

An Empty Chair at the Catholic School Table

By: Rob Birdsell and Kent Hickey

Introduction

Clergy and religious have been the leaders of Catholic schools in our country throughout most of their long history. What that meant in years' past was that most Catholic schools were led by those who received both extensive spiritual formation prior to entering the position and ongoing spiritual direction while serving in it. The same is not true today, and that is a significant problem for Catholic schools and their leaders.

Today, over 90% of Catholic schools are led by laypeople. Like their clergy and religious predecessors, the training lay leaders receive prior to becoming school heads is uneven at best, one reason so many are ill prepared for the expansive responsibilities that come with the position. But at least clergy and religious school leaders had the benefit of spiritual formation and direction. Lay leaders generally lack even this, and that must change if lay Catholic school heads and their institutions are to thrive.

Here is what that change could look like: First, training for Catholic school leadership needs to reflect what the job really is - Chief Executive Officer. While an advanced degree in curriculum and instruction or the like may be helpful, it is inadequate without additional training in the "business" side of the school. This training should also include preparation for the most important part of the job: Spiritual leadership. The modern Catholic school head is a Spiritual CEO - preparation for that role should reflect this reality.

Second, Catholic school lay leaders should cultivate a vibrant interior life once they have taken on a Spiritual CEO position. This should include developing consistent prayer practices while being accompanied by a spiritual director, a wise companion who could reinforce those practices and provide ongoing support. Catholic school leadership can be a difficult journey, and this requires spiritual nourishment every step of the way.

The Hardest Job You'll Ever (Sometimes) Love

Our work over the years has blessed each of us with opportunities to establish relationships with Catholic school heads from across the country. Characteristics shared among these colleagues include fervent desire to serve, genuine care for the people at the schools they lead, sense of humor, humility, self-awareness, and unwavering commitment to mission.

Also common among these leaders, however, is sometimes feeling overwhelmed by the many demands of the job, disconnect between mission-based aspirations and lived reality, desolation in times of failure and frayed relationships, and the isolation that comes with being the "buck stops here" person in the organization. Those difficulties were exacerbated during the pandemic. Suddenly, decisions involved life-or-death questions and each day brought with it a confluence of shifting public health guidance, concerns for vulnerable faculty, struggles to meet student needs, and waves of opinions about what should be done.

But the pandemic, as hard as it was, represented only an increase in degree of difficulty. The job had become exceedingly difficult even before the pandemic, and it remains so today: pressure to raise enough revenue to meet ever-increasing expenses; annual enrollment anxieties; toxicity that can permeate a faculty room; challenges from alumni ("you're not Catholic enough!"); doing too much or too little with Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; disconnect with board members who are driven more by personal agenda than mission. In sum, it's often not so fun.

The consequences are predictable. As search firms will openly share, there is currently a significant shortage of qualified candidates to fill Catholic school leadership openings. Word is out - this is a

hard job, perhaps too hard. And the openings just keep multiplying. Exceptional leaders, including many younger ones who are just starting their careers, are jumping out of the pressure cooker almost immediately after getting in.

We both belong, for example, to the Institute for Leadership and Entrepreneurship in Education (ILEE), an organization for Catholic school leaders from across the country that provides a forum to share best practices and develop professional relationships. Established in 2019, of the 21 leaders involved in ILEE over the past three years, only 11 remain in the same position and six have left the profession altogether. Without a meaningful change in preparation for Catholic school leadership and an ongoing commitment to provide spiritual nourishment to Catholic school leaders, the downward spiral will continue.

Spiritual CEO Formation

Two changes could redirect that downward spiral into an upward trajectory. The first would be to ensure that future Catholic school leaders are prepared to serve as Chief Executive Officers by matching training with the job responsibilities. This is best accomplished through education programs that emphasize CEO-centered coursework: operational excellence, advancement, communications, human resources, governance, finance, and facilities management. Ideally, these programs would also be cohort-based, thus providing an opportunity for participants to establish relationships that develop into ongoing mutual support systems.

Thankfully, CEO-centered leadership programs of this type are emerging at a few Catholic universities. However, even the best Catholic school CEO preparation is lacking without an emphasis on spiritual formation. How can a lay leader who directs a spiritual work lead that work without a thorough grounding in spiritual practices? The Catholic school head is a Spiritual CEO and preparation should reflect this reality by including, for example, exposure to various methods of personal prayer, introduction to spiritual direction, and experience leading community worship.

Ongoing Spiritual Nourishment

But Spiritual CEO formation prior to taking a leadership position is not enough. Given the many demands of the job, the second change required is nourishment in the form of ever-deepening prayer practices and ongoing spiritual direction while the leader is on this difficult journey. Teilhard de Chardin said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” This is very much true for those who serve as Catholic school leaders. They are spiritual beings having a challenging, very human leadership experience. Only by developing a vibrant interior life in concert with ongoing spiritual direction can these good people survive and thrive as Catholic school leaders.

Many school leaders say they simply do not have time in their day for prayer. In response to a similar challenge, when someone told Pope Francis they didn’t have 30 minutes a day for prayer, he said, “Well, you should then do an hour.” What this daily prayer may look like could be as diverse as the multitude of Catholic school leaders in this country. For some that daily prayer might be a quiet morning walk in nature, each day accompanied by the awe that comes with God’s creation. Others may use one of many apps to guide their prayer like *Pray as You Go* or *Centering Prayer*. Those who want to go old school might pray the *Liturgy of the Hours*, contemplative prayer nearly as ancient as the Church itself. What is critical is that the leader carves the time out every day and that nothing, even crisis, crowds out daily prayer.

These prayer experiences could then be probed and deepened in regular conversations with a spiritual director, a companion who would accompany the school leader on the journey and help bridge interior prayer life with lived experiences at home and school. Sharing the road with a spiritual companion would help school leaders live in healthier balance and better discern meaning and purpose. God’s creation is ongoing, and school leaders, called to labor with God, are charged

with creating more time and bigger spaces for God's design to unfold. It is through a vibrant interior life and ongoing spiritual conversation that the school leader is prepared to help God transform our Catholic schools into manifestations of the Kingdom.

Hopeful Signs

One way we help God build the Kingdom is by working closely with each other. A strength our Catholic schools possess that is generally lacking in other school systems is the power of our networks and networking. For many of our schools, robust relationships develop within the diocese; for others, it's through religious orders. Regardless of the source, it is through the wisdom garnered in these relationships and shared experiences that the transformation from school head to Spiritual CEO will take place. Leaders such as Dr. Kristin R. Cully, Director of Inquiry and New Ventures for the Jesuit Schools Network, are pointing the way:

"As we collectively emerge from the many challenges of the past few years, the burden on schools in supporting and caring for students has never been greater than at this moment in time. And the importance of supporting school leaders who are charged with caring for their communities in these times of multiple crises has also never been as imperative as it is today. The call to care for our leaders through nurturing their own faith with ongoing spiritual direction is wise and long overdue. Investing time, resources, and energy in cultivating an active faith life of our Catholic school leaders could be the difference in their longevity in furthering the mission of our particular way of education."

Catholic school leaders we have spoken to certainly agree with the vision reflected in the words of Dr. Cully. Too few, however, are receiving the level of support they need. In a recent survey of 40 Catholic school heads from across the country, for example, only 37% stated that they were receiving regular, formal spiritual direction. Of these, only 5% receive a stipend from their school to pay for spiritual direction. However, 98% of these leaders felt that ongoing spiritual direction would be helpful. And 90% stated that they would participate in spiritual direction of this kind if presented with the opportunity to do so. In a very practical move, every Catholic school leader's contract should provide a stipend for spiritual formation and ongoing direction.

Conclusion

Our lay leaders are the spiritual leaders of our schools. While many do not possess the kind of spiritual formation and ongoing spiritual direction necessary for the job, they certainly do not lack the desire to experience spirituality more deeply and to become more mission-driven spiritual leaders. There is, therefore, a convergence of need and desire, and that is a sign of great hope. Our next step should be to merge the need and the desire within the reality of Catholic schools today.

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