

Voices from the Field: Interviews with Three Prominent Catholic School Educators about Leadership and Collaboration

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A few months after the Loyola University Chicago (LUC) Catholic Higher Education Collaborative Conference (CHEC) on leadership, Lorraine Ozar, director of the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, interviewed three panelists to probe in greater depth their perspectives on the leadership crisis in Catholic elementary and secondary schools and ways that Catholic institutions of higher education can help. What follows is a summary of their candid and challenging insights, along with some “words of wisdom” for Catholic colleges and universities as they move forward in more collaborative partnerships. The three educators interviewed were: Sr. M. Paul McCaughey, O.P., superintendent of schools of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Illinois; Dr. Stephen Phelps, president of Bishop O’Dowd High School in Oakland, California; and Dr. Margaret Curran, principal of Annunciation Catholic Academy in Altamonte Springs, Florida. These educators were chosen because they are experienced national leaders and current practitioners in three vital sectors of Catholic education—system, secondary, and elementary. Each grapples with the important leadership issues confronting Catholic schools in the face of rising costs, outdated governance structures, fierce competition from charter schools, and weakening influence of the Catholic Church in society.

A Superintendent’s Call for Cohesion: Conversation with Sr. M. Paul McCaughey, O.P.

Lorraine Ozar: From your perspective, what are the greatest and most pressing needs facing Catholic schools around the whole question of school leadership?

Sr. M. Paul McCaughey: *Finding* the people we need. Finding people who “get” the full mission of Catholic schools—who are capable *and* loving—that is the biggest need. We have a whole generation of principals who are

retiring or near retirement. They are out of energy. Some of them should retire, but then we are faced with finding high-quality replacements. The principal's job in a Catholic school has grown and expanded exponentially. As always, we need strong *Catholic* leaders who are excellent professional educators. In addition, these principals now need to be entrepreneurs and team builders. So when we seek principals today we say, "You must be a strong Catholic leader and an excellent professional educator—and, oh yes, you will also need to be in charge of the asbestos plan and form a board and motivate all relevant stakeholders to invest in the school and build enrollment." Many people whom we would have looked at as competent in the past are not necessarily competent to handle all these added responsibilities. Or, they may say to us, "I can't see a way to make such a job workable; I need a life." Our model of leadership has been so focused on the person of the principal we need a new model built on shared leadership. Right now, those who are doing the job well (without a leadership team), really have no life. The job is consuming. The shared leadership I am talking about would include parents and other stakeholders.

Ozar: Are there other reasons why it is hard to find principals, besides the complexity of the job?

McCaughey: Finance is always an issue. Given the complexity of the job, we need to pay people better. A Harvard model speaks to "three steps of teaching compensation." Perhaps we need to do something analogous with Catholic school principals: a system of "merit pay" to include a category of "exemplary" that would apply to salaries whether or not a principal is working in the inner city. Finances and safety are always issues and we can no longer assume support for Catholic schools from parents or pastors and parishes. Many schools have aging physical plants. All of these reasons come together to create a formidable barrier to finding the right people who are willing to take the job. The demands of the principal in a Catholic school are so complex; I would dare an otherwise astute businessman to pull it off.

Ozar: Are the places where we look for these leaders different than they used to be?

McCaughey: We need to look for people with strong content skills in education and overlay that with exposure to business and accounting and personnel. Catholic school principals must be capable of managing multiple stakeholders and long-term projects. Those leaders who are thinking in the same old

individual leadership model are failing. Those who are not able to make decisions to think creatively have not been able to move their schools forward. At the suggestion that they need to expand their approaches, many will say, "Leave me alone to do my work." They are working so hard, you have to respect that—but their vision is limited. When I walk into a school, 80% of the time the school climate is created by the principal. Catholic school principals need to be committed, faith-filled Catholics; they also need to be bright and generous. Strong leadership is critical and can come from many sources. We are advertising in the *Wall Street Journal* as well as educational media.

Ozar: Can people grow into the principal's job as you see it?

McCaughey: Current principals need to mentor. I believe that leadership can be taught. For current principals themselves, we need to redefine expectations. Recently, in the Archdiocese of Chicago, we rewrote the principal job description and developed an evaluation to match the job description. We are moving away from checklists toward asking a small number of important questions. We will ask candidates to answer the questions and tell us why they answered as they did. Then we want pastors and assistant superintendents to use it to document performance and to design professional development or other interventions to help principals improve and to professionalize the system. We need pastors engaged with professional educators; often, the missionary priests who are placed in parishes with schools have no tradition of or experience with Catholic schools.

Ozar: What evidence leads you to name these issues around leadership as the most pressing?

McCaughey: Turnover in the system. Last year was unusual, we had only 4% turnover in principals. This year, I expect 10% or higher. As I scan the lists, I see 2 or 3 principals out of every 12 who are not returning. The predominant number of our principals are baby boomers, and they are retiring. Public schools are facing this turnover as well. Occasionally, we get a competent public school principal to take on leadership in a Catholic school, but they are not used to doing many of the things they need to do in a Catholic school: work with limited support staff, work with boards, do the budgeting and planning. Often, they also do not understand Catholic school culture in its best form.

Ozar: How can Catholic institutions of higher education help meet these Catholic school leadership needs?

McCaughey: Help find good leaders. Locate possible principals graduating from Catholic college and university programs and match them up to Catholic school needs. Say to dioceses: “Here are our whiz kids to watch. Here’s someone with the grit to be a great leader in the inner city. Here’s someone with the sophistication to work well with suburban parents.” Locate those with potential so that we can get them in as assistant principals, even while they are getting their degree. They will get some experience, build a grasp of the job and resiliency, and we can see who the real incipient leaders are. Current Catholic university or college degree programs are wonderful, but we need to work more at the internship angle.

More mentoring is critical. In current practicums, often the projects candidates select do not take them where we need them to go. Some are “fake” and some are real, but they do not necessarily put the candidate into the kind of decision-making mode and paperwork mode required of real principals in Catholic schools. We need to provide the opportunity for principal candidates to work with a school-based mentor who will say, “Here’s something you need to do with curriculum, with student behavior, with boards and parents, with teacher supervision” and then coach them as they try it out.

Catholic institutions of higher education do need to continue offering both professional development and degree programs: Get the tools out to leaders; develop menus of programs available to work with teachers and for principals themselves; give incentives; get principals recertified; develop school leaders at many levels, building the idea of a team of leaders; market to the skill set of what is needed; include time management. Catholic universities must assist with the philosophy of *Catholic* education: In courses and programs for general school leadership include a sidebar for *Catholic*. We also need training for presidents that match the skills they need.

Ozar: Many Catholic institutions of higher education have begun to expand their engagement with pre-K-12 Catholic schools. How do you view this partnership?

McCaughey: I love it; it is vital for both schools and Catholic colleges and universities. Catholic university involvement swings both ways. When Catholic colleges and universities make schools a “lab” school or a site for research two really important things happen. First, the partnership creates a bit of a “swish” for the community; it is huge to have the school working

with a university, to have a university involved with the school. Second, a strong partnership with a Catholic college or university over time can actually make something happen—actually improve the school and increase learning. Catholic institutions of higher education are critically aware of what needs to happen and they are looking for places where they can do applied research. If Catholic institutions of higher education put their feet on the ground, the results can be reciprocal. Schools can also draw on the multiple resources of the university: Political science can help schools with school choice issues; business can help with marketing and finance. Catholic school leaders do not have to be experts in everything, but they need to be Renaissance people so they are not taken to the cleaners by others, and able to craft what they write. Involving schools of education is good, but we also need to break down silos among divisions and units within universities so that, rather than doing scatter shots, a Catholic college or university could say, “We’ll take these three places [schools]. Here’s what we’ll do.”

Most of what is happening now is one-shot deals: that is rescue work. We need real development. We need Catholic institutions of higher education to engage with a school over time, stay with it on multiple fronts for 3-5 years until the school has built the capacity to sustain its efforts, then move on to another school. This would be “teaching the school to fish”; this would be responding to vocation, that place where the unmet needs of the world meet our talents and gifts. Catholic institutions of higher education can also get schools talking to each other: We are in the same neighborhood, let us do some common things.

Ozar: Would there be funds available to support Catholic institutions of higher education in this?

McCaughey: Yes. We have not been using our money wisely. I would rather say to a school, “We [diocese] just gave you \$200,000 and nothing has changed; not anymore. We’ll support scholarship for kids to attend if your school is worth attending.” Money could go to Catholic college- or university-facilitated turnarounds.

Ozar: A major focus of the CHEC initiative is on developing and sustaining genuine collaboration among Catholic colleges and universities. What words of wisdom or tips would you give them from your experience?

McCaughey: Sometimes what Catholic colleges and universities have to offer schools is very clearly defined: “Here’s this program that’s available, go

look at it.” Or, Catholic colleges and universities can say to schools, “Here’s what we do, come see.” As superintendent, I want to work with Catholic institutions of higher education as a unit; I want to know what they can offer and say to teachers and principals, “Pick anything that fits your needs and we’ll support your accessing that program.” I would like the Catholic colleges and universities to create a menu of offerings in a region; create teams among universities to design and offer programs to better meet needs.

My tip: No one will get diminished if we collaborate; rather, we will achieve greater strength and clarity. Recently I met with Catholic college and university presidents in Chicago to do some brainstorming about helping the schools. After looking at some data together, I was thrilled to hear their thinking go in this direction: “What if we [the Catholic colleges and universities that were present] took the 14 schools in this region and...” That is exactly it. I much prefer collaboration; we have enough competition without Catholic schools feeding more of it. The Catholic institutions of higher education are distinct enough, the projects are different enough, that even with the reality of competition within collaborative efforts, the results are unique enough that Catholic schools can benefit from all of it. And I say, “Wow, look at how the Catholic colleges and universities are involved with the schools.” I am tired of piecemeal. Let us think bigger.

A High School President’s Call for New Mind-sets: Conversation with Stephen Phelps, Ed.D.

Ozar: From your perspective, what are the greatest and most pressing needs facing Catholic schools around the whole question of school leadership?

Stephen Phelps: Leaders in successful schools understand the mind-sets that created the present system and continually develop and implement new mind-sets that will allow future growth and prosperity. Successful Catholic schools meet clear social, educational, and religious needs, supported by a viable economic model. Therefore, the first leadership challenge is to identify and articulate needs and develop an economic model to meet those needs. A second challenge is to develop a leadership style and school model that fosters *intrinsic motivation* in staff, students, and parents to support and develop a dynamic model that works. Rigid command and control systems are failing worldwide. The diverse and varied needs of the students who would be part of Catholic schools require skilled and practiced leaders who are continually evolving.

Ozar: Would you elaborate on the first issue—establishing new mind-sets?

Phelps: We need more work with people from other schools and other fields. Too many of our current Catholic schools and leaders are playing catch-up, not building capacity to adjust to what is coming. Schools tend to look back and prepare people for what has always been, for example, using a 1990 economic model. We are constantly starting with the model we have and tweaking; this limits our ability to engage fully with the demands of the 21st century. Unless we embrace new models, including economic models, we are stuck with the model we have, and it is not sustainable for public or private systems. For example, eight states are thinking about a model where students graduate from high school in 10th grade, and then move on to begin courses in community colleges, similar to the system in Shanghai. The idea is to graduate from a custodial institution at a certain age. Are we considering this? Should we? Even universities cannot afford to have their facilities empty. There is a pervasive issue out there around the model of what we teach, how, when, and how much in this century. Education at all levels needs to explore new mind-sets regarding “the way we do things here.”

Ozar: What about the second issue you raise, the need for leadership style and school models to address intrinsic motivation of stakeholders?

Phelps: Another shift school leaders need to make is to pay attention to how we motivate folks. I recommend Daniel Pink’s book, *Drive*. Pink makes a case that what truly motivates people today is autonomy, mastery, purpose—different from the motivators we use in schools. Leaders need to understand how people learn and how brains have changed; they need to learn a new economic model, and to understand motivation.

Ozar: What evidence leads you to name these issues around leadership as the most pressing to address?

Phelps: The best evidence is that thousands of Catholic schools have closed or are on the brink of closing because of economics and the absence of a compelling case that the need they serve in the community cannot be met by existing public institutions and by other means. People need to know why they need to *choose* Catholic schools. A case in point: I recently met with Sr. Rose Marie, principal of St. Elizabeth Elementary School in Oakland, California. She expressed the reality we face quite succinctly: “There are 11 charter schools within a mile. Students can go there in uniforms for free. We

charge \$6,000.” Catholic schools need to provide a lot more than you can get at charter schools. At Bishop O’Dowd, we are looking more to the outside to prepare our students for this world and this century. For example, we offer more career counseling for everyone to be ready to make a “good-fit” choice of college; we moved Kairos to junior year and redesigned the senior retreat to focus on learning more about who you are—talents, skills, and strengths (Gallup) analysis—to help students make reflective, prayer-informed choices for the next part of their lives. We are evolving into a dynamic community center that truly addresses what it means to educate the whole person in this century. It is a new mind-set that is evolving.

Ozar: How can Catholic institutions of higher education help address these leadership issues?

Phelps: Catholic institutions of higher education need to establish innovative leadership training academies that go beyond current programs. Pre-K-12 school leaders of the kind I am describing need to be trained and periodically supported in new learning and problem solving as they build upon the strengths of their existing schools in developing new, sustainable 21st-century models. The training involves expertise in human learning, motivation, leadership, and team building, and human, emotional, social, and religious growth. Develop these programs starting with a focus on the mind-set, on the vision of what a Catholic school must be to meet 21st-century needs. Catholic college and university leadership programs must be designed to prepare leaders who have the capacity to usher in the changes we need, so that the institutions we have in 2020 are substantially different from what we have in 2010. Has anyone done it?

Ozar: What will these “creative change agent” school leaders need to be able to do?

Phelps: We need different forms of leadership today. Through technology we have greatly expanded our knowledge of human learning and motivation. Technology makes nearly all the world’s information available to every student at almost no cost. As I said earlier, the old control and command that distributes information will no longer work. To paraphrase Dwight D. Eisenhower, “a successful leader must convince and motivate people to do what you want them to do because they want to do it.” As a leader you must be able to identify what you want and build capacity to self-select among models. Successful leadership of the kind I am talking about expands mind-set, or vision, first,

then develops and follows it up. Structures are set up in schools today in such a way as to constrain mind-sets. Everyone is invested in current structures, trying to protect what we are doing. We must go after these structures. Identify a few levers, or mind-sets, what kids, adults, workers need. Look at how to restructure the enterprise to meet the needs. Make sure we can use the tools of this age. That is what the leaders in successful Catholic schools will need to do. Catholic institutions of higher education need to set up innovative leadership programs to teach and coach the new mind-sets and the skills to pull them off, and then keep people coming back. Bring people back for incremental improvement.

Ozar: Many Catholic institutions of higher education have begun to expand their engagement with pre-K-12 Catholic schools. How do you view this partnership?

Phelps: This is essential. Implementing new mind-sets to ensure successful 21st-century Catholic schools requires a vital and growing Church. Because the Church model in the minds of adults and youth is primarily coming from mind-sets focused on promoting traditional and static forms of worship and spirituality, an increasing number of adults and youth are indifferent to the Church and its message. Universities can help here by moving beyond traditional mind-sets to develop more dynamic and engaging educational and religious models. The Catholic colleges and universities can be leaven—they can exercise leverage—in the larger Church and community in which the schools operate.

Ozar: A major focus of the CHEC initiative is on developing and sustaining genuine collaboration among Catholic institutions of higher education. What words of wisdom or tips would you give them from your experience?

Phelps: The job I have described is well beyond the resources or expertise of any one institution. A consortium of Catholic colleges and universities using digital technologies and new research in human learning would make a lot of sense economically and mission wise, but may not be possible given the limitations of human experience and short-term self-interest. We need to strive for innovative collaboration: Set up a model of leadership development for educating Catholic school leaders in the new mind-sets, and do it in each area, learn from one another, expand capacity. In Oakland, we have formed an online consortium of faith-based high schools. The mantra is, “We will do together what we can’t do alone.”

An Elementary School Principal’s Call for Help on the Front Lines: Conversation with Margaret Curran, Ph.D.

Ozar: From your perspective, what are the greatest and most pressing needs facing Catholic schools around the whole question of school leadership?

Margaret Curran: The greatest challenges are recruitment and retention of leaders; these are huge problems. People are not as willing to put in long hours and high energy for the level of remuneration offered. I am on a search committee for a principal right now, and honestly, we had maybe four good résumés, which really came down to two. Being a principal requires a lot of expertise. When people put in the time to get an advanced degree, they expect to be fairly compensated. Compensation varies greatly in different parts of the country.

Ozar: Catholic school principals have always worked hard in a demanding job. What is the difference now?

Curran: The demands placed on people in the position have increased. The principal has always worn many hats, but the level of expectation for being *more expert in many areas* has gone up, making prospective candidates nervous about being able to do the job well. With high-stakes testing, a principal coming in is expected to bring struggling or marginal schools to high achievement in a short time. With enrollment issues looming large in many Catholic schools, a principal coming into a school with lower enrollment is expected to turn it around. Development is crucial to keeping schools open, so the principal becomes a development director who is expected to find ways for “funding the mission.” Increasingly, Catholic elementary school principals are expected to have expertise in and to function effectively as a development director, marketing expert, and fiscal manager—along with the usual requirements of ensuring academic excellence and building a faith community. It is a scary set of responsibilities, given the precarious balancing of funding, enrollment, excellence, facilities, and Catholic identity going on in many Catholic schools right now.

Ozar: Do experienced principals see these added expectations in the same way?

Curran: Many current principals look at the challenges their schools face and choose not to stay on and see the school decline. Within the last week, two principals have mentioned to me that they want to get out of the job before the

school starts going down. One will retire and one will change fields—go out of the field of Catholic education completely. People are leaving the field of Catholic education at the leadership level. A big part of the problem is that the principal is expected to change it all on the front lines, with little support.

Ozar: Is this a change? Did principals get more support in the past?

Curran: Parents are not as supportive. This leads to the second greatest need around leadership: Principals are expected to keep the school *Catholic* in an increasingly secular environment. This means paying attention to service learning, social responsibility, and teaching the Catholic tradition. But Catholic school principals today must work at keeping the school Catholic while keeping scores high, keeping the budget low, and being careful not to impose preferences.

Ozar: What do you mean by that last phrase?

Curran: More parents are “unchurched” even if they are nominally Catholic, so, it is sometimes harder to be direct regarding the Catholic identity piece. Similarly, even when a principal wants to put his/her focus and energy into being the faith leader, into keeping strong Catholic identity, the board may often not agree. Pastors will agree, which is one point of support for principals, but frequently, pastors are not highly involved in the Catholic schools. Parents may not see Catholic identity as important as high achievement in other areas.

Ozar: Does needing to be the faith leaders of the school limit the pool of candidates and affect recruitment and retention?

Curran: Absolutely. For so many years Catholic schools depended on the sisters and brothers to keep the schools Catholic; then we depended on ex-brothers and ex-sisters; then we depended on those who were taught by ex-brothers and ex-sisters. We keep extending that line and now we get principal candidates who may never have experienced a Catholic school at all, either themselves or their children. This is a place where Catholic institutions of higher education can help.

Ozar: How can Catholic institutions of higher education help meet these needs?

Curran: Faith leader: Catholic colleges and universities can offer summer institutes and summer immersion experiences for potential principal candidates who seem to have expertise in the other relevant dimensions but do not see themselves as faith leaders, or who have had no experience in that dimension of Catholic school leadership.

Ozar: Would such opportunities be welcome for other areas besides faith leader?

Curran: Yes, in many areas of leadership training—development, marketing, fiscal management. Programs are already out there, because you need these areas of leadership expertise in non-Catholic schools as well. The difference in these areas would be in the focus. I think it makes a difference if a Catholic school principal was educated in a secular or Catholic institution. The focus and applications are different when you do budgeting in a Catholic school or public school, for example. Catholic institutions of higher education have expertise in the day-to-day relationships in schools that they could share with Catholic schools. At the October conference in Chicago, I heard someone refer to a speakers bureau. I did not know one existed. That would be a great help—getting people who could provide professional development at affordable prices. We all know about Grant Wiggins and Robert Marzano, but we cannot afford them. It would be good to have people from Catholic colleges and universities who are equally intelligent and informed and who know Catholic schools and would provide assistance at more affordable rates.

Ozar: What about audiences beyond teachers and principals?

Curran: Oh, yes. Catholic institutions of higher education could provide programs for parents, boards, and pastors.

Ozar: What kind of programs?

Curran: Again, speakers. Catholic college and university speakers could talk to parents about child development, learning, counseling, spirituality for parents. They could have a lot to offer boards as well. And do not forget those who are not near any involved Catholic college or university. I did my doctorate at Columbia. I got a great education, but it was not focused on being a Catholic school principal. I would like to see online/distance learning opportunities that would make Catholic college and university programs accessible to Catholic educators in rural areas, or in places where there is a small Catholic population.

Ozar: Do you have any suggestions for Catholic institutions of higher education that want to get more involved in support of Catholic schools? How do they go about connecting with Catholic schools?

Curran: The best bet is for Catholic institutions of higher education to connect through already established principal groups and forums, both national and regional. Catholic colleges and universities need to brainstorm with Catholic schools locally and get the word out that programs exist. Word of mouth is the strongest communicator for principals, not surveys. Last year at the beginning of the school year we had five major questionnaires—all taking time to respond appropriately. I think one was from the National Catholic Educational Association, one from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, and one from the diocese. If I had gotten one more, I would have deleted it before responding to anything. Flyers are still good for many principals. A lot of principals—sort of sad to say—are still more likely to delete or ignore things that come via e-mail, but if they get a piece of paper, it might sit on their desk for awhile, and then they will pick it up and do something with it.

Ozar: Will Catholic school educators use these programs?

Curran: It depends on what programs are available and the dissemination of information. You need buy-in from the superintendents.

Ozar: Many Catholic institutions of higher education have begun to expand their engagement with pre-K-12 Catholic schools. How do you view this partnership?

Curran: Really, I have not been involved with any Catholic institution of higher education; there are not many Catholic colleges and universities in central Florida. Also, I do not find people on the national level talking about Catholic college and university involvement. You do not hear people saying, “X university has really been assisting our schools with... Y university has really supported us in...” Perhaps there is a disconnect between what is available and the awareness of what is available. When I came to the LUC CHEC conference, I was surprised to hear people were doing things.

Ozar: How would you respond to a more significant partnership with Catholic institutions of higher education, a greater involvement of Catholic institutions of higher education with Catholic schools?

Curran: I would absolutely welcome it. I think such involvement is absolutely necessary. It may be the salvation of Catholic schools.

Ozar: Why do you say that?

Curran: We are expected to do too much without support. Catholic college and university partnerships would be a great support. Catholic institutions of higher education have expertise in the day-to-day relationships in schools that they could share with schools.

Ozar: A major focus of the CHEC initiative is on developing and sustaining genuine collaboration among Catholic institutions of higher education. What words of wisdom or tips would you give them from your experience?

Curran: I cannot really speak to this because I have had very little experience working with Catholic institutions of higher education. I was interested to learn that some Catholic colleges and universities are beginning to work in collaborative groups with apparent success. I am thinking of the group in Milwaukee who talked about what they are doing when we were in Chicago. They seemed to think it was working.

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