared narratives of their own history of being evaluated and evaluating others. These discussions led to a solid sense of how to use evaluation as a tool for professional development, and not simply as an exercise of personnel review and a tool in the dismissal process. Considerable brainstorming occurred around the behaviors and zones of administrative oversight that were most attached to an effective principal's work. In addition, the need for useful feedback, review, support, and continuing education was emphasized. While the presidents at the table spoke from their experience as reviewers of serving principals, the other participants in the discussion agreed that the role of the reviewer needed considerable training and support. There was no consensus of how to develop reliable reviewers in the case of a school that did not have a chief executive solely serving the school. Suggestions from third-party external reviewers to Catholic university personnel emerged, but since the group was not charged with solving this issue, the matter was set aside for future consideration by another group.

The group considered several initial texts in an effort to establish a set of parameters within which to conduct discussions. The first text was *The National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (NSBECS)* and the benchmark rubrics associated with school leadership, specifically, benchmark 1.3; all the benchmarks for Standard 4; all the benchmarks for Standard 6; benchmark 9.1; benchmarks 10.1, 10.7, and 10.8; and all the benchmarks for Standard 13. As a point of comparison *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL)* (formerly known as the *ISLLC Standards*) were also examined. A differentiating feature between the two texts was the sole focus on the leader's abilities and responsibilities as described in the PSEL as opposed to the "leader within the context of the school" posture present in the NSBECS. Assuming the need for growth and development on the part of the principal within the Catholic school, readings on school innovation were considered by the group as well as a series of articles from the business sector explaining current thinking on performance evaluation.

After reviewing the sources and engaging in discussion about the key differences between Catholic school leadership and the leadership of other schools, both public and private, the group agreed that domains governing principal evaluation would be Mission Stewardship, Academic Leadership, Operational Leadership, and Community Stewardship. These were hybrid designations from the NSBECS, other sources, and the group's experience. Assuming that a fruitful principal evaluation considers numer-

ous factors compiled over an entire year aimed at developing the principal's knowledge and skills, the group agreed to use the Milwaukee Teacher Evaluation taskforce's achievement level designations borrowed in part from the NSBECS: Not Evident; Partially Evident; Fully Evident; and Fully Evident and Innovative. Evidence would need to be gathered for an effective evaluation, so, borrowing from work in the Archdiocese of Chicago, one member of the team suggested the use of a "data dashboard" around key items that were measurable and the result of principal influence and leadership. Examples of these data points would be: an agreed upon increase in standardized testing scores; enrollment prospects and targets; communications events and tools employed to engage the community; and new initiatives targeted to achieve specific school growth goals. The group agreed with this idea. It was around these conceptual components, then, that the Protocol would be based. Additional conversations considering concepts for evaluation were engaged with additional diocesan priests who led schools, and the leadership of Catholic Leadership 360, a pastoral review tool being used throughout the country in multiple (arch) dioceses. The conceptual groundwork had been laid to begin the construction of the evaluation instrument. In summary, the group's work set the following parameters for constructing a Principal's Evaluation Protocol: (a) it was to be data informed via dashboard categories; (b) it was to involve multiple stakeholders' input; (c) it would employ a growth and development trajectory looking back at prior performance over a given time interval (3-4 months); (d) it would provide a critical consideration of the principal's interaction with the community; (e) the feedback to the principal would be filtered through schools' current governance structures, and (f) performance surveys distributed to multiple stakeholders would be used to supplement and enrich the data dashboard.

At this juncture, the NSBECS became the most formative part of the composition process. In general, four levels of consideration were employed for inclusion in the tool:

- Level I contains items that were explicitly stated for the principal as a task or area of leadership in the NSBECS. For example, benchmark 6.2: The leader/leadership team articulates a clear mission and vision for the school, and engages the school community to ensure a school culture that embodies the mission and vision.
- Level II contains items that implied principal leadership via her/his role on the leadership team by the NSBECS such as benchmark 6.5: The leader/leadership team directs the development and continuous improvement of curriculum and instruction, and utilizes school-wide data to plan for

continued and sustained academic excellence and growth. In many cases the principal is associated with this process but others conduct the process.

- Level III addresses items discerned for the principal given the larger context of the school from the NSBECS. This discernment often relies on a principal's community relations and interpersonal skills. Benchmark 9.1 illustrates this application: School-wide programs for parents/guardians provide opportunities for parents/guardians to partner with school leaders, faculty, and other parents/guardians to enhance the educational experiences for the school community.
- Level IV contains items that may or may not be under the principal's direct purview given the organizational composition of the school included in the NSBECS. In many elementary schools this can be illustrated in benchmark 13.2: The enrollment management plan requires the governing body to review and the school leader/leadership team to supervise annual and continuous measurement and analysis of both enrollment and retention patterns for all student groups. In some schools the principal deals with issues related to enrollment management, and in some schools the principal does not. The team concluded that the *Protocol*, like many other evaluative tools, would be constructed around a series of rubrics to describe the desired levels of achievement in each area under consideration.

The NSBECS are perhaps the only set of whole school standards that are in use today. As such they provide a unique opportunity to reflect upon the many opportunities for changing

practices and behaviors in a Catholic school that can be positively influenced by a principal's active leadership. In developing the Principal's Evaluation Protocol special care was taken to consider how a highly functioning, innovative principal could positively impact a school by surmising how a principal could/would exert influence or ideas on each area articulated in the NSBECS. The Protocol is an adaptive instrument in that it is easily altered to particular (arch)dioceses or schools depending upon their strategic leadership needs at different junctures.

The Protocol recognizes that different leaders are needed by different schools at different times in the school's history. In the same vein, the NSBECS, because of their scope in articulating the effective functioning of Catholic schools, cover a much larger catalogue of issues than any one leader at a given school at a given time can be expected to administer. Hence, the use of a "leadership team" in many instances. Assuming that a school community has hired a principal whom the community believes is well suited to their particular circumstances, the Protocol is designed to be adapted to

a school's context while remaining faithful to the NSBECS. Hence, the Protocol is developmentally based: it assumes that a principal will have to acquire or adapt new skills during her/his leadership tenure, and it evaluates the process and extent of this growth.

The Principal Evaluation Protocol

At this juncture a description of the Protocol's structure and process is in order. The Protocol is divided into three sections, each of which will be examined in turn below.

Section I: Principal's Leadership Traits

Section I focuses on the principal's leadership style through a consideration of the personal traits the principal exhibits during the course of her/his work within the community. The reason driving this section is the crucial role that the principal plays in developing relationship throughout the entire school community. Crucial to its effective use is the collection of evidence to develop a holistic understanding of how the principal interacts with the variety of stakeholders that function within the school's many concentric circles of relationship. It may be used in its entirety or it may be abbreviated to measure specific traits. A key component of its use relies on a realistic sampling of those familiar with the principal's work within the constituent community group being surveyed.

This section expands on specific sections of the NSBECS and attempts to operationalize them. Whereas the NSBECS set standards for optimal school performance and the benchmarks break these goals down into several levels of achievement, individuals within schools set forth the details of behavior that will achieve the benchmark levels. How one is to act should be aligned with the type of environment that is trying to be created. For example, many of the personal characteristics are elaborations from Catholic social teaching and the *Compendium of Catholic Social Doctrine*. Section I of the Protocol attempts to determine if the principal "possesses a social justice orientation." This orientation should be informed by dimensions of the Church's teaching on what constitutes a Gospel-centered community. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states:

Solidarity is also an authentic moral virtue, not a "feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. That is to say to the good of

all and of each individual, because we are *all* really responsible *for all*" [418]. Solidarity rises to the rank of fundamental *social virtue* since it places itself in the sphere of justice. It is a virtue directed *par excellence* to the *common good*, and is found in "a commitment to the good of one's neighbour with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to 'lose oneself' for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to 'serve him' instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage. (p. 193)

Whereas it cannot be assumed that principals have a fine-grained understanding of Catholic social teaching when they assume their positions, instruction regarding the details of these teachings and subsequent leadership behaviors associated with them can be learned, implemented, and made part of an individual's repertoire in dealing with the community. The feedback gathered in Section I allows such growth to occur from "partially evident" to "fully evident" to "fully evident and innovative."

Section II: Principal's Data Dashboard

Section II of the Protocol is the Principal's Data Dashboard. At the outset of the academic year the reviewer and the principal decide on which priorities will be the focus of data collection in order to measure the principal's effect on the school's performance in the areas that the principal can most directly affect. These areas flow from the NSBECS. In each area, "artifacts, actions, or evidence" are required to be collected to determine the principal's effect on the area. Surveys may be distributed (examples are provided in the Protocol), data from testing processes, enrollment statistics, instructional guidelines, assessment practices and many other types of data may be considered. This section grounds the principal's performance in data prescribed by the leadership and governing structures of the school. Instructional achievement may be measured by the data sources in use at the school, but the role of the principal interacting with these data sources should be identified at the outset of the academic year as the review process is undertaken. For example, if the job description of the principal is to serve as an instructional leader, and a goal is set for improvement around a specific student achievement metric, the role of the principal around the metric should be elaborated before the review process is engaged. Is the principal serving as the instructional coach working with faculty to improve performance? Does the principal control a budget for instructional coaches who will work with faculty? Is there a testing process controlled by the principal that will measure improvement around the particular dimensions that produce the metric? Clarifying these

issues will yield areas where the principal's leadership is most effective and where the school needs to consider a fuller range of options to effect sustained improvement.

Beyond improvement data, it is recommended that the school use survey instruments directed at different sets of stakeholders. The survey questions are adapted from the third section of the Protocol. The use of surveys is a key part of the NSBECS for strategic planning, school improvement, and accreditation. In this spirit, then, the Principal Evaluation Protocol relies on surveys of significant stakeholders to acquire input on the principal's activity within the larger community.

Section III: Principal's Professional Development Profile

Section III of the Protocol is the Principal's Professional Development Profile. Designed directly from the NSBECS, this section should be aligned with the school's strategic vision for the principal's continued effectiveness. Specific components of school operations and the principal's specific duties have been gathered from the relevant areas of the NSBECS and parsed into achievement levels. Under five principal evaluation domains twenty-three areas of consideration are identified for consideration, feedback, growth and development. Depending on the principal's professional background this section allows reviewers and principals to determine the template for the principal's professional growth from year to year depending on the school's changing needs. Should the principal need additional training in a particular area, for example, technology leadership, the school leadership and governing body can make arrangements for the principal to acquire this training, put it into action, and measure the results. This new skills package can then be used by the school to plan future growth under the principal's continued leadership.

The combination of the three sections of the Protocol measuring data, community feedback, school growth trajectory, and the principal's interactions with the community allow for schools and principals to develop in the changing educational landscape. The reliance upon data within the context of the community gathered from multiple sources is a crucial component of the Protocol because most principals are never observed performing their jobs by reviewers. Unlike teacher evaluation tools that rely on classroom observations, the data portions of the Principal Evaluation Protocol serve as the "observable" moments of "watching" the principal in action. Taken together, the three sections allow for a dynamic dialogue regarding the performance of the principal, the school's academic growth and development in the con-

text of its mission and Catholic identity, the school's operational health, and the community's ownership and involvement in the school as a part of the Church. The Principal Evaluation Protocol is a highly adaptable tool in a school's full array of instruments used to activate the NSBECS as a driver towards continual Catholic school excellence.

The Principal Evaluation Protocol is currently being adapted by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, WI by the Office of Catholic Schools. One of the practical components under consideration was the rewriting of the principal's job description in accord with the NSBECS. During this process the Office of Catholic Schools also adapted several of the rubrics to fit more seamlessly with their revised job description. It is scheduled to be piloted in the

2019-2020 academic year. The Diocese of Paterson, NJ conducted a full day workshop introducing the Protocol in November 2018. Discussions are underway regarding its use. At present, inquiries regarding training, access, and use should be directed to the Chief Program Officer of the NCEA.

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Appendix A

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