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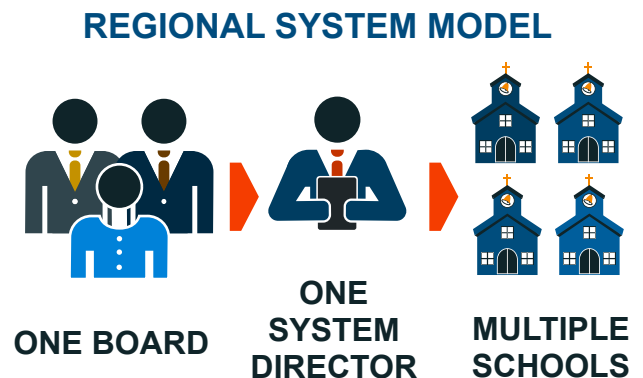
Regional Catholic School Systems: Considerations for Success and a Model for Future Viability

Each year there is much to celebrate with regard to Catholic schools and the positive impact of Catholic education. The 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that Catholic schools consistently achieve higher results than public schools in science at grades 4, 8, and 12. In addition, Catholic schools have nearly perfect high school graduation rates (99 percent nationally) and the distinction of having a higher percentage of grade 12 students attending four-year colleges than other religious, non-sectarian, or public schools.¹ This data related to student academic achievement is noteworthy and commendable, as are the other benefits of Catholic education less easily quantified and related to the development of the whole child: religiously, spiritually, socially, morally and physically.

Yet, despite these positive outcomes, Catholic schools as an overall community continue to struggle with issues related to long-term viability and sustainability such as enrollment, finances and remaining competitive in terms of academics, student programs and facilities. These contemporary challenges support the need to examine alternative models of Catholic school organization and management.

CSM Adjunct Consultant Nicholas Wolsonovich, Ph.D., although now twice retired from a life-long career in Catholic education, has continued his commitment to positively impacting the future of Catholic schools and has recently undertaken the responsibility for studying success factors related to a particular organizational model for Catholic schools: the Regional Catholic School System. Recognizing that many Catholic schools, particularly elementary schools, are organized as parish-based entities, Dr. Wolsonovich sought to inquire as to the approach used in a number of communities across the nation in which parish schools have been reorganized as a system. In order to provide a clear focus for this study, the following definition for a system was used:

“A regional school system is defined as a group of schools which 1) has been established canonically as a separate juridic person and civilly incorporated within its state, 2) is governed and administrated collectively via a single governing structure, i.e., a board of trustees, and 3) has designated personnel serving in an administrative capacity to provide oversight to all schools, i.e., a president or system director.”



The results of the study², conducted over the course of 2015 and published in August 2016, were shared with Catholic education leaders, i.e., superintendents, dioceses and archdioceses across the United States. The study was conducted using a series of surveys beginning with outreach to superintendents in order to identify those dioceses or archdioceses in which Regional Systems, as defined, were operated. From the first Superintendent Survey, information was received from 38 dioceses or archdioceses. For 24 of the 38 responding dioceses, 60 systems were identified for further contact and survey administration. In addition to the Superintendent Survey, a second survey was provided to the chief administrative officer of the system, i.e., president. Thirty-two complete survey responses were received. A third survey was sent to various stakeholders which included pastors, principals, board members and parents. One hundred nine complete responses were received from the third survey. What follows is further perspective and commentary on this work through an interview with Dr. Wolsonovich as the lead researcher.

CSML QUESTION: Why was the Regional System Model chosen for this study?

“We wanted to study the Regional System Model for operating Catholic schools since the system, as defined in the study, is perhaps a model that, if implemented properly, could be very effective in areas where schools are suffering from difficult challenges that necessitate schools collaborating in a more collegial fashion. We wanted to identify those strategies that have proven to be more successful and those that have not been successful.”

Key Ideas: Why consider a system model?

A Regional System recognizes the potential for competition that can exist between and among schools that may be relatively close geographically or seeking to serve a single community or defined region. Rather than reacting to competition, the System Model focuses on collegiality and collaboration. The System Model allows for clear association as a collaborative group of schools committed to the mission of Catholic education, and also supports the ability of individual schools to speak to the distinctive aspects of each school’s unique community.

CSML QUESTION: What were the major findings of the study?

“The purpose of the study was to analyze success factors, and a key finding was identifying what constituted success from the perspective of the survey respondents. In addition, there were two basic premises that were revealed from the analysis, each having to do in some way with factors necessary for the effective implementation of the System Model. These two premises indicate that success of the Regional Catholic School System Model is closely related to widespread support for the Model as well as attention to proper implementation of the Model.”

Key Ideas: What constitutes success?

The study found that there was a high degree of support on the part of respondents for the belief that the Regional School System was an effective way to operate Catholic schools and to make them viable and available to families for the long term. Eighty-one percent of survey respondents believed that the change in structure to a Regional School System Model had been necessary for their schools to survive, and 85 percent felt that the Regional School System Model would strengthen the viability of their schools.³ It was concluded that the strong support voiced for the Regional Catholic School System Model on the part of the respondents is related to the general successes that were perceived as a result of operating schools as a system. The following were noted as related to perceptions of success:

- Strengthening of Catholic identity;
- Strengthening of educational programming and academic rigor;
- Stabilization of enrollment;
- Enhanced planning and management of finances;
- Improved strategic planning;
- Increased financial support due to more effective fundraising efforts;
- Enhanced integration of technology in school administration as well as in the instructional program;
- Improved professional development opportunities for staff;
- Increased opportunities for extracurricular activities for students;
- Improvement in the management and efficacy of marketing programs;
- Enhancement of administration from a “team approach.”

Key Ideas: What kind of support is critical for success?

The study identified the critical need for the clergy — from bishop to pastors — to be completely committed to and supportive of the Regional School System Model. This need was viewed as so significant that survey comments warned that if this support was not completely and publicly present, then the Regional System Model should not be attempted. The second criterion noted in the definition used for the Regional System Model in this study specifies the existence of a governing body, or board. Typically, these boards are comprised largely of lay people who serve in a volunteer capacity to assist with securing the long-term viability and vitality of the system and its schools. Based on survey responses, it appeared that when clergy support was strong in support of the Regional System Model, the clergy were comfortable with sharing their canonical authority with a board. When clergy support was weak, it appeared that the clergy were less comfortable with sharing their governance authority with a board.

Highly public and unwavering support is particularly important from diocesan and parish leaders, but also includes school administrators as well as other leaders in the parish and school communities. The understanding of and commitment to the Regional System Model must be thorough and complete from all involved in leadership positions beginning with the bishop and pastors, and continuing to the board developed as the governing body of the system, and the administrators at both system and school levels. Consistency of message is imperative from all in leadership positions as to belief in the System Model and its premise of collegiality and collaboration.

It was also noted as very important that the System Board be properly constituted with members with appropriate skill sets and that the board members receive sufficient and ongoing training on board and committee functioning. Finally, as would be expected, it was noted that regular, effective and consistent communication is a key to success. Well-planned and scheduled communication should be delivered from key leaders in verbal, print and electronic form.

Key Ideas: What are the recommended steps in planning for the successful implementation of a Regional Catholic School System?

Reorganization of parish schools as a Regional System is not simply a change in governance or in administrative structure, it is also a significant change in culture. As such, the ramifications of change must be explored, well understood and agreed to by all involved. In particular, this requires a clear understanding as to how a new structure may necessitate changes in authority, policies or procedures; and, furthermore, how such changes will have an impact on day-to-day and long-term decision-making.

Finally, reorganizing as a Regional System should not be undertaken as a means for saving schools that are in extreme danger of failing. In order to establish successfully a system with a bright future, sufficient time is needed, and the planning and preparation alone can take up to two to three years, with an additional two to three years required for leaders, boards and communities to embrace fully and function comfortably in a new model. The following is a list of recommended first steps:

- 1.** Document in writing, and in great detail to support any future needs for clarification, the commitment of the bishop and the clergy involved.
- 2.** Conduct school community information and listening sessions regarding the rationale for the reorganization as a Regional System, with a sufficient level of detail to describe how each school and parish would be affected, what the System would look like, and how it would function.
- 3.** Organize a Board, once sufficient community support for a System has been determined, and then identify and select members with the appropriate skill sets and provide appropriate pre-service and in-service training.
- 4.** Identify school administrators who support the Regional System Model.
- 5.** Engage in a collaborative process through which the System's Board, administrators, and other significant stakeholders develop a strategic plan to guide how the Regional System will be established and its key strategic goals and initiatives for its first years of implementation.
- 6.** Begin regular communication and marketing efforts in support of any necessary fundraising to initiate the System.



MEET ...

Nicholas M. Wolsonovich, Ph.D.
Adjunct Consultant

Administration, Assessments,
Governance, Catholic School
Superintendent Searches and
Mentoring

Nicholas M. Wolsonovich has served as Secretary for Faith Formation/Superintendent of Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Orlando, Florida; Superintendent of Schools for the Archdiocese of Chicago; and Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio. He also served as a teacher of Religion and Latin, Director of Guidance, Director of Government Programs and Director of Curriculum and Instruction, all in the Diocese of Youngstown. He earned his doctorate in Educational Administration with a minor in Curriculum and Instruction from Kent State University in Kent, Ohio.

Conclusions

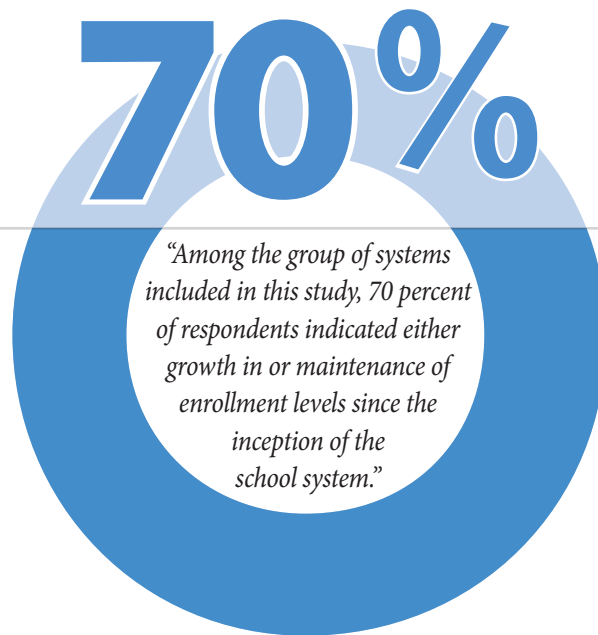
The study noted many conclusions, but of great significance is the following:

“Among the group of systems included in this study, 70 percent of respondents indicated either growth in or maintenance of enrollment levels since the inception of the school system.”

This finding indicates that it is possible for collaboration and collegiality to have a positive impact on Catholic school enrollment. It also follows that the design and development of strong programs of marketing and enrollment management are investments that should be made to secure these desired enrollment outcomes.

While the Regional System is a model that has been pursued as a means for securing the long-term viability and vitality of Catholic schools, particularly parish-based schools, it is not the only model. Further investigation, further study, and the ongoing commitment of Catholic school supporters and leaders continues to be needed in order to navigate successfully the challenges faced by today’s Catholic schools and to enable them to continue to provide the positive impact and outcomes for which they are known and valued.

If you have any questions regarding the study or would like a copy of the full study, please contact Dr. Nicholas M. Wolsonovich via email at: nicholaswolsonovich@me.com



¹ National Catholic Educational Association. www.ncea.org. Accessed: December 2016.

² Wolsonovich, N., Smilaycoff, M., Ribera, M. “A National Study of Regional Catholic School Systems: Quantitative and qualitative analysis of success factors with recommendations.” August 2016.

³ Wolsonovich, N., Smilaycoff, M., Ribera, M. “A National Study of Regional Catholic School Systems: Quantitative and qualitative analysis of success factors with recommendations.” August 2016.



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