

## Pastors' Views of Parents and the Parental Role in Catholic Schools

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*Over 300 years of official Church teachings and documents affirm the importance of the home-school relationship, yet relatively little research has systematically explored the need and value of parent involvement in the school community. This study is a secondary analysis of survey data collected for the Notre Dame Study of U.S. Pastors (Nuzzi, Frabutt, & Holter, 2008) and examines pastors' views of parents and the parental role in Catholic schools. The article closes with recommendations for action based upon analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data trends from pastors' responses.*

Throughout the history of Catholic education, the Catholic Church has emphasized and extolled the primacy of parents in the education of their children (Caparros, Thériault, & Thorn, 1993; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1999; Leo XIII, 1885). At the same time, the unique and primary role of the parent-educator is not solitary. The pastors, principals, and teachers who educate and care for Catholic children in the parish and school are collaborators with parents in the spiritual and intellectual formation of their children. The Catholic parish and school become a second home of sorts where the faith and values first modeled by the parents are reinforced through the formal enterprise of religious education and catechesis. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1997), the Vatican office charged with international oversight for all Catholic educational matter worldwide, remarked that “[m]any of the students will attend a Catholic school—often the same school—from the time they are very young children until they are nearly adults” (§27). Because of this, “it is only natural that they should come to think of the school as an extension of their own homes” (§27). As such, the relationship between parents and school, between the child’s primary educator and the institution

charged with deepening the spiritual and intellectual formation begun in the home, is critical.

Over 300 years of official Church teachings and documents affirm the importance of this home-school relationship, yet relatively little research has systematically explored the need and value of parent involvement in the school community. Moreover, given pastors' centrality in the life of the parish, it is especially critical to assess their perspectives on the parental role in Catholic schools. The traditional parish school remains the primary and most prevalent governance model, whereby the parish priest is most directly involved in the management of the school. We focus on the pastor of the traditional parish school because, despite new and innovative models of school governance, he is still responsible for "arranging everything so that all the faithful have a Catholic education" (canon 794 §2). Thus, this study is a secondary analysis of survey data collected for the Notre Dame Study of U.S. Pastors (Nuzzi, Frabutt, & Holter, 2008) and examines pastors' views of parents and the parental role in Catholic schools.

The current article is divided into two sections. The first section reviews the teachings of the Church in relation to parents and Catholic education. Given that contextualizing information, the second section presents a secondary analysis of the quantitative and qualitative survey data collected for the Notre Dame Study of U.S. Pastors. Special attention is given to the survey items that directly address the need for and value of parental involvement in the school community.

### **Church Documents on Parents and Education**

A literature review of over 30 Church source documents (see Table 1) indicated several conceptual clusters that represented the essential content of these writings. This section outlines six major themes that form the heart of the Church's teaching regarding faith, parents, and Catholic schools (see Frabutt & Rocha, 2009, for a more extensive treatment). The first two themes (primacy of parental role in education and parents as witnesses in the world) establish what might be termed the *philosophical and theological foundations* of parents' role in Catholic education, describing the parental obligation to educate their children and importance of the parental example in faith education. The remaining four themes (continuing parental catechesis, parent-school-church collaboration, parent involvement, and school choice) stem from these philosophical underpinnings, providing practical and instrumental means by which parents can more effectively carry out their parental duties (see Figure 1).

Table 1

*Chronological Listing of Documents and Their Major Thematic Elements*

Documents	Themes
<i>Spectata Fides</i> (Leo XIII, 1885)	School Choice, Primacy of Parental Role in Education
<i>Sapientiae Christianae</i> (Leo XIII, 1890/1941)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World
<i>Divini Illius Magistri</i> (Pius XI, 1929/1930)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Continuing Parental Catechesis, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Parents as Witnesses in the World
<i>Mater Et Magistra</i> (John XXIII, 1961)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education
<i>Lumen Gentium</i> (Vatican Council II, 1964)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World
<i>Gravissimum Educationis</i> (Vatican Council II, 1965b)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World, School Choice, Parent Involvement
<i>Dignitatis Humanae</i> (Vatican Council II, 1965/1967)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, School Choice
<i>Gaudium Et Spes</i> (Vatican Council II, 1965a)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World
<i>General Directory for Catechesis</i> (Congregation for the Clergy, 1971)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Continuing Parental Catechesis
<i>To Teach as Jesus Did</i> (USCCB, 1972)	Parents as Witnesses in the World, Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Continuing Parental Catechesis, Parent Involvement
<i>Evangelii Nuntiandi</i> (Paul VI, 1975)	Parents as Witnesses in the World
<i>The Catholic School</i> (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977)	Parent-School-Church Collaboration, School Choice, Parent Involvement
<i>Sharing the Light of Faith</i> (United States Catholic Conference Department of Education, 1979)	Parents as Witnesses in the World, Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Continuing Parental Catechesis, Parent Involvement
<i>Catechesi Tradendae</i> (John Paul II, 1979)	Parents as Witnesses in the World, Continuing Parental Catechesis
<i>Familiaris Consortio</i> (John Paul II, 1981)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World, Parent Involvement, School Choice
<i>Lay Catholics in Schools</i> (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982)	Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Primacy of Parental Role in Education, School Choice
<i>Code of Canon Law</i> (1983)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, School Choice, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Parent Involvement, Parents as Witnesses in the World
<i>Charter of the Rights of the Family</i> (Pontifical Council for the Family, 1983)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, School Choice, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Parent Involvement, Parents as Witnesses in the World

<i>The Hispanic Presence, Challenge, and Commitment</i> (USCCB, 1983)	Continuing Parental Catechesis
<i>The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School</i> (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Parent Involvement
<i>In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools</i> (USCCB, 1990)	School Choice, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Parent Involvement
<i>Gratissimam Sane</i> (John Paul II, 1994)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, School Choice, Parent Involvement
<i>Principles for Educational Reform in the United States</i> (USCCB, 1995)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, School Choice, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Parent Involvement
<i>The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium</i> (Congregation of Catholic Education, 1997)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Parent Involvement
<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> (1999)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World, Continuing Parental Catechesis, School Choice
<i>Ecclesia in America</i> (John Paul II, 1999)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World
<i>Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us</i> (USCCB, 1999)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World, Continuing Parental Catechesis, Parent-School-Church Collaboration
<i>In Support of Catechetical Ministry</i> (USCCB, 2000)	Continuing Parental Catechesis, Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parent-School-Church Collaboration
<i>Consecrated Persons and Their Mission in Schools</i> (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2002)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Parent Involvement
<i>Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church</i> (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World, Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Continuing Parental Catechesis, Parent Involvement, School Choice
<i>Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium</i> (USCCB, 2005)	Parent-School-Church Collaboration, School Choice, Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parent Involvement
<i>Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> (Benedict, XVI, 2005)	Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Parents as Witnesses in the World, School Choice
<i>Educating Together in Catholic Schools</i> (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2007)	Parent-School-Church Collaboration, Parent Involvement, Primacy of Parental Role in Education, Continuing Parental Catechesis

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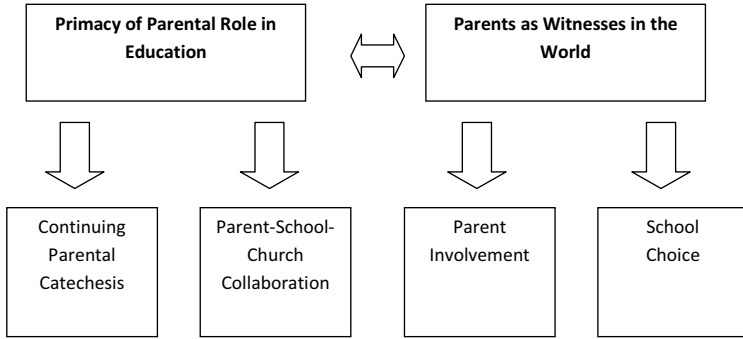


Figure 1. Schematic representing the primary themes and their instrumental subcomponents.

***Primacy of Parental Role in Education***

Parents’ “original, primary and inalienable right” to educate their children ranks as the most central theme in regards to parents and education, evident in 28 out of 33 documents (e.g., Pontifical Council for the Family, 1983, §5; see also John Paul II, 1981; Leo XIII, 1885, 1890/1941; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1972). Parental love and care for children serve as the foundational basis for healthy child development and thereby contribute to education in its earliest and most basic form. Parents are also charged with the faith development of their children, a responsibility solemnly conferred through baptism, the foundation upon which a Christian life of faith is built and nurtured.

***Parents as Witnesses in the World***

Nineteen of the examined Church documents (e.g., John Paul II, 1979; Pius XI, 1929/1930; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004) mentioned the instructive power of parents in witnessing their Catholic faith to their families. In *On Catechesis in Our Time*, Pope John Paul II (1979) emphasized that

[e]ducation in the faith by parents, which should begin from the children’s tenderest age, is already being given when the members of a family help each other to grow in faith through the witness of their Christian lives, a witness that is often without words but which perseveres throughout a day-to-day life lived in accordance with the Gospel. (para. 68)

Given that children learn their earliest lessons in the context of family life, parents should bear in mind the power of their example and regularly ask themselves if their day-to-day actions reflect a Christian lifestyle.

### ***Continuing Parental Catechesis***

A total of 11 Church documents underscored the need for outreach to parents and ongoing parental catechesis (e.g., USCCB, 1972, 1983, 2000). The USCCB (1999) succinctly stated, “an adult community whose faith is well-formed and lively will more effectively pass that faith on to the next generation” (§40). The call for ongoing parental catechesis is therefore a logical consequent of and complement to the primacy of parental role in education and parents as witnesses in the world. Since parents are indeed the “first heralds” of the faith (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1999, §2225), every effort must be made to provide them opportunities for continual spiritual growth and conversion—for catechesis—so that they may subsequently effectively model the faith for their children. Parents who actively seek opportunities to grow in their own faith embody for their children a spiritual thirst that is “lifelong and does not end upon reaching adulthood” (USCCB, 1999, §40; see also Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2001).

### ***Parent-School-Church Collaboration***

Nineteen of the reviewed documents noted the theme of collaboration between parents, Catholic schools, and the wider Church (e.g., Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, 1982). Merely sending one’s children to a Catholic school does not fulfill this “grave obligation” of education (Pius XI, 1929/1930, para. 34). As much as possible, parents should collaborate with the local Church community to secure the promise of Catholic education for their children and for future students. Similarly, the Church community—both on the universal and local level—must be committed to supporting Catholic schools and parents.

### ***Parent Involvement***

Sixteen of the documents note the importance of parental involvement with teachers, administrators, and school activities as part of the marital duty to serve as the primary educational stakeholders in child education (e.g., Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, 1988; USCCB, 1990). Active parent participation in school functions, increased dialogue between parents and teachers, and the establishment and bolstering of parent organizations unite parents with the mission of Catholic schools. *The Code of Canon Law* (Caparros et al., 1993) makes clear that this cooperation and collaboration are more than just highly desirable. They are canonical requirements. Canon 796 states that “it is incumbent upon parents to cooperate closely with the school teachers to whom they entrust their children to be educated.”

Moreover, “teachers are to collaborate closely with parents who are to be willingly heard” (canon 796). Thus, teachers and administrators should work in unison with parents in collaborative decision-making processes in order to strengthen Catholic education.

### ***School Choice***

The final theme, evident in 15 documents (e.g., John Paul II, 1981, 1994; USCCB, 2005), can be traced to the earliest Church document on education where Pope Leo XIII (1885) highlighted the right of parents to choose Catholic schooling for their offspring. This same conviction was a central theme at the Second Vatican Council and appears repeatedly in Vatican II’s (1965b) *Declaration on Christian Education*. The right of parents to choose a Catholic education for their children is an issue of justice and remains a core conviction of the Church today. Leaders in the Church have vigorously defended the right of parental school choice, stating, “all Catholic children, not just those whose families have the financial means, have a right to a Catholic education” (Miller, 2006, p. 15).

In sum, these six themes broadly represent the Church’s position in regard to the primacy and importance of parents in Catholic education. By looking at parents and Catholic education through a historic lens, this review provides a backdrop to the current issues facing Catholic education and serves as a contextual frame within which to examine pastors’ views of the parental role in Catholic schools.

### **Need for Current Study**

Given this backdrop of Church teaching on the role of parents in Catholic education, it is necessary to consider the views of pastors on this topic, a central group of stakeholders in the ministry of Catholic education. There is a pressing need to elicit the current state of affairs as described by pastors, for “it is simply not possible to understand, assess, change, or improve parish life without reference to the pastor” (Nuzzi et al., 2008, p. 6). In particular, we used data from a 2008 national survey of pastors with responsibility for schools to examine pastors’ responses to several survey items specific to parents. In addition, we were able to highlight pastors’ responses to open-ended survey items specific to parents.

### **Method**

The purpose of this study was to examine pastors’ perceptions of parental involvement in their parish schools. Data were accessed from the Notre Dame

Study of U.S. Pastors (Nuzzi et al., 2008) and a secondary, mixed-method analysis was conducted for the purpose of “answering new questions with old data” (Glass, 1976, p. 3). As such, the methods of data collection and survey instrumentation are the same as presented in *Faith, Finances, and the Future: The Notre Dame Study of U.S. Pastors* (Nuzzi et al., 2008). Below is a brief overview of salient components of the current study method.

### ***Participants***

Participants for this study were 1,047 pastors of parishes with Catholic schools from all major geographic regions (New England, Mideast, Great Lakes, Plains, Southeast, and West/Far West) and parish locations (inner city, urban, suburban, rural) throughout the United States.<sup>1</sup> Participants completed the electronic survey between January and March of 2008.

### ***Survey Instrument***

An electronic survey instrument was developed to include both original survey items and a replication of specific items from the scholarly work that informed this inquiry (Convey, 1999; O’Brien, 1986, 1987). Questions were organized into three primary categories concerning demographic information (e.g., pastor age and experience in parishes with a Catholic school), needs assessment (e.g., expressed needs in their leadership of a parish with a school), and perceptions and attitudes regarding Catholic schools (e.g., perceived quality and worth of Catholic schools). Five items pertained to parental involvement in Catholic schools, assessing parental involvement as an area of need at the school, gauging the level of support that pastors receive from parents, and measuring pastors’ views about parents’ role in governance and policy matters in Catholic schools (see Table 2 for the full set of items). In addition to these closed-ended items, the survey gathered narrative, open-ended responses to two items: “In your own words, what are the most important needs facing your parish school in the next 2 to 5 years?” and “Please provide any additional comments regarding thoughts and opinions on Catholic schools or Catholic school leadership.” A systematic, multistage qualitative analysis process (see Nuzzi et al., 2008, pp. 13-15) was utilized to classify text segments—individual meaning units—into codes. Qualitative software assisted throughout this open coding process to sort and classify text segments into emerging themes.

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<sup>1</sup> The geographic region and parish location response categories are derived from McDonald & Schulz, 2008.



Table 2

*Survey Questions Included in the Quantitative Analysis*

Item	Question
21.	Rate the importance of each need area as it pertains to your parish school. (Parental involvement was a response choice.)
22.	From the checklist below indicate the top five (5) areas that your parish school is currently addressing. (Parental involvement was a response choice.)
28.	In regard to school matters, rate the level of support and backing you receive from each of the following. (Parents was a response choice.)
32a.	Parents should have a substantial voice in the governance of Catholic schools. (Pastors rate level of agreement.)
32b.	Parents must be given a substantial role in the development of policy for Catholic schools. (Pastors rate level of agreement.)

## Findings

### *A Quantitative Perspective on Pastors' Views of Parents*

A preliminary descriptive analysis was conducted to examine basic trends in survey questions regarding parental involvement in the parish school. On average, pastors rated the importance of parental involvement in the parish school 4.25 out of a possible 5. The average score of 4.25 for the importance of parental involvement falls between *very important* (4) and *extremely important* (5) and was ranked fourth in importance after Catholic identity ( $M = 4.63$ ), finances ( $M = 4.45$ ), and long-range planning ( $M = 4.29$ ). However, when asked to select the top areas currently being addressed in the parish school, parental involvement fell to 8 out of 16 priorities. Pastors also rated parents third highest for the support and backing they provide regarding school matters behind only the principal (rated number 1) and school board (rated number 2).

Two questions regarding parental involvement in school governance were also included in this analysis and replicated portions of Convey's (1999) study that examined bishops' and priests' views of Catholic schools. These questions (32a and 32b) were included in the subsection on school governance. Using a Likert scale from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1), pastors rated substantial parental involvement in the governance ( $M = 3.64$ ) and policy development ( $M = 3.62$ ) of Catholic schools between *neutral* and *agree*, which indicates only slight agreement with parental involvement in the development of policy for and general governance of the school. Although these data do not indicate a strong valuation of parental involvement in governance

Table 3

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and MANOVA for Parental Involvement by Pastor Factors*

Variable	32a. Governance			32b. Policy		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Age			4, 976			4, 976
< 35	3.05	1.18	7.96***	2.89	1.10	9.36***
36-45	3.54	0.98		3.52	0.97	
46-55	3.55	0.93		3.49	0.91	
56-65	3.63	0.88		3.66	0.85	
> 65	3.95	0.82		3.91	0.87	
Ordination			4, 975			4, 975
< 10	3.51	1.00	6.80 ***	3.36	1.05	8.09***
11-20	3.49	0.97		3.49	0.95	
21-30	3.58	0.92		3.54	0.88	
31-40	3.70	0.86		3.75	0.83	
> 41	3.98	0.78		3.89	0.83	
Location			3, 978			3, 978
Inner City	3.83	0.89	2.85*	3.87	0.84	3.95**
Urban	3.62	0.89		3.57	0.90	
Suburban	3.54	0.96		3.54	0.97	
Rural	3.68	0.90		3.64	0.86	

or policy development, a more specific and nuanced analysis was conducted to examine salient between group differences.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine differences in pastors' views of parental involvement in school governance and policy development by the pastor's age, number of years ordained, and the location of the parish. The MANOVA yielded a statistically significant difference within each independent variable: pastor's age (governance,  $F = 7.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ; policy,  $F = 9.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), years ordained (governance,  $F = 6.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ; policy,  $F = 8.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and location of the school (governance,  $F = 2.85$ ,  $p < .05$ ; policy,  $F = 3.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ; see Table 3). In general, these findings indicate that pastors differed in their views of parental involvement

Table 4  
*Correlation Coefficients for Primary Variables of Interest*

Variable	32a. Governance	32b. Policy
Total education experience (n = 984)	0.056	0.095**
Total experience in parish with school (n = 952)	0.084**	0.129**

\*\*  $p < .01$

in school governance and policy development based on their age, the number of years they had been ordained, and the location of their parish.

Post-hoc contrasts revealed the nature of these significant between group differences. Pastors who were less than 35 years old rated the importance of parental involvement in school governance ( $M = 3.05$ ) and policy development ( $M = 2.89$ ) lower than any other age group. In contrast, pastors over the age of 65 rated the importance of parental involvement in school governance ( $M = 3.95$ ) and policy development ( $M = 3.91$ ) higher than any other age group. A similar pattern emerged when considering years ordained. Pastors who had been ordained more than 40 years rated the importance of parental involvement in school governance ( $M = 3.98$ ) higher than any other ordination group and pastors ordained between 31 and 40 years, and for more than 40 years rated parental involvement in policy development ( $M = 3.89$ ) higher than any other ordination group. Finally, pastors of parishes located in the inner city rated the importance of parental involvement in school governance ( $M = 3.83$ ) higher than any other location except rural ( $M = 3.68$ ) and rated the importance of parental involvement in policy development ( $M = 3.87$ ) higher than any other location.

A correlational analysis (Table 4) was conducted using variables from past research that indicated a relationship with perceived support of Catholic schools (Cieslak, 2005; Convey, 1999). The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between a pastor's total experience as a student in Catholic schools and their rating of the importance of parental involvement in policy development ( $r = .10, p < .01$ ), and a significant positive correlation between a pastor's total experience in a parish with a school and their rating of the importance of parental involvement in school governance ( $r = .08, p < .01$ ) and policy development ( $r = .13, p < .01$ ). Although small, these correlation coefficients are statistically significant.

### *A Qualitative Perspective on Pastors' Views of Parents*

Review of 190 text segments written by pastors regarding their views of parents in Catholic education revealed an interrelated constellation of four major

themes. Figure 2 represents a model that captures the essence of pastors' narrative commentary. First, the overarching construct affirms that the parish and school are not distinct entities but part of a unified whole. From that undergirding premise, two themes regarding "ways of being" emerge for parents: (a) a call for liturgical presence in the life of the parish, and (b) directives for operational action. Parents' liturgical presence in the parish is brought to life most simply by school families' attendance at Mass. The operational themes address parent involvement and parent role in governance.

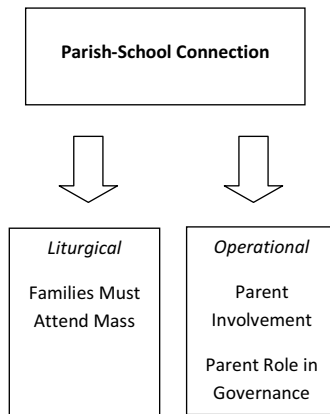


Figure 2. Schematic representing the interrelationship of qualitative pastor themes.

*Parish-school connection.* Based on the 70 text segments regarding parish-school connection, pastors seemed to hold that a stronger relationship is required between the parish and the school in order to enrich both the school and the parish community. Within the responses, an overwhelming number cited a lack of parental involvement and low Mass attendance as the main obstacles toward creating the ideal union of school and parish. Other responses spoke of the need for a shared mission and sense of common identity through the mutual support of the school and parish.

Pastors focused on three subthemes in relation to parish-school connection. The most dominant of these was the need for increased engagement of parents at the parish level. Pastors expressed a great desire for "committed stewardship and presence by school parents" in parish life. Additionally, over a quarter of all responses noted the lack of parents attending Sunday Mass. As witnesses to the faith and the primary educational figures in children's lives, parents hold the obligation to foster religious education in the home. This duty includes the celebration of the sacraments—especially the celebration of the Eucharist. One pastor viewed regular Mass attendance as a

means to “[build] up the local body of Christ.” In general, pastors considered Sunday Mass to be the primary mechanism for anchoring Catholic school faith formation and religious education in the home. For one pastor, increased accountability is the answer:

Today our local pastors agree that 70% [of parents] do not attend Mass, and the parents simply drop the children off at school... This rift must be addressed through our policies of what we expect from parents so that there is a true cooperation with parents and parish/school. Today the mission of the schools has become the role of surrogate spiritual parents because their parents are spiritually default. We must insist that the Sunday [E]ucharist is the foundation of the Catholic faith that we claim to instill during the week. The tolerance of this repeated cycle has not built up the body of Christ, but on the contrary has... led to the shrinking of the worshipping community.

By participating with their families at Sunday Mass, parents actualize and reinforce the lessons learned in Catholic schools and in the home—the two primary contexts of Christian formation for Catholic youth—thereby harmonizing the important connection between home, parish, and school.

Second, many pastors commented on the spiritual poverty of parents, suggesting a “need for greater faith formation of adults whose children are part of the school family.” Due to parents’ primary role as educators, pastors highlighted the gravity of “helping parents understand the importance of [their] being active Catholics,” which is essential for Catholic parents committed to raising their children in the life and faith of the Church. Relating to a previous subtheme, pastors acknowledged the weak association between the “commitment to school and commitment to Catholic faith practice” and called for continuing parental catechesis in the parish. Pastors recommended creating paths which “[reconnect]... families with parish worship and activities” in order to “deepen parents’ support of the faith formation of their children” and participate more fully in “the life of the parish and worship.” A general conclusion of the study called for a broad and sweeping effort at evangelization, to reawaken the seed of faith in those who are formally and officially members but perhaps casual and irregular in their practice of the faith.

While most responses listed the ways in which parents themselves must improve their quality of religious living, one response uniquely offered a way in which the parish community could help address this issue. By “involving parents more strongly in the liturgical and ministerial life of the parish,” parents not only renew their individual faith development, but also serve as models of faith to their children in the community setting. Examples of such

liturgical parental participation could include participating in a church choir, presenting the gifts of bread and wine, aiding in parish projects, or serving as a Eucharistic minister, lector, or usher. Examples of ministerial parental participation might include work with the social action committee of the parish, civic and community activities, political and grassroots efforts on behalf of the poor, interparish and diocesan events, and community service projects.

Finally, the majority of pastors mentioned the desire to unite the parish and school under the canopy of the mission of the parish. Specifically, pastors wished to call upon the entire parish community—including faculty, students, and parents from Catholic schools—in advancing a “[g]reater awareness that the parish and school are one entity.” According to one pastor, the success of a cohesive parish relies on “making the parish community aware of the need for and importance of [the Catholic] school to the future of our children in the parish.” True success, another said, would come by “continuing to advance the understanding among all parishioners that the school is part of [the] parish mission and the Catholic [i]dentity as a whole.” Several pastors expressed frustration in their work toward this end, stating that parents tend to view Catholic schools as “private rather than parochial.” Additionally, one pastor mentioned the fact that many schools are comprised of fewer and fewer parishioners, with only 25% of his students coming from his parish.

Nonetheless, the Catholic school and local parish should understand their mutual goals and symbiotic relationship. Supporting stronger ties between parishioners both with and without children enrolled at affiliated Catholic schools would help the “wider parish community see the school as an integral part of [the] parish mission.” In working hand-in-hand with Catholic school parents, parishioners can thus help “build a community of mutual trust.” New governance models emerging in dioceses throughout the United States require deep and meaningful partnerships with parents in order to ensure accountability and transparency in school operations.

*School families must attend Sunday Mass.* Quite simply, pastors expect to have full engagement of families in parish life—evidenced most noticeably when they participate in the Sunday Eucharist. Since Nuzzi et al. (2008) have already discussed this theme at length, it is not fully treated here other than to reiterate the central point: “pastors expressed strong opinions about the need for Catholic school families to more fully embrace and practice the faith” (p. 44). One pastor noted, “Ask any pastor what percentage of families from the school attend Sunday Mass, and the answer will be shockingly low.”

*Parent involvement.* Given the primary role of parents in the education of their children, pastors noted the centrality of parent involvement in sustaining the tradition of Catholic schooling. Comments about the importance of parent involvement in education were mentioned in 48 text segments. These responses indicated the dual need for increased parental involvement in Catholic schools and stronger parent participation in the religious life of the parish and the home. Overall, pastors agreed that parents should take greater ownership in both the school and parish communities.

Pastors noted the importance of parental participation in the workings of Catholic schools. There was a general recognition that education, especially an education in the Catholic context, is dependent on the “cooperation of faculty, students, parents, and the parish at large.” Given the large influence of family life on children, pastors stated that parental support in particular must be “continuing and consistent” for the success of the school. A number of responses indicated the currently low levels of parental involvement, alluding to a parental assumption that one’s duty to educate is complete after sending children to Catholic schools: “Too many send the kids to our school and do not practice the faith on any regular basis.” The Church teaches, however, that a parent’s onus of responsibility extends much further than this narrow definition. Pastors thus stressed “greater involvement of families in students’ faith formation.”

While parent involvement was certainly called for, pastors were careful to say that such involvement should be guided. According to one pastor, the ultimate goal is to “successfully capture parents’ ideas while avoiding micro-managing.” In many responses where parent involvement was mentioned, such participation seemed to be misguided or directed toward areas deemed less important to the pastors. One participant commented that “[p]arents are disengaged in every aspect of parish life with the exception of sporting events.” In a similar vein, another pastor remarked, “Our parents attend the opening parent school meeting, but do not attend special meetings to address issues such as bullying and Internet safety.” If these are indeed the extent of parental interest and participation in the school, then they certainly are inadequate and superficial levels of parental involvement.

Two solutions for obtaining greater parent involvement emerged from the pastors’ comments. The best way for parents to become involved in the education of their children, argued pastors, is through the practice of their own faith life. One pastor noted the “fundamental need” for a greater parental “understanding of parish membership.” Another pastor commented, “We need to have parents...go to church on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, and be involved in the parish community.” According to pastors, the familial practice

of faith as well as “the more active interest of the larger Catholic population of the parish” instill children with a greater sense of Catholic identity, which is at the heart of Catholic education. Thus, one of the most important ways parents can remain involved in the mission of Catholic education and the specific work of the Catholic school is to “know, live, and practice their faith.” All other involvement in the Catholic school is informed by and secondary to this central commitment to their own life of faith.

The other path to enhanced parent involvement is to secure a deeper parental investment in schools. As one pastor noted, “ownership of the school by parents” should occur in order to continue the long-standing tradition of high-quality Catholic schooling. Although varying work schedules and the demands of long hours serve as obstacles to securing parent involvement, pastors generally seemed determined to find ways of including parents more fully in the Catholic school community. Most felt that this could be achieved through the growth of strong parent organizations. Providing opportunities for parents to adopt “responsible leadership roles” could engage parents in the life of the parish and school in a manner that utilizes their specific talents, responds to specific needs in the school community, and strengthens the parent-school rapport.

Overall, the responses given reflect a pervading opinion that the education of a child is dependent on the active participation of many parties, but most especially the involvement of the parents. Pastors agreed that the formation of deep, authentic Catholic identity requires the example of parent participation in school and faith matters. The more that parents and members of the larger Church community contribute to the mission of Catholic schools, the better off Catholic school students will be in their academic and spiritual formation within these schools.

*Parent role in governance.* Comments concerning parental involvement in school governance were mentioned in 30 text segments. Overall, pastors expressed mixed reactions in regard to this issue, showing concern for parental intentions and the preservation of Catholic identity within schools while still acknowledging the value of parent involvement. On the one hand, many pastors recognized the need for cooperation on behalf of all stakeholders of children’s education, including principals, pastors, teachers, and parents. In doing so, the whole Catholic school community participates in the shared “mission and ministry of the Church.” Several pastors, especially those in urban areas, noted their wish for increased parent involvement in advisory boards, which was cited as both “vitaly important” and “critical for a school.” One pastor noted that “governance issues have to be collaboratively solved



through the use of parent advisory committees” as a means of securing parental “ownership in their Catholic schools.” Responses such as these demonstrate that some pastors are open to and appreciative of parental participation in the governance of their schools.

On the other hand, the delicate balance between appropriate and excessive parent involvement was evident in pastors’ responses, which cautioned against too much parental influence. Indeed, because pastors mentioned that many parents focus too closely on their own children and “not enough on the common good,” many stressed that they were “reluctant to give parents substantive participation in school governance.” The problem of parents having a “narrow focus” or not seeing the “larger picture” was referenced several times. One pastor remarked that “so often parents come with a certain agenda” that may conflict with the objectives of pastors and principals. Another pastor commented, “Interference by parents in the governance of schools, in my experience, harms the school, makes the principal’s role less effective, and has the potential to cause chaos in the school and parish family.”

A good example of establishing appropriate boundaries, according to some pastors, would be to view parent organizations as advisory “source[s] of soliciting input on matters,” with school administration as policy-makers holding the “ultimate responsibility of oversight.” Hence, pastors stated that parent input is welcome in the context of parental advisory councils, granted that these boards are subordinate to the opinions of the professional leadership of Catholic schools.

Another major area of concern was perceived parental disregard for the “religious element” of Catholic schools, which seems to stem from differences in values and priorities between parents and Catholic schools. Parents “no longer see the [importance] of a Catholic [e]ducation,” choosing to advocate for academic, athletic, or performing arts improvements instead. In pastors’ eyes, parents have lost sight of the importance of Catholic identity, which should take precedence above all else. One respondent expressed this disconnect when stating:

Most parents today see themselves as consumers of Catholic education. They often do not come with the same vision of Catholic identity and ministry that a pastor might have for the school. The school council should [sic] comprise of people with gifts and skills that will further the role of the school as a model for evangelization and solid faith formation.

Due to these disparities in values, many pastors do not believe that parents have the religious education background necessary to merit a “substantial voice in governance.”

Lack of interest in the Catholicity of schools has thus led some pastors to conclude that parents should not be the primary architects of school policy. Yet pastors recognize that parents may come from different backgrounds and that the formation of a Catholic identity depends largely upon the evangelization of these parents. Hence, a greater emphasis on parental catechesis and the recruitment of parents who would uphold Catholic identity could help improve governance issues.

### General Discussion

*The Code of Canon Law* (Caparros et al., 1993) is clear that the traditional parish school is not a separate entity from the Church, but is subsumed into the juridic personhood and overall mission of the parish. In some respects this legal understanding of the parish renders moot any discussion of the parish-school connection; the parish school and Church are already legally and canonically joined. However, as our data reveal, pastors sense a real disconnect between the parish and school, and speak to this most pointedly when talking about the involvement of school parents and families in the liturgical life of the parish.<sup>2</sup>

Quantitative data reveal that pastors believe the need for parental involvement is high, yet many pastors indicated that they are addressing more pressing needs (e.g., finances) above those designed to engage parents in the life of the parish and school community. Additionally, the data indicate that older pastors with more experience in parishes with schools report a higher valuation of parental involvement in the governance and policy decisions of the school. It is possible that these pastors have personally witnessed the value of parental involvement in the life of the school and parish and seek parents as strategic partners in the governance of the school, or simply that they are too busy to manage the demands of operating a school and parish on their own and need the added assistance. No matter the reason for this difference, the data clearly indicate that the longer pastors are in a parish with a school, the more they value parental participation in that school.

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2 Governance models for all Catholic schools, including the traditional parish school, are evolving rapidly and include diverse distribution of leadership responsibilities beyond the pastor and principal (Haney, O'Brien, & Sheehan, 2009). As noted earlier, however, we focus on the pastor of the traditional parish school because, even amidst emerging models of governance, the pastor occupies a central role in the ministry of Catholic education (see canon 794 § 2).

The qualitative data illustrate pastors' affirmation that the parish and school are not separate entities, rather a unified whole. As such, they want to see school families participating in the liturgical and ministerial life of the Church and parishioners engaged in the work of the school. The Catholic faith must be alive and practiced; given that indispensable and central commitment, there are operational and practical avenues for parent engagement in the school.

Before we consider specific recommendations to ameliorate the perceived divide between parish and school, we must first consider the underlying and yet most prominent clarion call to parents emanating from the Church: That is, if parents are indeed the first and primary educators in the faith, then they can only be effective in this ministry if they are first and foremost engaged in the liturgical life of the Church and in the ministerial activities of their parish. None of us, parents or not, are optimally effective in our ministry absent full engagement in the sacraments of the Church. The Sunday Eucharist, Reconciliation, weekday Masses, a personal life of prayer, and various other encounters with Christ deepen our personal faith life, and inspire our work. Said another way, engagement in the liturgical life of the Church is a primary source for the grace and faith needed for participation in the ministerial, operational, volunteer, and governance elements of the parish and school. These sacramental graces are what inspire and support the faith of parents and families in their daily lives and struggles. By bringing their faith into the world, they become ministers of the Gospel in their own right and return to the sacraments with new energy and vigor. This is why the Second Vatican Council called the Eucharist "the source and summit" of the Christian life (Paul VI, 1963, n. 10). It is the place where all ministerial work finds its true inspiration and its final destiny. It sends us forth and calls us back in a never-ending fountain of grace. In this way, the sacramental life of the Church feeds and supports an active life of faith in all believers and the regular practice of the faith in daily life calls Christians to return again and again to the sacramental life of the Church.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Miller (2006) stated that "America's Catholic schools, if they are to be genuinely Catholic, must be integrated into the organic pastoral program of the parish, the diocese, and the universal church" (p. vii). This line of reasoning reflects the inclusive juridic personhood of the parish and the important teaching ministry of the Church that is realized in a special and privileged way in our Catholic schools. The perception among pastors in this study was

that more must be done to reaffirm and accomplish this unique and essential accord between parish and school and to engage parents effectively in the life of the Church. Anchored in and guided by the insights gleaned from pastors via this inquiry, we turn now to three specific recommendations for pastors, parish communities, and parents.

### ***Comprehensive Vision of Catholic Education***

Pastors of parishes with schools must evince a comprehensive and compelling vision of Catholic education that extols the Catholic school as an essential ministry of the parish. Common juridic personhood or geographic proximity are not sufficient proxies for intentional and frequent communication about the shared mission of parish and school. Pastors must proactively seek opportunities to inform and engage parishioners. Are all parishioners aware that the parish and school are indeed one entity with a shared and complementary mission in Catholic education? Moreover, do school parents know that the pastor expects to see them at church on Sunday or why liturgical and sacramental celebration is important to the educational mission of the parish? More critical yet, do the parents themselves understand the importance of their own spiritual development for the overall education of their children? Pastors would do well to address this vision of comprehensive Catholic education from the pulpit. Pastors should institutionalize these expectations through specific policies, include them in the school handbook, and reaffirm them through literature that is sent home to parents and published for parishioners.

### ***School Preparation Programs***

While most Catholic schools have clearly delineated expectations for parental involvement in operational aspects of the school (e.g., minimum number of volunteer hours at school) they rarely promulgate equally clear expectations for parental involvement in the liturgical components of Church life and the ministerial activities of the parish. In fact, these matters often receive little, if any, attention. What would parental involvement in the life of the parish and school look like if school preparation programs for parents were as informative and formational as other sacramental preparation programs? For example, there are specific programs for parents when preparing for the baptism of their children—programs that clearly outline the responsibilities of Christian parenthood and help parents understand the importance of the particular sacrament to life in Christ. And yet, when parents consider enrolling their children in the parish school, a decision that is critical to the ongoing faith development

of their child, the primary information they receive often pertains to tuition costs and age requirements for enrollment. Little is said about how the parish honors and celebrates the liturgical seasons or what opportunities there are for community service or social action—extensions of the Christian education begun in the home. Specific efforts must be made to develop programs that help parents understand the importance of Catholic education in the life of the Church and their own responsibilities as Christian parents of children enrolled in the parish school. Enrollment is an opportune moment for such catechesis and for calling forth and affirming the faith of both parents and children.

### ***Proactive Parental Involvement***

The Church affirms that her mission to educate children in the faith is secondary to the “primordial and unalienable” duty of parents as the primary teacher and model for moral and spiritual formation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1999, n. 2221). As such, parents need not wait to be invited to participate in the education of their children—they are in fact the primary stewards of Christian education. The Catholic school is indeed a special and privileged place of Christian education, but it does not operate independent of the education children receive in the home. Parents must then proactively seek ways to become involved in the life of the school to concretize the connection between the primary education received in the home and the special expression of Christian education realized in the Catholic school. Proactive parental involvement in the schools that is respectful of and complementary to the professional responsibilities and expertise of teachers and leaders in the schools would satisfy pastors’ desire for parental participation and parents’ own responsibilities as the first and primary educators of their children.

The Catholic parish and school are collaborators in this endeavor and, as such, require the full and active engagement of parents at all levels. The most important contribution parents can make to the life of the parish and school is to “know, live and practice their faith.” This necessarily includes making the sacramental and service opportunities of the parish an important dimension of family life, so that families’ involvement in the life of the parish is never limited to the school and school activities. A full and vibrant faith, demonstrated by parents through their regular participation in the sacraments, leading them to inspired service and work for justice in the local community, is the best cooperation and support that can be provided in a school context. With such a deep and manifest commitment, parents fulfill their obligation to collaborate with the school and bring into full bloom the greatest gifts God has entrusted to them—their children.

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