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Key Foundational Documents for Catholic School Success

The most successful Catholic schools have clear statements of philosophy, mission, vision, and a profile of the graduate at graduation. These are known as the foundational documents of a Catholic school, and much like the foundation of a school building, they provide the structure and support upon which all programs and activities rest. These statements should be differentiated, used consistently, and clearly articulated, communicated, and understood by all within the school community.

Philosophy

The Catholic school philosophy identifies what the school is called to be. The essential elements of a Catholic school philosophy were articulated by Catholic Bishops in 1972 in a Pastoral on Catholic education entitled "To Teach as Jesus Did." A Catholic school philosophy essentially identifies that the school exists to "integrate elements of faith with the learning process." Other elements of the Catholic school philosophy are:

- To educate for and teach Gospel values;
- To build community;
- To provide opportunities for prayer and worship;
- To educate and provide opportunities for service to others.

Additionally, the Catholic school philosophy suggests that Catholic schools exist to:

- Educate the whole child;
- Educate for global awareness;
- Educate for justice issues;
- Provide opportunities for community service learning.

Individual Catholic school philosophies are usually based upon and flow from philosophies and educational guidelines published by the archdiocesan or diocesan office of Catholic education and/or a particular religious community or institution. Since the philosophy is based on and describes the educational ministry of the Catholic Church, most Catholic school philosophy statements sound similar.

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Mission

While the Catholic school philosophy describes what the school is called to be, the mission statement describes its purpose for existence. A mission statement is a compelling statement that describes what the school is called to do and so positions a school as unique among all other schools. Catholic school mission statements typically contain the following core elements:

- Why a school exists;
- Whom the school serves;
- What kind of academic program is offered;
- What values are held most important in the school community.

The mission statement is based on and reflective of the school philosophy. The mission statement is used to drive strategic planning, the design of the academic program, and institutional advancement and development initiatives, including marketing for image, enrollment, and resources.

Mission should serve as the basis for formulating policy and making decisions. When a major decision has to be made, the decision makers should be asking: *Does the action that will result from this decision further our mission? Is it consistent with who we are and what we do?* Referring to the mission statement to make decisions in this manner can also help a school prioritize actions when resources are limited. The mission statement is most effective when it is developed through a facilitated process that engages representatives from all constituencies of the school.

Vision

A vision statement describes the ideal state that can be achieved in the future if resources are no obstacle. The vision should be inspiring, motivating, and far-reaching, articulating what the school aspires to be in the future at its best.

Typically determined by the school leadership, the vision statement should provide an aiming point for the future. A vision for a school is often attained through a strategic plan, one that is grounded in the school's mission and which defines strategies that further the school's mission. (The May 2016 *Catholic School Management Letter* will be devoted to Effective Models for Strategic Planning and will discuss this topic in more detail.)

Profile of the Graduate at Graduation

Every Catholic elementary, middle, and secondary school should be able to describe a successful graduate. The profile of the graduate at graduation represents the consensus of faculty, administration, and Board regarding essential expectations for student development and accomplishments. In general terms, the profile categorically enumerates characteristics of the ideal Catholic school graduate:

- Academically;
- Religiously;
- Spiritually;
- Socially;
- Physically.

Secondary schools will sometimes combine these categories in order to emphasize the growing importance of leadership and social awareness for the high school graduate. The profile of the graduate at graduation serves as both a description of the student who is a product of a Catholic school education and a measurement for parents and educators. This statement is founded in mission, an expression of vision, and a key element in marketing the school. Typically, the faculty and staff of a school play an instrumental role in creating the profile of the graduate.

The Foundational Documents

Why is the articulation of these foundational documents so important in a Catholic school?

- If there is a lack of understanding of the Catholic school's philosophy, this may weaken the Catholic identity of the school and it may be perceived as any other private school.
- Without clarity of mission, individuals will follow what they perceive to be the school's mission – thus creating inconsistency in the way the program is carried out.
- Without a vision, there is no picture of what the school should be or look like in the future. There is no aiming point, no articulation for what the school wants to be known or desired, and no goals for people to get excited about.
- Finally, without a written profile of the graduate at graduation, there is a lost opportunity to describe the outcomes of the Catholic education that the school provides, along with desired measures to ensure it is successful in delivering its program.

When a parent asks: “Why should I send my child to this school?” or a potential donor asks: “Why should I give money to this program?” or a potential teacher asks: “Why should I come and teach at this school?”, the responses should be based on the foundational documents, and should be the same or similar regardless who in the school community is responding to the question. Together, these foundational documents should articulate and provide a shared sense of purpose.

Once developed, shared with various communities of the school through a consultation process, and approved, the foundational documents should be introduced and celebrated. Many school administrators recognize the foundational documents at the opening of the school year or as part of an acknowledgement of a significant event or anniversary in the life of the school. Foundational documents should be visible throughout the school, especially on the school’s website and social media sites, and in written materials, such as view books, brochures, and handbooks. In particular, the profile of the graduate at graduation should serve to inform the school’s marketing initiatives. The characteristics described in the profile should be highlighted using banners and written messages and can be used as themes for social media strategies, including student recruitment and retention efforts.

Keeping foundational documents current is critical to the success of the Catholic school. A school should revisit its foundational documents every three to five years and update them as necessary. Often this updating is triggered by an accreditation process or the development of a strategic long-range plan, both of which require clear, well-understood foundational documents as their pillars. A clarification process should be undertaken periodically in order to ensure that the foundational documents remain contemporary, compelling, and clearly focused and relevant to the school. The clarification process, similar to the development process, should be a collaborative one involving owners/sponsors, Board members, faculty, staff, administration, alumni, current parents, and students. The updated documents should be shared with members of all communities of the school through a consultation process.

The following samples of foundational documents were compiled from various schools where Catholic School Management provided facilitation for the clarification of foundational documents.

Catholic School Philosophy:

St. Sample Catholic School is a Catholic community committed to the education, development, and spiritual formation of students. Its purpose is to proclaim Christ as the center of all things. Within the context of the Gospel and the teachings of the Catholic Church, St. Sample Catholic School is called to:

- Faithfully teach Catholic values;
- Nurture in its students a love of the Catholic faith;
- Provide opportunities for regular prayer and worship;
- Engender a sense of responsibility to develop God-given gifts to their fullest;
- Develop a sense of community through joyful worship, service, and prayer; and
- Proclaim the Gospel message of love, hope, and peace.

Catholic Elementary School

Mission Statement:

St. Sample Catholic Elementary School provides a quality Catholic education for children from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds in the metropolitan community. Dedicated faculty and staff respect and encourage each individual learner to reach his or her potential *spiritually* by developing a strong relationship with God, *academically* by the valuing of lifelong learning, *physically* by embracing healthy living habits, and *socially* by growing as a self-disciplined member of the community and learning to serve others.

Vision Statement:

St. Sample Catholic School will be a faith and learning community recognized for its academic excellence, student-centered curriculum, enriching activities, and culturally rich environment.

Profile of the Graduate at Graduation:

Upon graduation, a St. Sample Catholic School graduate will:

Academically

- Excel academically and be well prepared for the challenges of high school;
- Be a creative and independent thinker;
- Use technology proficiently and responsibly.

Religiously

- Live and promote Catholic values;
- Understand Catholic faith traditions;
- Know prayers, catechism, and scripture.



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Spiritually

- Have begun to develop a lifelong relationship with God;
- Look for opportunities to provide service to others;
- Show respect for the beliefs of others.

Socially

- Respect self and others;
- Be a responsible and contributing member of the community;
- Have begun to develop a global perspective.

Physically

- Know the importance of good nutrition and exercise;
- Appreciate the gift of life;
- Demonstrate self-control.

Catholic Secondary School

Mission Statement:

St. Sample Catholic High School, building on 50 years of tradition and excellence in Catholic education, is a community of faith and learning dedicated to service and centered on Christ. An educational ministry of the Diocese of Somewhere, St. Sample serves students from Some County as well as international students in a co-educational, college preparatory environment. St. Sample provides students with opportunities for lifelong learning and leadership, teaching skills for college, and values for life.

Vision Statement:

By the academic year 2017-2018, St. Sample Catholic High School will be recognized as the preeminent co-educational Catholic secondary school in Some County with an enrollment meeting the facilities' capacity, a rigorous college preparatory program, and state-of-the-art instructional technology, serving individual students with their unique abilities and achievement levels.

Profile of the Graduate at Graduation:

An academic achiever:

- Exhibiting knowledge and skills for admission at the college or university of choice;
- Practicing critical thinking and problem solving skills in a variety of disciplines;
- Displaying evidence of academic integrity and original authorship; and
- Demonstrating innovation, creativity, and well-developed communication skills.

A spiritual and faith-based person:

- Knowledgeable of the Catholic faith;
- Aware and respectful of others' religious beliefs;
- Growing in spirituality; learning to articulate and defend one's own faith; and
- Able to make moral choices based on a well-formed conscience.

A leader committed to service and social justice:

- Demonstrating effective leadership skills while adapting to change;
- Understanding and appreciating divergent points of view;
- Embracing social and personal responsibility with concern and compassion; and
- Promoting justice and peace.

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