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Models and Characteristics of Effective Leadership in Contemporary Catholic Schools

At the beginning of each school year, Catholic school administrators open the doors of their schools to welcome students and families with a sense of confidence and hope... confident that the school is ready to serve the needs of its students and hopeful that the coming year will be a success. It goes without saying that each new school year brings new challenges. When a new school year is marked by a change in administrative structure or leadership, the challenges are magnified.

At critical junctures, Catholic schools must take the opportunity to reexamine their administrative structures. This often occurs when a change in administrative leadership takes place – for example, a beloved principal retires, or a religious order can no longer provide a priest, brother, or sister to lead the school. At other times, a significant change may occur in the foundational structure of the school itself that requires consideration of a new administrative organization – grades or levels are added, schools merge, or transition from being sponsored by a single parish to a regional structure serving multiple parishes. Changes in leadership at the Arch/Diocesan level or the placement of a new pastor can also be the catalysts for an examination of the effectiveness of the school’s organization.

In order to remain vital and viable, contemporary Catholic schools must embrace administrative models and fill leadership positions in ways that effectively enable schools to provide a 21st century learning environment for years to come. Catholic School Management (CSM) is often called upon to conduct objective, external diagnostic assessments of the effectiveness of existing administrative structures, while providing appropriate recommendations for new administrative structures along with facilitating the identification and transition of new administrative leadership.

Administrative Models

Catholic School Management’s evaluation of the administrative structure of a school always considers whether the existing structure is a good “fit” for the school. That is, does the administrative model adequately cover both the necessary internal and external functions given the size and needs of the school? The basic normative internal and external functions for any Catholic school today are as follows:

Internal Affairs

- Faith Community Affairs
- Academic Affairs
- Student Affairs

* Personnel Affairs (is a function both Internal and External Affairs)

External Affairs

- Business Affairs
- Advancement/Development Affairs (including Enrollment Management)
- Board Relations
- Liaisons (to the Diocese or Owner, Parish, and Community).

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In Catholic elementary schools, the majority of which are owned by parishes, the typical administrative model has a principal reporting to a pastor. Occasionally, driven by size and complexity of multiple sponsoring parish relationships, an elementary school will choose the President-Principal or other model of administration.

There are three common models or structures of administration found in Catholic secondary schools today: the Principal Model, the President-Principal Model, and the Head of School Model, with some minor variations on these around the Country.

The Principal Model is the traditional administrative structure model with the Principal serving as the chief executive officer of the school for all functions. Ideally, the Principal works with the Board, be it advisory or of limited jurisdiction, and leads both the external and internal affairs of the school. As education has become more complex and more demanding on both the internal (i.e., academic) side and the external (business and development) side, CSM has found many Principals struggling between the traditional role of the Principal as the instructional leader of the school and the additional responsibilities inherent in advancing the mission of the school through programs of marketing, enrollment, and development. Therefore, the school may find itself behind the times because the Principal neither has the time, skills, nor staff to properly lead and guide the external affairs of the school. Possibly even worse, sometimes the Principal favors the external side and neglects academic and student affairs to the detriment of the educational quality of the school. In many Catholic schools, however, size, circumstances, and economic considerations dictate that the Principal remain as the sole leader. In order to be most effective, this model requires the Principal receive strong support from the positions of assistant/vice principals and/or lead teachers as well as positions dedicated to business operations, enrollment management, and development and public relations.

The President-Principal Model of administrative structure has evolved over the last 30-40 years beginning with Jesuit high schools and is now the most prevalent model in Catholic secondary schools. In this model, external and internal affairs are separated in the belief that appropriate emphasis will be placed on both. In the normative model as recommended by CSM, the President is the chief executive officer and the Principal is the chief operating or educational officer. Ideally, the President works mainly on the external affairs of the

school and the Principal, internally on the day-to-day operation of the faith community, academic, and student affairs of the school. It goes without saying that the President and Principal must work closely together and respect each other's roles or the model can fail. Although these individuals would typically bring different skills and experiences and often different personalities to their roles, ideally these are complementary, and result in a positive synergy in the administration. In most cases, this model can produce appropriate time and emphasis on the future of the school – the “big picture” issues of mission, vision, and planning. It also tends to increase emphasis on good business management and comprehensive development – “friend-raising,” fund-raising, communication, marketing, and enrollment management. But, this can happen only if the appropriate leadership and staffing are in place. Because the model calls for two top-level administrators in the school, it can be considerably more expensive than other administrative models.

The Head of School Model is the third model of administrative structure. It is commonly found in private independent schools, including some Catholic religious order-owned schools, and in schools with grades K-12 or grades 6 or 7-12 with distinct academic levels or divisions. The model derives from the traditional English “Headmaster” role. However, the role today is much different than that of the early headmaster or head teacher. The Head of School is the chief executive officer, working with the Board, but is also the academic leader who creates a vision for, and oversees, a vibrant contemporary learning environment. Like the President-Principal model, it is highly dependent upon appropriate leadership skills and upon the appropriate staffing of all functions. Chief among these roles is typically an associate head of school/dean of faculty and division leaders who work with the Head of School to provide direction and support for the academic program, curriculum, decisions related to the delivery of these programs including technology, and evaluation and supervision of faculty. “High delegation” is an important skill for a Head of School. He or she must appoint highly-skilled administrators and staff members for both external and internal functions, monitor them carefully, and give to them significant responsibility for fulfillment of their roles. The major downside of the Head of School model is similar to the Principal Model. Certain functions may suffer if the leader does not adequately cover the roles, is overburdened, and/or understaffed, particularly in the areas of advancement including development, fund-raising, and enrollment management.

Each of the specific models described above “fits” in certain circumstances. Regardless of the model chosen, there are important considerations regarding all administrative structures. Ideally, regardless of the structure, the successful administration includes:

- Administrative priorities driven by the mission of the school and a comprehensive and current strategic plan including a school improvement plan addressing academic performance;
- Administrators, adequate in numbers and skills, to fully address all the normative administrative responsibilities required by the size of the school operation;
- Administrative relationships that are healthy and assure clear and open communication among all stakeholders;
- Adequate policies and procedures in place that provide direction and clarity as to how roles are carried out on a day-to-day basis;
- Normative role descriptions and organizational/span of control charts for all administrative positions that clearly delineate all job functions, responsibilities, and relationships;
- Performance appraisal processes for administrators that address assigned functions and responsibilities, as well as annual performance goals and expectations;
- Administrative team(s) that meet regularly and effectively for collaborative decision-making with shared responsibility for the overall operation of the school in both internal and external affairs;
- Ongoing professional development for administrators including effective team operations, team building, and spiritual formation for the administrative team(s);
- Adequate office support staff, hardware, and software to meet the administrative needs of the school.

Administrative Leadership

With the appropriate model of administrative organization in place, the school can then turn its attention to filling the newly created leadership position(s). As demonstrated above, one size does not fit all in terms of a Catholic school’s administrative organizational model. Likewise, a Catholic school leader will bring his or her own unique personality and style of leadership to bear on the school’s culture. Those chosen to lead as chief administrators must be capable of maintaining the highest levels of effectiveness and achieving excellence in all aspects of school administration.

When facilitating searches for Catholic school leadership positions, Catholic School Management works closely with Boards and Search Committees to ensure the identification and placement of candidates that best fit the school’s needs as well as its unique mission, values, and culture. In addition to matching the skills and experiences of candidates with the normative internal and external functions for Catholic schools today as described above and further defined in the chief administrator’s position description, CSM assesses a candidate’s attributes and abilities to effectively lead all communities of the school through the transition in administrative leadership. These attributes align with yet transcend those normally described in a position description and are assessed during the interview and selection process.

Leadership

- Understands that schools tend to take on personalities of their own that are largely influenced by the leadership style of the top administrator. Is conscious of what the school would “look like” if he/she is selected as its leader. Knows that people learn from observing in the leader the values and behaviors that are acceptable and those that will not be tolerated.
- Effectively articulates a common and inspiring vision for the future that is communicated to internal and external stakeholders and the broader community. The vision, and the actions that flow out of the vision, should call and inspire others to embrace it, live it, own it, and invest in it.
- Ensures that the administrative working relationship best serves the students in the school community.
- Exhibits exceptional leadership skills to a variety of people; understands his/her leadership style and appropriately differentiates between leadership and management. Able to build consensus and create a team.
- Identifies and articulates priorities for first six to twelve months of service and implements an effective 30/60/90-day entry plan.
- Identifies and mentors potential administrators and plans for administrative succession.

Catholic Identity and Faith Affairs

- Provides overall leadership and vision to achieve fullest attainment of the school’s unique Catholic mission.
- Articulates how he/she lives the Catholic faith and understands the leader’s role in carrying out the teaching mission of the Catholic Church.



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- Understands the importance of the Catholic faith in the school and its presence in the school community and ensures its prominence in the life of the school.
- Demonstrates knowledge of and values the traditions and charism that define the school's history and present situation.

Academic and Student Affairs

- Able to assess the strengths and concerns of the existing program of studies, including responding to the desires and expectations of both parents and students.
- Can build and sustain a vibrant learning community throughout the school.
- Enhances the overall academic quality and image of the school.
- Possesses strong knowledge of technology and its application and importance in a Catholic school. Understands what should be in a technologically up-to-date school today and in the future.
- Instills confidence in other administrators and the faculty that he/she can make appropriate academic decisions and conduct fair supervisory assessments.
- Able to connect with the students in the school and build productive relationships with parents of students.

Board Relations/Business Affairs

- Utilizes the talents and abilities of the members of the School Board for the good of the school.
- Understands and practices the concepts of responsible stewardship.

Advancement/Development Affairs (including Enrollment Management)

- Able to sell the school and self to prospective students, parents, donors, alumni, and interested friends of the school.
- Comfortable and confident in his/her ability to raise a significant amount of money and make personal asks for major gifts.
- Effectively markets the school for image, enrollment, and resources.
- Serves as the face of the school to the external community, the chief spokesperson, and the one who develops successful relationships with the business, professional, and civic communities. Able to market the school for image and resources to these communities.

In order to sustain their viability and vitality, Catholic schools must have appropriate and contemporary organizational structures in place as well as well-trained and prepared administrators ready to lead. With the appropriate administrative structure, a well-qualified chief administrator, and a thoughtful transition/succession plan, a Catholic school can effectively manage and survive significant changes in organization and leadership.

For additional information on this subject, please refer to Catholic School Management Letter Volume XXXII, No. 6, "Succession Planning for Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools," and to www.catholicchoolmgmt.com for information regarding the CSM Administrator Search Division.

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