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Preparing Priests to Lead Parish Schools: Concerns and Recommendations

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Abstract: Canon law recognizes the pastor as the chief educational officer (CEO) of the parish school. However, recent studies demonstrate that seminaries do not prepare seminarians for work in or leadership of Catholic schools, and recent scholarship also demonstrates that an increasing number of seminarians lack the desire to lead a parish school. Our research study examined the post-seminary preparation of priests for leadership of parish schools. We also explored alternative governance models for Catholic schools. We conducted structured interviews with 10 national leaders to explore these two areas of interest. Our findings demonstrate that preparation of newly ordained and veteran priests for parish school leadership is woefully inadequate. Interviewees suggested that the pastor/principal relationship and school finance are two important topics that should be addressed in best practice preparation programs for school leaders. All 10 interviewees had difficulty imagining alternative governance models for schools in which the pastor would not serve as the CEO, but at the same time, some of the participants could see potential benefits of alternative governance models. Based on the findings of our study, we recommend that: (1) seminary programs include an initial introduction to the importance of Catholic schools for evangelization; (2) a new national model for preparing young and veteran priests for school leadership be developed and implemented; (3) existing best practices for alternative governance models be collated and promulgated; and (4) church leaders and stakeholders determine the best governance models for their schools and then prepare the appropriate people for leadership roles accordingly.

Keywords: alternative governance models, Catholic schools, leaders, leadership, parish school, parish schools, pastor, priests, seminarians, seminaries, seminary

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Ensuring that Catholic schools have effective leadership moving forward will be critical for reversing the trend of Catholic school closures (Boyle & Dosen, 2017; McDonald & Schultz, 2019; Schafer, 2013). In parish schools, the pastor is the chief educational officer (CEO) of the school (Calkins & Convey, 2019; Schafer, 2013). The responsibilities of the pastor as CEO include: making policy, hiring the principal, constituting a board, providing financial oversight, leading mission advancement, and providing faith formation for faculty and staff (Schafer, 2013). Additionally, the pastor must be able to work in partnership with the school principal, and must be a savvy political leader who is able to navigate the complex web of parent, community, and parish relationships (Brock & Fraser, 2001; Weiss, 2007). Clearly, pastors need effective preparation for this complex and multifaceted role of school leader.

Literature Review

However, recent studies of seminary programs demonstrate that priests are not being prepared to work in or to lead Catholic schools during their seminary formation. Boyle and Dosen (2017) conducted a content analysis of 38 seminary syllabi from 18 United States' Catholic seminaries. These seminaries represented 39% of the 46 seminaries operating at the time of the study. Boyle and Dosen (2017) discovered that the percentage of syllabi that made reference to Catholic schools was minimal, with 6.5% referencing Catholic schools, 12.6% referencing teaching and learning, and 19.4% referencing catechesis. Boyle and Dosen (2017) noted, "Few seminary courses move beyond a mere mention of Catholic schooling to a discussion of the challenges that confront parish schools and the ministerial opportunities that Catholic schools provide for parish priests" (p. 121).

Calkins and Convey (2019) conducted a study of United States diocesan seminarians using an online survey. The researchers sent the survey to all the rectors of the 49 diocesan seminaries where US seminarians were being trained at the time of their survey study. The rectors of these seminaries were invited to share the survey with their seminarians. Calkins and Convey (2019) reported that during 2016-2017 there were a total of 3,172 seminarians attending the diocesan seminaries, and 11% of these seminarians or 361 participated in their study. Of the seminarians participating in their study, 71% reported that their seminary program did not include content related to Catholic schools.

Even if seminarians are not receiving formal preparation for school leadership during their years in the seminary, their personal desire to work in schools is another important factor to consider. Caruso (2004) conducted a survey of seminarians attending St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, CA. Caruso (2004) found that 67% of the seminarians he surveyed desired to be assigned as pastor to a parish with a school.

While Caruso's (2004) findings seem encouraging, they have not been replicated by a more recent study. Simonds et al. (2017) conducted focus groups with 14 seminary students attending a

national summer formation program in 2015. The researchers found that this group of seminarians was considerably less positive about being assigned to a parish with a Catholic school.

The 14 seminarians interviewed were attending 12 different seminaries from across the United States. The seminarians were from 14 different US dioceses. Simonds et al. (2017) reported that these seminarians expressed excitement about being involved with Catholic schools, but they also expressed grave reservations about having responsibility for a parish school. The seminarians mentioned the worsening financial situation for Catholic parish schools, and did not want to be drawn into this difficult situation. For example, one of the seminarians interviewed stated, “With great respect for Catholic schools, I don’t want the financial and administrative responsibility of a school” (p. 103). Another seminarian shared that a pastor confided in him, “The finances of the school are killing me. I wonder at what point we can no longer do it” (p. 103).

The seminarians interviewed by Simonds et al. (2017) also expressed concerns about the work required to be pastor of both a parish and a school. One seminarian explained, “I’ve always envisioned myself as a priest without a school. Being in charge of both [parish and school] is a gargantuan task. I’d rather be the pastor of a parish [without a school] than a parish with a school” (p. 103). Simonds et al. (2017) also related that during focus group discussions, a potentially more desirable leadership model for parish schools emerged.

Notably in the course of focus group discussions, the idea of freestanding Catholic schools emerged. A freestanding regional Catholic school would need priests to be involved in ministerial roles, but the administrative responsibilities of operating a Catholic school could be taken on by principals and regional school boards. The seminarians thought that Catholic schools not connected to parishes would be a good concept to explore. For example, one seminarian shared, “I believe in Catholic schools, but just not schools in parishes. Have freestanding schools and then the priests can come to the schools to help with pastoral needs.” Another seminarian agreed saying, “I would desire to be assigned to a parish with a school, but my feelings would be mixed. I would need others to do the administration.” Finally, a third seminarian shared, “I imagine myself as a priest without a school. Doing both parish and school is too much” (pp. 103-104).

While Caruso’s (2004) survey of seminarians attending one diocesan seminary just prior to 2004 indicated that three quarters of the seminarians desired to be assigned to a leadership role in a parish school, this finding may no longer be representative more than fifteen years later. Simonds et al. (2017) conducted their focus groups with seminarians in 2015. The study by Simonds et al. found that a group of 14 seminarians attending 12 different seminaries across the United States lacked a positive desire to be the CEO of a parish school. And while Calkins and Convey (2019) found that seminarians they surveyed had an overall positive perception of the value of Catholic schools, the researchers did not query seminarians as to their desire to be the CEO of a Catholic school. Therefore, the literature suggests that seminarians in the United States are not

being prepared for leadership of Catholic schools, and further suggests that increasing numbers of seminarians lack the desire to be a leader of a parish school.

Conceptual Framework & Need for this Study

Figure 1 provides a visual of how the leadership model of a parish school drives school funding and operations. Without a well-prepared and effective leader, the machine represented by gears in Figure 1 will not operate. The gears will not turn and the school will close (Clark, 2016, Spring).

Figure 1

Catholic Parish School Operational Model



Note. Depiction of the parish school leadership model as the gear that drives funding and school programs. Based on "Pastor-Principal Relationship in the Parish School," by S. Weiss, 2007, *Journal of Catholic Education*, 11(1), p. 9.

Shirley (2019, Feb. 4) related that some stakeholders in Catholic education are already taking action to ensure effective school leadership. Bishops, pastors, superintendents, and benefactors who thought the pastor as CEO model of parish school leadership was no longer viable, have already put in place new models for P-12 Catholic school leadership. These new models include regional schools, network schools, and charter schools with afterschool religious education programs. In all of these alternative governance models, pastors provide spiritual guidance, and in some cases are board members, but the pastors are not the chief educational officers (CEOs) of these schools.

But are these alternative school governance models needed? Priests have been leading parish schools in the United States for centuries, so why change this model? To answer these questions, we critically explored if priests are being prepared for leadership of parish schools.

Method

In this study, we conducted structured interviews with national leaders of priest professional development, national leaders of Catholic education, and superintendents from dioceses and archdioceses in the United States. Our goal was to uncover how priests are currently being prepared to lead parish schools, to document ideas for future formation models for priests, and to also obtain participants' thoughts about alternative school governance models. Based on our research goal and issues raised in the literature and research that we reviewed, we developed three primary interview questions and a series of follow up questions to use during our structured interviews with national leaders.

Structured Interview Questions

1. Based on your knowledge and experiences, how would you summarize and assess the current process being used in the US to prepare young priests to become pastors of parishes with schools.
 - (a) *Follow up question:* What programs are you aware of that prepare newly ordained priests for school leadership roles?
 - (b) *Follow up question:* What programs are you aware of that pastors of parish schools can seek out for help with their responsibilities of leading a school?
2. Imagine you could create a new program to prepare priests to be leaders of parishes with schools. Describe what that program would look like.
3. What are your thoughts about developing a school model in which the priest is not responsible for oversight of a school but serves as a school chaplain? For example, a regional Catholic school could be developed with a board of directors appointed by the bishop to provide oversight of the school.
 - (a) *Follow up question:* Describe any canonical problems you foresee with changing from a parish school model to a regional elementary school model.
 - (b) *Follow up question:* Describe any significant practical problems you foresee with changing from a parish school model to a regional elementary school model.

Approval of Research Study

Our study was approved by the social sciences review board at our institution. To maintain the confidentiality of the 10 interview participants, we describe the participants solely by the national role they had in Catholic education or priest professional development at the time of our study.

Recording of Interviews

We used Trint, a recording and transcription application, to capture all 10 interviews in electronic form. Two members of our research team participated in each interview. Following each interview, one member of our team who participated in the interview reviewed the Trint transcription of the interview to ensure accuracy.

Findings

Two members of our research team coded transcripts using NVivo to identify themes within participant comments. We used triangulation of thematic codes to identify which themes were consistent across interview participants (Creswell, 2014), so the themes mentioned by three or more interview participants are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Interview Question One

In this section, we present and analyze interview participants' comments about the process by which newly ordained priests are currently being prepared to become pastors of parishes with schools. We also discuss participants' comments about programs available to prepare both young priests and veteran priests for leadership of parish schools.

Preparation of Newly Ordained Priests

In terms of the programs that existed at the time of this study to help newly ordained priests prepare for school leadership, nine of the 10 interview participants indicated that diocesan-based school informational programs were of uneven quality across dioceses and archdioceses in the United States (Table 1). For example, one diocesan superintendent stated, "I would describe it as spotty...I don't think that there is a consistency across the United States both [sic] in our seminaries as well as within our dioceses."

Interview participants also noted that there was a woeful lack of any meaningful school leadership preparation for newly ordained priests. Seven of the 10 interview participants made this point (Table 1). Examples of their comments follow.

One national leader in priest professional development stated, "This [question about the amount of preparation of newly ordained priests for school leadership] can be answered...in one word, zero." A national leader in Catholic education shared, "So how do I characterize it? Weak." Another

Table 1

Participant Comments about the Process by which Newly Ordained Priests are Prepared for School Leadership

Thematic Codes	Cases coded ^a n=10	Total references ^b
Thematic Codes		
Diocesan orientation to Catholic schools inconsistent	9	46
School leadership preparation virtually non-existent	7	10
Priest shortage exacerbating problem	5	6

Note. ^a Cases coded is the total number of participants who made a comment related to a particular theme. Only themes mentioned by three or more participants are presented in this table. ^b Total references is the total number of times a thematic comment was made by any participant during our interviews.

national leader in Catholic education stated, “I know it primarily from my own experience...and I think others echo this, it is somewhat limited.”

Five of the 10 interview participants thought that the lack of effective preparation of newly ordained priests for leadership of parish schools was a result of the declining number of priests (Table 1). A national leader in priest professional development described how priests were prepared for school leadership in the past. “Years ago, a guy learned how to be a pastor from being the associate three times for nine years in different parishes and schools. Then, by the time he was a pastor, he kind of learned it.” A national leader in Catholic education took up this same theme and compared the formation method of the past with what had been happening more recently.

When my own pastor was ordained...he was an associate and was mentored by long term pastors who could demonstrate [how to run] things in the [parish school]. ...Now very often these young priests aren’t getting a lot of that...and now people are being made pastors before the oil is dry on their hands from ordination, and they are put in charge of schools with a two million dollar budget and they don’t know what they’re doing.

Programs Available to Prepare All Priests

When asked specifically about existing programs that did provide school leadership preparation for priests of all experience levels, interview participants discussed several programs. Participants who discussed the existing programs offered favorable impressions; however, there was also a shared consensus that the programs by themselves were not meeting the existing need. For example, a school superintendent shared an experience one of his pastors had with a professional development program.

It’s a one-shot thing. This is lacking. I would love to see [professional development programs for priests and pastors] available on a more regular [basis], you know something you can go

back to. One of our pastors who's been a school pastor for [many] years went to [a program]. ...He said to me you know it was a little bit frustrating...seemed like every time I got into a topic just to where I felt like I can learn something new, we had to go; the next session started.

Interview Question Two

Our interview participants shared a number of ideas about what they would consider to be best practice in providing priests with school leadership formation. In Table 2, we analyze participant comments about the specific content they thought ought to be covered and participant ideas about how the content could best be delivered.

Table 2

Participant Ideas about Best Practice to Prepare Priests to be Pastors of Parish Schools

Thematic codes	Cases coded ^a n=10	Total references ^b
Content areas to cover		
Pastor/principal relationship	9	14
School finance	7	16
Hiring and human resources	5	8
Evangelization	5	5
Roles and responsibilities	4	5
School boards	4	4
Catholic identity	4	4
Catholic school history in the USA	3	3
Working with parents	3	3
Ideas for innovative delivery		
Formation needs to be ongoing	8	9
CSO ^c as a resource	7	18
Importance of mentorship and shadowing	7	13
Pastors and principals learn together	5	9
Online delivery model holds promise	3	3

Note. ^aCases coded is the total number of participants who made a comment related to a particular theme. Only themes mentioned by three or more participants are presented in this table. ^bTotal references is the total number of times a thematic comment was made by any participant during our interviews. ^cCatholic Schools Office (CSO).

Content Areas to Cover when Training Priests to be Pastors of Parish Schools

All of the participants had ideas about key areas that ought to be covered in pastor preparation programs. Two content areas stood out from the other areas mentioned. The pastor/principal relationship was mentioned by nine of the 10 participants. School finance was mentioned by seven of the 10 participants. Each of the other seven content areas mentioned by participants is listed below with a representative quote to provide greater insight into participants' thinking.

- Hiring and human resources (HR): “What policies and structures need to be in place to support that relationship [between a pastor and a diocesan office] from a...HR policy perspective...including hiring and firing protocols, roughly translated to, ‘talk to us before you fire your principal please.’”
- Evangelization: “Whatever program is designed, we have to lead with the facts of today’s world, who’s attending and not attending church. And how critical the Catholic school has become as the central evangelization for our young people and the future of our Church.”
- Roles and responsibilities: “So the roles and responsibilities of everyone from bishop to superintendent to pastor to board - what are their roles? How does that work? I think that’s a really critical [area to cover].”
- School boards: “Pastors need to understand a school board. What are the different kinds of school boards? What would their roles be in those school boards?”
- Catholic identity: “[Pastors need] to know the culture of Catholic schools. How are we different? What happens in a Catholic school that doesn’t happen in any other school?”
- Catholic school history in the United States of America: “Education or presentation needs to give a scope of where we’ve been and what the importance of Catholic education is.”
- Working with parents: “How do you learn to work with parents?”

Ideas for Innovative Delivery of Preparation Program Content

Eight out of the 10 interview participants thought that a new model of priest preparation for Catholic schools ought to use a continuous formation approach. These participants envisioned a new program beginning in the seminary and continuing over time as a priest becomes more experienced. For example, a national leader in Catholic education noted, “I always feel like the mistake we make in training is we think of things as a one and done. Maybe it [should be] part of seminary formation...but then as they are moving into pastoral roles you have ongoing programs.” Along the same lines, a national leader in priest professional development shared, “I think you almost need a two to three-day in-person gathering just to give it a push start. And then you might do a monthly meeting over the course of a year to focus in on specific topics.”

Seven of the 10 interview participants indicated that the Catholic Schools Office (CSO) could be used in new ways as a resource to develop and deliver school leadership preparation programs for priests. A Catholic school superintendent described the value of the Catholic Schools Office in assisting priests with school leadership.

The other thing that we're doing locally is...I meet with every pastor every year...[and] our CSO helps by [showing] our pastors [the] shared services that we offer from the diocesan level. ...We're helping pastors with information that otherwise they would have had to try to do themselves...[so the pastor knows] I'm not alone anymore.

An additional common theme that emerged from the interview data was that participants thought that new preparation programs ought to include multiple means for priests to learn about school leadership. So in addition to local resources, courses, and meetings, participants mentioned the need for mentorships, shadowing, and shared formation for pastors and principals.

Seven interview participants envisioned a mentoring program as a dialogue between experienced school leaders and those priests who have less school leadership experience. A number of participant comments support the recommendation for a mentoring model. For example, a Catholic school superintendent proposed, "I suggest [school pastors] speak with one of their fellow priests that also has a parish role." A national leader in Catholic education stated, "It would be really important to have practitioners as part of the conversation, people that are doing that work all the time...letting them know what their greatest challenges are, what's worked, what hasn't worked."

Five interview participants also thought that principals should be trained in tandem with priests who are moving into the role of pastor. A representation of this theme was expressed by one of the national leaders in Catholic education who shared, "I wouldn't train the priest without the principal if I had a choice." Another national leader in Catholic education made a similar point by stating, "It is time for principals and pastors to come together."

Along with the notion that learning experiences should be on-going and collaborative, three of the participants also suggested that new leadership preparation programs could utilize online learning. These Catholic educational leaders reasoned that online preparation would be more manageable and affordable for busy priests and pastors, and the leaders also thought that combining face-to-face programs with online components would be an effective way to provide ongoing leadership formation.

Interview Question Three

When we asked interview participants to share their thoughts about alternative school governance models, they had difficulty imagining what a new independent Catholic elementary school model might look like. In Table 3, we share our analysis of the interview data followed by representative participant comments and additional data analysis.

Difficult to Imagine How a New Model Would Work

All 10 interview participants had a difficult time imagining how a new leadership model for a Catholic parish school would work. Participants asked numerous questions about how practical issues would be handled in a model in which the school was not connected to a parish and led by a

Table 3

Educational Leaders’ Thoughts about Alternative School Governance Models

Thematic codes	Cases coded ^a n=10	Total references ^b
Difficult to imagine how a new model would work	10	41
Would need to plan for development of boards	5	19
Some benefits to alternative school governance models	5	5
Would need to build out new structures in CSO ^c	4	5

Note. ^aCases coded is the total number of participants who made a comment related to a particular theme. Only themes mentioned by three or more participants are presented in this table. ^bTotal references is the total number of times a thematic comment was made by any participant during our interviews. ^cCatholic Schools Office (CSO).

pastor. For example, a national leader in priestly formation commented, “I mean who’s going to be in charge? Who’s going to help hire...who’s going to baptize the third-grade teacher’s kid...I mean so many things.” Another national leader in priestly formation probed, “There are practical problems, like who’s in charge of the school and where does the money come from?”

Participants also thought that a number of issues in canon law would need to be explored before a new school model could be workable. One canon law issue that was raised had to do with the role of pastors when multiple parishes sponsor one school. Raising this concern, a Catholic school superintendent stated, “If you’re going to move [to having] several parishes to support one school, it is canonically required that parish pastors are the last word in those fiscal systems. So, they [will] have to make decisions together. You can’t get around that.”

A broader canon law issue was also raised by participants related to the ownership of school property. For example, a national leader in Catholic education made this point; “The canonical challenge is the Catholic Church is structured such that leadership and governance is restricted to property ownership and ordination. Therefore, governance of the ministries is tied to the ownership of the properties, and those are hard to untie.”

Need to Plan for Development of Boards

Interview participants noted that both practical and canonical questions would need to be addressed to develop a new leadership model for an independent Catholic elementary school. The leaders who shared their ideas with us thought that a governing board would be the most likely leadership model to replace the pastor as CEO model. Participants noted that the process of choosing board members and the formation of board members would both be critical issues to address. For example, a leader in priestly professional development shared, “When you talk about educating our children, you talk about Catholic identity and...you have to really think through governance.” Another national leader in priestly professional development made a similar point.

What you don't want is a board of directors that's been formed by law offices. Sometimes you see wealthy people on a board that have been formed by corporate thinking and that isn't what you want in your school. The school is more than dollars and cents. That's my fear and that's what I've seen.

Benefits of Alternative School Governance Models

Despite the many difficulties they foresaw in creating an independent Catholic elementary school model, five leaders we interviewed did share what they thought could be benefits of a new school model. For example, one national leader in Catholic education asserted, "the [alternative] governance model...certainly does have some advantages in the sense that it does free the pastor from having to take on things [related to the school] that aren't in his purview such as budget and facilities." Another national leader in Catholic education made the same point, sharing, "We're putting the pastor or the priest where he needs to be. Why he became a pastor priest? Not to be an administrator. He came basically to be an evangelizer. That's their mission right, they want to be the pastor."

Need to Build Out New Supporting Structures in Catholic Schools Offices

Despite an awareness among half the interview participants that a new school leadership model would have some benefits, participants had a great many questions and concerns about a new model for leadership of Catholic elementary schools. For example, four of the 10 educational leaders we interviewed noted that alternative school governance models would require more support from the Catholic Schools Office. One national leader in Catholic education explained, "I think practically...if you decrease the role of the pastor you need to increase the role of the central office in management and oversight and support to the principal, right?" In the same vein, a Catholic school superintendent we interviewed noted, "If [a change in governance] were to happen system-wide, the challenge we have is our office would probably have to double, triple, quadruple in size."

Conclusions

Based on the responses of our 10 interview participants, we have concluded that new school leadership preparation programs for seminarians and priests need to be developed. We have also concluded that some national leaders in priest professional development and Catholic education are as yet unprepared to begin a transition to an alternative model of governance for Catholic elementary schools.

New school leadership preparation programs for seminarians and priests could be developed by consulting national and local leaders in Catholic education. Our study findings demonstrate that these leaders already know what content is necessary for effective school leadership preparation programs. It remains only to take action and develop a critically needed program that is both

consistent and effective and could serve as a national model for local programs. Based on the findings of this study, it is also evident that a mentoring program needs to be developed for all first year pastors of parish schools so that the perceived needs of the first-year pastor are met with top quality resources that are available when they are needed.

It is also clear that seminarians need to have some introduction to the goals and values of Catholic schools during their seminary years. In their research article, Calkins and Convey (2019) reported that forty percent of responding seminarians had never attended a Catholic school, so an effective leadership preparation program ought to begin in seminaries. Seminarians need to be introduced or reintroduced to the purpose and ecclesial value of Catholic schools as a first step in a new leadership preparation model. Numerous resources that are readily available could be used to integrate study of Catholic schools into the US seminary curriculum. For example, reflections by successful pastors of parish schools are shared in *Priestly Leadership in Catholic Schools*, assembled by King (2015) and published by the National Catholic Educational Association. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) letter on the continued importance of Catholic education is another resource seminaries could utilize.

After priestly ordination, young priests need to both work in Catholic schools and be mentored about how to lead a parish school. School finances would be a critical area to include in a mentoring program, which could also include the broader area of general parish finances. Indeed, “basic administrative skills” are already specified by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as a required component of the Program of Priestly Formation for seminarians (USCCB, 2006, sec. 239), and so it would make sense to build out this knowledge and skill set to include Catholic school finances in the years immediately following ordination.

An example of a seminary program that addresses finances is the “Pastors and Stewards” program required by Mount St. Mary’s Seminary, which focuses on both personal finance and parish finances, human resources, and legal issues (Mount Saint Mary’s Seminary, 2018). School finances could be easily highlighted within such a program and then practical experience could be earned in a mentoring program following ordination.

It is also important to observe that as Senior (2016) noted, more attention needs to be paid to the pastoral and spiritual implications of institutional administration and fundraising. Mentoring programs for young priests ought to include discussion of the spirituality of stewardship so that the young priest understands that finances and development work “are not alien activities or purely secular tasks that have to be endured but are capable of being true expressions of our vocation as disciples of Jesus Christ” (Senior, 2016, p. 133).

Everyone in Catholic education participates in additional training to meet the specialized needs they encounter in schools that were not adequately addressed by initial coursework. Therefore, our conclusion that an educational and mentoring program is needed for young priests is reasonable,

and our conclusion also lines up with current guidelines already in place for priestly formation. The current Program for Priestly Formation specifically notes that “programs of continuing education and ongoing formation will be necessary to equip newly ordained priests to assume future responsibilities as pastors” (USCCB, 2006, sec. 239).

As we demonstrated in the findings section through quotes from some of the leaders we interviewed, continuing education for young priests to learn about the leadership of parish schools used to occur through a mentoring process in which an experienced pastor showed associate pastors how to operate both the parish and the school. For a number of reasons, most significantly the current short time span between ordination and being named pastor of a parish with a school, this former model of priestly leadership preparation is no longer functional, but the basic principles of this once effective model can still be used today.

The development of a new mentoring model for young priests could begin by recruiting pastors who are experienced in operating parish schools to prepare and give a series of seminars or webinars on various topics related to parish schools; such as, Catholic identity, finance and mission advancement, human resources, and the relationship of the school community to the parish as a whole. These presentations could address key topics already identified as critical for effective school leadership and operations (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012; Uhl & Zelenka, 2018, Summer). Once they are recorded, these presentations could be paired with instructional materials for ongoing application; for example, *Your School’s Catholic Identity: Name It, Claim It, and Build on It*, provides a broad coverage of Catholic school leadership topics in a workshop in a book format (Engel et al., 2020). Recorded presentations can also be used in online courses and as key notes to begin face-to-face conferences that would include discussion and networking with mentors.

If a diocese has a dearth of pastors with experience in the successful operation of parish schools, or does not have adequate resources to establish their own leadership formation program for young priests based on a national model, then a diocese can reach out and partner with a larger diocese, archdiocese, or Catholic university (USCCB, 2005). Catholic universities such as Villanova and Loyola University Chicago already have certificate or degree programs in church and parish management that could likely be adapted to meet the needs of dioceses for preparing young priests for school leadership.¹ Other Catholic universities, including Creighton and Saint Louis University, have school leadership certificate and degree programs already available, and some of these programs are completely online.²

¹ See <https://www1.villanova.edu/university/business/faculty-and-research/centers-of-excellence/church-mgmt.html> and <https://www.luc.edu/ips/parish-leadership-programs/> for descriptions of the programs at Villanova and Loyola University Chicago.

² See <https://gradschool.creighton.edu/programs/graduate-certificates/education/catholic-school-leadership> and <http://www.slu.edu/education/degrees/educational-leadership-ma-eds-edh-phd.php> on the programs at Creighton and Saint Louis University.

Additionally, as noted in the findings section, current and former Catholic school principals can be effective mentors for young priests as they prepare for the leadership of parish schools. These veteran principals possess knowledge of the daily operations of a parish school that are essential to include in a new education and mentoring program.

Clearly, there is work to be done. It is critical that our conclusions in this study be followed by practical action since there is a complete lack of an organized and effective school leadership preparation model for young priests. To that end, we conclude this article with four recommendations.

Recommendations for Action

First, we recommend that basic knowledge of the role and function of Catholic schools in the ecclesial community be integrated within the seminary curriculum in the United States. Second, we recommend that a new national model for school leadership preparation for young priests be developed and implemented in dioceses and archdioceses.

Third, because of the trend toward larger parishes (Sullivan, 2019a, 2019b) and the current operational challenges facing parish schools, we recommend the development of a best practices model that a bishop, superintendent, and pastor can use to set up an alternative governance model for a Catholic elementary school when that seems like the best course of action. This best practice model can address the numerous concerns, questions, and hesitations expressed by the leaders interviewed for this study when asked about their thoughts and feelings toward new school governance models.

In fact, as we noted earlier in this article, alternative governance models for Catholic schools have already been developed and implemented. Concerns expressed by our interview participants that canon law may not allow for new governance structures have already been addressed by those who have implemented innovative school governance models (Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA), 2015; Holy See, 1993). So it is not a question as to whether such a move is possible, it is only a matter of local Catholic educational leaders discerning what the best strategy is in their context.

So our fourth and final recommendation is that pastors, superintendents, and bishops work together with their stakeholders to identify and implement the best leadership model for their schools and regions. If pastors are to retain the role of chief educational officer of a parish school, the diocese will be responsible for providing effective leadership preparation as we have outlined it in this article. If pastors need to focus on their parish duties, or if a diocese is unable to provide effective school leadership preparation for priests, then regional and network school models can be explored and developed.

Examples of New Governance Models

Instead of ending this article with recommendations and references readers can consult, in this section, we provide examples of some new school governance models that have already been implemented and are in full operation. If leaders in Catholic education wish to develop a national best practice model for regional and network schools, we suggest that the following organizations could serve as useful exemplars for creating such a model.

For example, the Drexel School System of the Diocese of San Jose, California, is comprised of nine former parish elementary schools in the diocese that report directly to the system executive director, who is also an associate superintendent in the diocesan schools office. Pastors provide spiritual leadership and pastoral ministries for the schools (Diocese of San Jose, 2019).

Seton Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has created a section 501(c) (3) corporation, with operational officers and a corporate board who are responsible for the financial and operational management of eleven schools. In the Seton model, the schools continue to be based in a parish, but the regional board and office provide operational support on an economy of scale (Seton Catholic Schools, 2019).

Similarly Catholic Partnership Schools in Camden, New Jersey, manages five former parish elementary schools through a section 501(c) (3) corporation. However, in the Camden model, there is no supervisory responsibility vested in the Diocese of Camden or in the parishes Catholic Partnership Schools (2017).

Siena Catholic Schools provides a Catholic school “district” with financial and operational management for five elementary schools and one middle/high school. This regional school model operates in Racine, Wisconsin (Siena Catholic Schools of Racine, 2020).

Alternative governance models, as illustrated above, take a variety of forms, and those who created the models were able to address the concerns expressed by the leaders who participated in our study in terms of the relationship between clergy, property, governance, and affiliation with the Catholic Church. Further exploration of these new school leadership models will also provide understanding about the relationship between the Catholic schools office and the regional or network school organization. With separate entities authorized to manage the full range of school operations, pastors of parishes can devote their time and energy to leading increasingly larger parishes, and they can also remain involved in regional and network schools through board membership and chaplaincy work.

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