

21st Century Catholic School Governance: A Legacy of Vatican II

It's truly an honor and privilege to welcome you this evening to the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and to again thank our great host, Marquette University

Over the next two days, all of us who work within the Archdiocese in any capacity will be happy to serve your needs and answer your questions. It's a great blessing to have you here. At the outset, I'd like to share with you a bit of background information to provide some context for your understanding of our Catholic educational ministry here in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

We are a decentralized system of 118 schools, including 104 elementary and 14 high schools, educating more than 32,000 students in 10 counties spanning all of southeast Wisconsin. 37 of our schools, in Milwaukee and Racine—just to the south of Milwaukee—participate in the Wisconsin Parental Choice or voucher program. Three of our schools are K-12 systems, in three different cities, and 24 schools are the result of consolidations, mergers, or other reconfigurations ranging in maturity from three months to almost thirty years. As you may know, we enjoy the unique benefit of an alliance with all five of the Catholic colleges and universities located within the Archdiocese known as the Greater Milwaukee Catholic Education Consortium about which you'll hear more over next two days. I would like to acknowledge my colleagues from the Archdiocesan Office for Schools who are here this evening, Associate Superintendents..., and our extraordinarily supportive and visionary leader,

Archbishop Jerome Listecki, who insists that every plan and **action** on behalf of our schools will be made in terms of long-term, not just immediate, consequences. This is what good governance and what excellent leadership do.

We gather here this evening, just days before we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the opening of the second Vatican Council, the 20th anniversary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the opening of the Year of Faith, and we appreciate the providential timing of this conference on governance in our Catholic schools to coincide with the commemoration of those key events in our Church—events that produced a legacy of texts and changes in perspective that seem now to have been both practical and prophetic when viewed through the lens of our 21st century commitment to Catholic educational ministry.

At the opening Mass of the council, on October 11, 1961, Pope John XXIII called for *aggiornamento*, a modernization of the Church to bring it “up to date” with and relevant to the needs of the times. What is perhaps the most pressing need of our times relevant to schools? As my good friend and colleague Bill Henk recently noted in his blog about the importance of Catholic schools, “To the extent that Catholic schools get **governance** right, almost all of the viability factors will align themselves positively.”

Currently, we are enriched by new perspectives on school governance that broaden its meaning and importance beyond but not to the exclusion of “school boards” and structures. Specifically, thanks to Loyola University

Chicago, the School of Education, and the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, the landmark document *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* has provided us with criteria for effective Catholic school Governance and Leadership:

“An excellent Catholic school has a governing body which recognizes and respects the roles of the appropriate and legitimate authorities, and exercises responsible decision-making (authoritative, consultative and advisory) in collaboration with the leadership team for development and oversight of the school’s fidelity to mission, academic excellence, and operational vitality.” (Standard 5)

“An excellent Catholic school has a qualified leader/leadership team empowered by the governing body to realize and implement the school’s mission and vision.” (Standard 6)

And as we gather these days for a summit on governance, we remember that, indeed, it’s ALL about the mission of our schools: forming disciples of Jesus Christ.

To that end, we are re-inspired tonight by the prophetic Council document, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” *Gaudium et Spes*:

“One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and their day-to-day conduct....Let there, then, be

no false opposition between professional and social activity on the one hand and religious life on the other. Let Christians...be proud of the opportunity to carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional, scientific and technical enterprises with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are ordered to the glory of God.” (GS 43)

This integration of faith with culture, of the eternal with the temporal, is, of course, the essential mission of our Catholic schools as we contribute to the evangelizing mission of the Church.

With words that impart special meaning for this summit on governance and leadership, the Council fathers continued, “Let [the laity] not hesitate to take the initiative at the opportune moment...it is **their** task to shoulder their responsibilities under the guidance of Christian wisdom and with careful attention to the teaching of authority of the Church.” (GS 43) A new day for Church ministry in general and for Catholic school governance in particular, was dawning.

Similarly, in their “Declaration on Christian Education” in 1965 the Council Fathers affirmed both the importance of Catholic schools and their need to be structured in ways that meet the needs of time and circumstances:

“Since, therefore, the Catholic school can be such an aid to the fulfillment of the mission of the People of God and to the fostering of the dialogue between the Church and [society], to the benefit of both, it

retains even in our present circumstances the utmost importance.

Consequently this sacred synod proclaims anew...the right of the Church freely to establish and to conduct schools of every type and level. And the Council calls to mind that the exercise of a right of this kind contributes in the highest degree to the protection of freedom of conscience, the rights of parents, as well as to the betterment of culture itself. This Sacred Council of the Church earnestly entreats pastors and all the faithful to spare no sacrifice in helping Catholic schools fulfill their function in a continually more perfect way, and especially in caring for the needs of those who are poor in the goods of this world or who are deprived of the assistance and affection of a family or who are strangers to the gift of Faith.” (Gravissimum Educationis 8)

It seems particularly fitting that, at the opening of this Year of Faith, we will be discussing governance structures that will make the evangelizing mission of Catholic education affordable and accessible to all, especially those who suffer from material, emotional, and spiritual poverty.

In 1988, the Congregation for Catholic Education further reinforced the Catholic educational legacy of Vatican II in its document, “The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School,” and emphasized collaboration, a hallmark of meaningful governance, as essential to Catholic educational effectiveness. “The more the members of the educational community develop a

real willingness to collaborate among themselves, the more fruitful their work will be. Achieving the educational aims of the school should be an equal priority for teachers, students, and families alike...always in the Gospel spirit of freedom and love.”

This emphasis on collaboration was repeated almost twenty years later, in 2007, in what may be a lesser known but equally moving statement by the Congregation for Catholic Education, “Educating together in Catholic schools, “If lived authentically and profoundly, the ecclesial dimension of the...Catholic school cannot be limited to a relationship with the local Christian community. Almost by natural extension, it tends to open onto the horizons of the universal Church.” What powerful implications this type of vision has for the organization, the regionalization, and the accountability structures of our schools.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn’t call to our attention tonight the anniversary of perhaps the most influential document for us as Catholic educators directly inspired by Vatican Council II.

Forty years ago, in 1972, in the spirit of the Council, the National Conference of Catholic bishops issued *A Pastoral Message on Catholic Education*, “To Teach as Jesus Did,” “written against the background of the Second Vatican Council’s “Declaration on Christian Education” which had requested that

national hierarchies issue detailed statements on educational ministry considered in the context of the Church and society in their own countries.” The United States bishops asserted, “Of the educational programs available to the Catholic community, Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the purposes (message, worship, community and service) of Christian education among children and young people....Only in such a school can they experience learning and living fully integrated in the light of faith....this integration of religious truth and values with life distinguishes the Catholic school from all other schools.” (101, 103)

These words from the document are probably familiar and certainly motivating to us all. What I found especially relevant, however, in light of this summit, was the following statement from the bishops—presciently issued four decades ago:

“Specific steps can and should be taken **now** by concerned parents, educators, pastors, and others to ensure the continuance and improvement of Catholic schools: stating clearly and compellingly the distinctive goals of the Catholic school, increasing associations with other nonpublic and public schools, practicing fiscal, professional, academic and civic accountability, conducting vigorous programs of student recruitment, joining with other nonpublic schools in public relations efforts, exercising firm control over operating costs, practicing

greater efficiency in the use of facilities and personnel, intensifying efforts to increase income from private sources...entering into partnership with institutions of higher learning, and undertaking school consolidations at the elementary and secondary levels...Catholic schools are called to a renewal of purpose and some to reorganization... [this]reorganization may also involve new models of sponsorship and collaboration....Approached with candor and intelligence, cooperative planning need not threaten the identity or independence of any school system and can benefit all. (123, 126)

Here we are at Marquette University, representatives of almost every educational ministry in the Church—higher education presidents, deans, provosts, administrators and instructors, diocesan leaders, principals, school board chairs and members, donors, and supporters of Catholic education from all areas of our country and all levels of educational study to explore the ways in which Catholic higher education can help to ensure, through sound, creative, and courageous governance structures a future for our K-12 Catholic schools that is sustainable, affordable, accessible, and filled with hope for all.

I conclude with the passage from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians with which the Council ended the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. It seems that these encouraging words of Paul are no less relevant tonight as we face enormous challenges but always remember that we do not work alone:

“Now to him who is able to accomplish all things in a measure far beyond what we ask or conceive, in keeping with the power that is at work in us—to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus down through all the ages of time without end. Amen.” (Eph. 3: 20-21)

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