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CATHOLIC SCHOOL MANAGEMENT *Letter* SM

A publication of
Catholic School
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March 2015

Volume XXXVI, No. 4

Enhancing Academic Quality and Image: Raising the Bar for Catholic Schools

Catholic schools are called to be many things, one of which is academically excellent. *Canon 806 § 2* clearly states that those who are charged with the leadership of Catholic schools must ensure that the formation given, including academic standards, is at the very least comparable to that of other schools in the local area. From an image and marketing standpoint, “comparable” is not a concept that will result in the realization of enrollment or resource goals. The right solution is to “raise the bar” and insist upon high quality academic programs as evidenced through data, results, reputation, and the presence of a rigorous and relevant curriculum enlivened and enriched by a school’s Catholic identity. Therefore, Catholic school leaders not only need to understand what makes an excellent Catholic education, but they also need to understand how to leverage a school’s high quality academic program to support the perception of being a Catholic school blessed with a strong academic image.

In any discussion of the marketing of Catholic schools, Catholic School Management uses as a premise the postulate that Catholic schools can only be marketed for three things: image, enrollment, and resources. If you look at each of these as variables in an equation, then it is quickly seen that there exists a distinct relationship among the three variables:

- *Enrollment is dependent on image;*
- *Enrollment is dependent on resources;*
- *Resources are dependent on image;*
- *Resources are dependent on enrollment.*

Image is the only independent variable. Therefore, a school’s ability to market effectively for enrollment and for resources is controlled by its ability to market effectively for image.

What are key components necessary for the effective marketing of academic image for the Catholic school? Although there are many pieces that figure into the puzzle of the perception of academic excellence, there are five critical components that are clearly of significance.

1. Foundational Documents

There are four foundational documents necessary for a Catholic school to be effective and successful. These would be:

- Statements of mission, philosophy, and vision;
- The profile of the graduate at graduation.

The first three documents are critical to the differentiation and positioning of the school, as well as to planning efforts, including day-to-day decision making and strategic, long-range planning. It is the fourth document that provides excellent opportunity for the marketing of a school's academic image. The profile of the graduate at graduation is not the school profile that one might think of as being sent along with a senior student's college application. It is quite different as it describes how the graduate of a school will be formed from various perspectives: academically, religiously, spiritually, socially, and physically. When describing the academic formation of a graduate, a school is provided with the opportunity to emphasize the key academic skills, knowledge, and life-long learning to be instilled in each child.

A well-written and attractively-presented profile of the graduate at graduation can be provided as part of recruitment materials given to both students and parents. This same document can be a retention tool when included with re-registration materials for current families to reinforce the value proposition that the cost of tuition is a worthy expenditure given the value received. The graduate who receives his or her diploma, and then presents an emotional parent with a graduate profile rolled and tied with ribbons in school colors, is also bound to make a lasting impression.

Finally, a school should find ways to honor students who exemplify the qualities of a graduate in action. Awards ceremonies can include such an opportunity to speak publicly to these qualities by

recognizing students at each grade level for their displays of desired qualities. Teacher comments on report cards can reinforce desired qualities of the graduate through personal messages or even by simply adding key academic indicators from the profile of the graduate at graduation into the report card software's comment codes.

2. Well-Known Academic Standards

In this time of intense discussion surrounding the need to improve America's schools and adoption of the Common Core Standards, Catholic schools have the good fortune of being able to turn to unique standards and benchmarks whose design provide a framework for the attainment of the mandate put forth by *Canon 806 § 2*. The *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* provide criteria for Catholic school excellence. Standards 7, 8, and 9 speak to Academic Excellence and the provision of curricular experiences that are "rigorous, relevant, research-based, and infused with Catholic faith and tradition." But, do your school families ask you about these standards? Are they aware that they exist, and that they are a guiding force in school planning as well as curriculum evaluation and development? These standards provide evidence for how the Catholic school goes beyond any state or national standards. They articulate the "Catholic school difference," and can be used as a springboard from which a school can educate its community as to the overall value of Catholic education as supported through statistics with regard to graduation rates, standardized test scores, and college completion rates.

Seek out ways to educate your community as to the *National Standards and Benchmarks*. Provide evidence for them via newsletters, the school website, and social media to reinforce the higher standards to which the Catholic school is held. Make clear to your constituent groups how use of the *National Standards* informs the school improvement process on a regular basis.

3. Testing Transparency

Catholic high schools enjoy the ability to communicate clearly within school profiles and via other marketing materials as to the achievement of

students on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT. This kind of transparency is rich nourishment for the contemporary data-hungry culture, particularly prospective parents and students. Testing practices at the Catholic high school provide an additional means through which the school can promote academic image. College bound students at public schools are also taking the SAT and ACT, and many score well. So, what does the Catholic school do better in this arena? In order to answer this, school leaders need to know their public school competition. In many cases, there are comparisons that can be made as to how Catholic school testing practices better prepare students for testing success. For example, is the PSAT offered to all sophomores and juniors? Is the EXPLORE taken by freshmen as a pre-ACT? Is practice with test question formats and content integrated into core subject areas? Are test prep classes offered from valued professionals in the English and Math departments of the school?

At the Catholic elementary school, the area of testing is often a difficult one to discuss transparently. Although there are Catholic schools in some states that administer the same standardized test as taken in public schools, there are many more that do not and cannot. "It's like comparing apples to oranges," is a lament regularly voiced. Yet, there is still opportunity to speak to families on a regular basis about student achievement on standardized tests. An annual parent meeting should be held to discuss results that includes the following:

- An explanation of the test used, why it is used rather than another standardized test, and what the other schools are like that also take the test. If your school takes a test also commonly taken in private, independent schools, then an apples-to-apples comparison is often more easily made.
- Test results in an easily understood format by school and by grade level. This might be through the usage of national percentile rankings or grade level equivalents as appropriate.
- Longitudinal test result comparison by school and by grade to show growth. For those schools that experience regular changes in enrollment, this kind of information can be further disaggregated to indicate growth by students

who have been in the school for a specified number of years to show the impact made by the school over time.

- Explanation of the school's response to test results by discussing what curriculum practices exist to support the strong results and what curriculum practices will be adopted to attain the desired results.
- How to interpret individual student results, what kinds of questions to ask, and who to contact with concerns.

4. Well-Integrated Technology Programs

Keeping up with advances in education technology in terms of infrastructure, hardware, software, and other resources is a financial challenge. Keeping up with programs of professional development to ensure that faculty are well prepared and confident in their abilities to integrate technology effectively into teaching and learning also requires funding, as well as time, flexibility, and customization of training for a variety of learning levels and styles. Though they both carry a price tag, one cannot and should not be done without the other. Lack of technology, unused technology, and poorly used technology all carry the potential to damage the academic image of a school.

Just as we've gone from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 and beyond, so have our consumers (students, parents, teachers) changed in their demands and, more importantly, in their evaluation as to what constitutes academic excellence in terms of technology integration.

What's important today? Creating, publishing, and evaluating digital products in all disciplines and at all levels is the current goal for technology use. Many students are so used to doing incredibly engaging things with technology and screens at home that they resent being relegated to content consumption versus content creation with devices when at school. Parents want to see technical fluency developed in their children, but more and more they are wary of projects and activities that lack a focus on quality content and higher-order thinking in favor of technology bells and whistles.



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Well-integrated technology programs focus on various kinds of literacy:

- **Technical Literacy:** Are students able to perform basic as well as necessary functions with ease?
- **Information Technology Literacy:** Are students able to get to the information they want or need to find? Are they aware of sources and resources, along with accompanying copyright, fair use, and academic integrity considerations?
- **Media Literacy:** Are students being supported in their ability to become effective communicators and information consumers via a variety of media? Do they possess a well-informed understanding of media safety and other safety-related technology topics?

5. Catholic Values Infused with Learning

Rich programs of community service learning should be a hallmark of all Catholic schools. The experiences provided to students to understand the call to service should be multidimensional as well as evident across the curriculum, and not just confined to the study of religion. As a community, students should regularly engage in compassionate responses to those in need via various acts of kindness and charity. School-wide days of service are opportunities to bring the community together in this kind of endeavor as well as to publicly share evidence of this key Catholic value.

But what is community service learning? This is service integrated with curriculum content. Such programs provide the framework for students to integrate Catholic values and social teachings with a service activity and a reflection process while also being introduced in a meaningful way to established curriculum content.

Those schools that fully embrace a Community Service Learning Program establish positive, image-building relationships with their local, and often broader, communities. Associating outreach and service with rigorous curriculum content further enhances not only the Catholic identity but also the academic image of a school. Many schools find that annual service projects or activities by grade level or related to a theme are successful means for fully integrating community service learning into the curriculum. Concepts or curriculum related to ecology, stewardship and environment, the dignity of life, at-risk youth, the elderly, and poverty all provide opportunity for curriculum-based service activities that cross disciplines and form students through a strong and relevant model of Christian service.