

RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

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

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After several careful readings of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) document *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium* (2005), I was clear about one thing. Its goals are strikingly similar to *In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, published by the USCCB in 1990.

So, what impact, if any, has this recent bishops' endorsement created? What impact can it create? How can those of us who care so deeply and work so assiduously for a proud and valued school system believe that this 2005 document will make any difference?

The challenges outlined in the document are real. Now as in 1990, they touch each of the critical underpinnings of the Catholic school system: pastoral and school leadership; professional preparation; finances, including the desperate need for just wages and benefits; accessibility; academic rigor; and Catholic identity. But outlining the needs goes only so far. Where are the teeth, the clout, the specificity regarding action and accountability?

The document's tone suggests, however, that the bishops are looking for helpers to address the needs of the Catholic school system. They suggest convening educational, business, and community leaders, leaders of Catholic colleges and universities, the Committee on Education of the USCCB, and the National Catholic Educational Association, all of whom are in positions to create and influence the vision and then, without delay, act on it. So I am cautiously optimistic that these helpers may be the ones who will move

beyond the ecclesiastical rhetoric and influence the bishops to act.

Daring directives that speak to the required, equitable participation of every parish in the country to provide support are long overdue. Specificity and timelines to “ensure that Catholic schools, despite financial difficulties, continue to provide a Catholic education to the poor and marginalized” (John Paul II, 1999, §71) are desperately needed as well as courageous decision makers who realize the need is great and can put them in place. A bold and well-conceived plan to effect governance changes and empowerment of the laity in Catholic schools is paramount. And at the core of it all is the critical need to examine and reexamine the Catholic identity and character of the school as well as the actual and perceived quality of the school’s teaching and learning.

Leaders with a passion for these and many other initiatives must be the helpers and make their voices heard. Conventional approaches and tired, worn out, short-term fixes, as the bishops have noted, will no longer work. If all of the faithful, not just the bishops, truly believe that “our young people are the Church of today and tomorrow. It is imperative that we provide them with schools ready to address their spiritual, moral, and academic needs” (USCCB, 2005, p. 8), then we have no other option than to seek new solutions to long term challenges.

Let’s begin now to write the script for the bishops’ 2020 statement in support of Catholic schools. What a different story it could be!

Thousands of Catholic educators, this author included, are ready to make it happen.

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The Catholic educational community is grateful for the most recent statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in support of Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Directing a program

for the preparation of Catholic school principals at a large university and traveling to many dioceses to speak to teachers and principals, I know firsthand of the joy and appreciation Catholic educators feel in response to this document. It has been many years since such a strong statement on behalf of schools was issued. For this consciousness raising, publicity, and invitation to collaborate in the future success of schools, all Catholic educators are grateful.

And this gratitude is heartfelt and widespread. The USCCB can be highly bureaucratic; getting a document proposed takes immense work. Getting one published presents administrative and political obstacles that can be dispiriting. Bishop Bernard Harrington, of Winona, Minnesota, and former chair of the Bishops' Committee on Education, deserves special recognition for shepherding this document through to publication. Catholic educators throughout the US also know that Sister Glenn Anne McPhee, Secretary of Education at the USCCB, and Fr. Bill Davis, Deputy Secretary, played indispensable roles in the writing, editing, and publication of this document. The process was years in development and great patience and perseverance were required to achieve publication. It was a group of diocesan superintendents who first suggested such a document, and that suggestion was made several years ago.

The statement merits serious attention and consideration. Parish councils, finance committees, boards of education, and pastoral councils should read and discuss the challenges articulated by the bishops. Universities, too, ought to respond to the call to become more seriously involved in addressing some of the issues facing Catholic education. In my travels, I find most Catholic educators already aware of the statement and conversant about its contents. Thus, it appears that the document is serving its purpose of creating dialogue and energy around key, strategic points of Catholic school leadership. Such movements can only strengthen Catholic schools.

Footnote #1 in the document, citing the work of Notre Dame professor David Campbell, deserves some emphasis. Campbell, a political scientist, has been studying civic engagement across school sectors and has found that Catholic schools are among the nation's best in producing civically engaged adults. In the age of school choice and education tax credits, Campbell's findings are especially relevant as Catholic school leaders continue to make the case to state and federal legislatures that Catholic schools serve and promote the common good as good as, if not better than, most public schools.

The bishops must be pleased and delighted that their thoughts and words are being taken seriously across the country. Several initiatives are noteworthy in this regard. A national group of leading Catholic business leaders has been formed to study parish and school business practices and to recommend to the USCCB best practices that can be implemented to improve the administration and management of the Church's human and fiscal resources. The

National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management (www.nlrcm.org) predated the recent bishops' statement, but the effort can be seen as a part of the national response to the growing involvement of lay leaders in significant management issues of church governance.

The Catholic University of America and the University of Notre Dame have established special task forces to study some of the pressing issues facing Catholic education, and to make recommendations to the USCCB in light of the invitation contained in the recent statement. All of these initiatives have engaged the expertise of leading academics, clergy, politicians, and educators to surface, create, and affirm a vision for Catholic schools that will insure their future success.

Critics will no doubt say that it is time that the bishops do more for Catholic education than simply write documents. Supporters will hope that the bishops have the courage to listen to Catholic business leaders, educators, and academics, and respond favorably to the many recommendations that will no doubt start coming out of the Roundtable, The Catholic University of America, and Notre Dame. At the top of my wish list is a national Catholic health care plan that would include all Catholic school teachers, administrators, clergy, central office personnel, and parish pastoral staff. With the exception of the dioceses in the state of Michigan, every diocese now purchases health care separately for its employees and at great cost. Any principal or pastor can tell you that after salaries, health care costs are the largest line item in the budget. If the bishops could find a way to leverage our national, Catholic presence and purchase or provide health care from a single provider through a national plan, the savings could be in the millions of dollars. Leaders at the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) and the USCCB tell me it is not possible, that it has been discussed without success before. Perhaps, but maybe a few visionary bishops could get this ball rolling again and take this one step that would go a long way to securing the future of Catholic schools.

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The following is written with the utmost respect for all Catholic clergy, all Catholic school educators, the Catholic Church, and most importantly,

for the children who attend our Catholic schools.

I am a recent arrival to Catholic education having been formally involved since 1996. I have, however, seen much and have been blessed to have worked with Catholic educators in 75 of the nation's 7,799 Catholic elementary and secondary schools. An even greater gift has been to be afforded the opportunity to interact with and teach many children in Catholic schools.

My recent experiences in Catholic schools have been rich and varied. Though mostly limited to under-resourced schools in the South and Southwest, my travels have brought me to over 70 schools, so I hope my findings are somewhat generalizable.

Our first stop is at Mass at a school that is fortunate enough to have an enrollment of 360. The sounds of the guitar, tambourine, and bongo drum are accompanied by all 360 voices singing praises to the Lord. The pastor goes out into the center aisle to preach a homily that contains a message with which children can relate. He involves the children as he asks them questions. He is having them be active participants in the message of the Gospel. I compliment him and tell the school principal she is fortunate to have such a pastor. I wonder if he has read the 2005 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) report that states, "It is the responsibility of the entire Catholic community...to provide an exceptional educational experience for young people" (p. 1).

I ask myself if another priest at one of the schools I regularly visit has read the report as well. I pose this question because in the last 5 years that I have been working at this particular school, the pastor always takes his well-deserved vacation the first 2 weeks of school. Gone is the opportunity to welcome the children back from the summer, gone is the moment to thank parents for making the financial sacrifice to provide their children with a Gospel-based education.

Let us move on to another school where each teacher is limited to one ream of copy paper per month. When one has 35 students, that means that each child can only be allotted 3.5 sheets per week. What do these teachers do? They supplement their paper allotment with their own money. This would not be so bad if all Catholic school teachers were paid fair and just wages. After all, they do more than teach; they coach, sponsor reading clubs, prepare students for the academic decathlons, teach students the scientific method so they can participate alongside their peers in the science fair, tutor after school in all content areas, serve as the athletic director, lead school Masses, and cover classes for colleagues because the school has no funds to pay a substitute teacher. These are just a few of the responsibilities they are undertaking. They remain in Catholic education because they want to serve Jesus and his children; they do it because they are Catholic.

Many of my Catholic school colleagues are forced to leave the ministry they so love due to financial constraints. I spoke with a young chemistry teacher who told me she had to leave her Catholic school job because her husband was going to law school this year. She told me her public school salary is now \$11,000 more than she was paid last year.

Let's visit yet another school. Do you see the big yellow school bus parked in the school parking lot? Can you see the trailer parked at another school? What is going on inside there? It is the Title 1 reading program funded by the public school district, for those Catholic schools that meet the federal guidelines for the program. Is there an English as a Second Language (ESL) bus or trailer, or even one that can address the needs of those students who have special learning needs outside of just reading? No. There should be because the 1995 USCCB document, *Principles for Educational Reform*, states that government advocacy will be sought. Additionally, the 2005 USCCB document recognizes that the face of America is changing with the arrival of recent immigrants. It is not that principals and superintendents do not want to have these programs; it is the fact that they cost money and far too many of our schools are stretched beyond their limits.

In 1990, the USCCB issued the statement *In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, which is revisited in the 2005 document, about initiatives that would assist "parents...[in] their right to choose the best schools for their children" (USCCB, 2005, p. 2). Have the bishops and the Committee on Education of the USCCB partnered with the current school choice movements working in our nation? Have they joined forces with the two major minority school choice organizations that are committed to seeing that all children, regardless of race, ethnic origin, or zip code have an opportunity to attend the school of their choice?

I am a teacher. An effective teacher puts a plan into action because the students will not sit there and wait. Renewal of commitment is not enough. We need bold ideas and a new vision.

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