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Parent Involvement and Parent Organizations in Catholic Schools

The Catholic Church has long held the position that “parents are the primary educators of their children.” This applies to academic preparation as well as formation in the faith. Parents who make the choice to have their child attend a Catholic elementary or secondary school generally do so for one or more of the following reasons:

- A perception that their child will receive a better academic education;
- An environment that fosters safety, structure, and discipline;
- Religious values integrated with the academic program;
- An appropriate array of co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

Recent research also suggests that parents look for and expect:

- An atmosphere where individualized attention is encouraged and fostered;
- Broader academic programs (than in other area schools);
- An engaging learning environment;
- Highly qualified and caring teachers;
- An appropriate array of enrichment activities;
- Programs that provide for character building;
- Holistic education that addresses the academic, spiritual, physical, and social needs of students;
- Schools that build a sense of community involving parents as well as students.

Recent research (2011)* also indicates that almost 40% of parents reevaluate their school choice each and every year, while 37% reevaluate the choice of school after middle school. Generations X and Y parents are very much concerned about finding the “right” school for their child and are willing to put in the time and effort to ensure the right selection. Moreover, they are inclined to reevaluate that decision on a regular basis, making changes when necessary. The 2011 research also indicates that the top sources for information about schools are campus visits; friends, family, and neighbors; and the school’s website.

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At the elementary school level the mother typically makes the decision as to where the child goes to school with the following influencing mom's decision:

- Mother's friends, neighbors, other moms;
- Mother's mother, sisters, and extended family;
- Kindergarten, primary teachers;
- Nursery school teachers, daycare providers.

At the secondary level, the decision is often made by the time the child is in fifth to sixth grade, and both parents tend to be involved in the decision. In the majority of cases, the child makes or overwhelmingly influences the decision. Influencers include:

- Friends, peers;
- Parents;
- Elementary school teachers;
- Secondary school teachers;
- Programs/activities.

Perhaps most importantly, Generations X and Y parents expect to be involved (to a greater or lesser extent) with their child's school and expect to be communicated with on a regular, frequent, and consistent basis.

Catholic schools with healthy enrollments typically are those with administrators and Board members who review and utilize this research on a regular basis. Their websites and marketing and promotional materials reflect parental preferences and highlight the great things about the school in each of the main categories noted above. Unfortunately, many school administrators and Boards do not utilize the research to their advantage and find that enrollment suffers.

Parent Ambassadors

It is the recommendation of CSM that school administrators adopt a Parent Ambassador program where selected volunteers carry out specific functions on behalf of the school. Parent ambassadors are chosen annually by the principal to serve as model representatives of the Catholic school. Selection is based on personal reputation, character, working knowledge of the school, and school spirit and enthusiasm. Specific duties and

responsibilities might include:

- To assist the principal and Enrollment Committee with the implementation of the Enrollment Management Plan;
- To assist with the planning and organizing of recruitment activities;
- To provide input regarding the public image of the school;
- To participate in both on-campus and off-campus school presentations and visits;
- To lead school tours and serve as official parent representatives;
- To serve as mentors and assist new families and students in adapting to life at the Catholic school;
- To enhance school spirit by implementing and encouraging communication and enthusiasm among the school community.

The principal and members of the Enrollment Committee and/or Enrollment staff should meet on an annual basis with parent ambassador leaders to review expectations, policies, and procedures related to utilizing parent volunteers as parent ambassadors. These parent leaders should have a packet of materials with which to orient and train parent ambassadors. This package should contain, but not be limited to, such items as:

- Parent ambassador role description;
- Assigned parent ambassador tasks and/or listing of activities;
- "Mission cards" with the mission statement, philosophy, vision, and profile of the graduate at graduation, along with key facts about the school and contact information;
- "Parent testimonials" that can be shared with prospective families;
- "Talking points" that include the **4 Great Things** about the school in terms of academic programs; safety, structure, and discipline; Catholic identity and sense of community; co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

It is also recommended that the principal connect personally with each parent ambassador to recognize and affirm the individual's commitment being made to advancing the school's mission and to answer any specific questions.

Among the activities that parent ambassadors can and should be involved with are at least the following:

- Pre-baptismal instruction program in the parish and/or parishes that are in close proximity to the school;
- Baptismal and Godparent recognition programs;
- Quarterly parenting workshops;
- Young moms and dads groups to discuss the challenges of parenting from infancy forward;
- Fundraising and friend-raising efforts or events;
- “Grade School Night” program with Catholic high schools or other event providers (sporting or other events, i.e., music, drama, arts, etc., to which elementary school students can enter free of charge and at which information tables regarding Catholic education can be staffed by parent volunteers).

Small Group/Grade Level Parent Gatherings

With a limited amount of time available, contemporary parents often times will not attend parent teacher association (home school association) meetings or gatherings. They will use their time more effectively to attend small group gatherings where specific topics are addressed that may be of particular interest to them. Therefore, it is recommended that principals periodically host afternoon or evening “coffees” by grade level or with a focus on a particular topic. Topics might include graduated discipline, bullying, interpreting and understanding standardized testing, etc.

Measuring Parent Satisfaction

As indicated in *Catholic School Management Letters*, Vol. XXXIII, January 2012, “Monitoring and Ensuring Parent Satisfaction: Effective Methods for Enhancing Enrollment in the Catholic Elementary School” and March 2012, “Effective Use of Surveys as Indicators of Satisfaction in the Catholic Secondary School,” CSM recommends that parent satisfaction surveys be conducted annually in all Catholic elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. These surveys provide valuable feedback with regard to the attitudes of parents pertaining to various areas of school life including academic affairs, instructional delivery,

utilization of technology, student activities, Catholic identity and faith community affairs, etc. It is critically important that principals share the results of the parent satisfaction surveys with faculty and staff, and also in both written and oral forms with parents themselves. Parent feedback should thank parents for their input and recognize both the perceived strengths and weaknesses, noting actions that will be taken in the future to overcome perceived deficiencies.

Exit interviews should also be conducted with all families leaving the school whether the child leaves upon graduation or earlier in their school career. Exit interview results should be provided in detail to the Board and faculty annually and longitudinal analysis should be completed in order to understand and track the reasons that families leave the Catholic school.

Parent Teacher Organizations (Home School Associations)

In a very real sense, the parent organization in a Catholic school has a clear leadership role to play in supporting the school’s mission, program, and activities. These roles are more specifically delineated as follows:

1. As originally intended, it acts as a parent/teacher/school organization, very similar to its counterpart in the public school. It serves as a vehicle to nurture parent-to-parent, parent-to-teacher, parent-to-school administration communication. It also works collaboratively to build a positive school climate which, in turn, facilitates the teaching/learning process.
2. The parent organization serves as a logical catalyst in building faith community. More specifically, the parent group provides a forum for broadening the faith community in the Catholic school to include not only teachers, administrators, and students, but all parents and guardians as well. In order to accomplish this objective, parent organizations should meet on a regular basis. Opportunities for prayer, social interaction, and idea exchange should be planned regularly. Please note that large group or all-school gatherings may not be most effective,



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- and that smaller gatherings by specific topic or grade level may be more desirable.
3. Of particular importance, the parent organization should serve as a vehicle for exchange of information. One of the most valuable and far-reaching purposes of the parent organization is to provide an opportunity to share with teachers and administrators their ideas and dreams for opportunities for the children. Careful organization of this exchange highlights the fact that parents are the primary educators of their children.
 4. Probably the most widely recognized role of the parent organization is that of fundraising. The parent organization serves to unify parents in an effort to raise funds each year for the school. It is critical that the School Board solicit input from the parent organization with regard to a reasonable number of dollars that can be raised, the fundraising strategies to be employed with appropriate timelines, and uses to which the money may be put. It is important that monies raised by the parent organization be included in the annual operating budget for the school. It is understood that all funds raised by the parent organization in the name of the school belong to the school. However, parent organization involvement in budgeting and allocation decisions builds energy and harmony on the part of the parent community. It has been the observation of CSM consultants that leaders of parent organizations gain motivation and fulfillment in their roles when they are engaged in the decision-making process as to an ultimate purpose for the funds that they raise. Engaging the parent organization in supporting objectives as outlined within the school's strategic plan allows them to identify key initiatives or improvements that they perceive as compelling to support.
 5. An effective parent organization creates an ideal environment for providing information to parents that they might use in order to communicate with public officials at the local, state, and national levels. Specifically, specialists in many areas of federal and state funded programs available to students in Catholic elementary and secondary schools should be invited periodically to address the parent group and to serve as a catalyst for "parent lobbying" activities. In short, it is important that parents be provided with up-to-date information concerning current legislative proposals so that they can be in a better position to advocate for the legitimate rights of their children attending Catholic schools.

A Final Thought

The Church remains very vocal about the critical need for parental involvement: "... that the parents have been appointed by God Himself as the first and principal educators of their children and that their right is completely inalienable." (Pope John Paul II, *FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO*, Section II, B.40). *TO TEACH AS JESUS DID* states that "a parent component must be a part of many different church-sponsored educational programs" (Section 59). Parental involvement dramatically fulfills the mission of the Church by providing parents opportunities to build community and to serve the Church through the school. Moreover, it reinforces the partnership of parents and Catholic educators in the academic preparation and faith formation of children.

* Myra McGovern, "What Motivates Parents," *Independent School Magazine*, Spring 2012, 16-18