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Dan Guernsey

James Barott

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# CONFLICT IN INDEPENDENT CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

DAN GUERNSEY

*Ave Maria College*

JAMES BAROTT

*Eastern Michigan University*

*Independent Catholic schools are a growing phenomenon in the Catholic Church in America. This article provides a contextualized account of the phenomenon by examining via a field observation the experience of two independent Catholic schools in two different dioceses. These schools were founded in conflict and beset by continued conflict to the point of splitting; first from the diocese, then again within themselves. An environment of religious conflict motivated laity to open their own schools to socialize their children into a traditional notion of the Catholic faith. In both independent schools examined, conflict about governance, between founding parents and new stakeholders who joined the schools, led to each of the schools splitting; thus, the two became four. Each of the new breakaway schools was structured and governed much like the original schools, albeit with some increased openness to parental input. Second generation breakaway splits further complicated the relationship between these schools and their dioceses. While the limited sample prohibits highly generalizable data, the account suggests some preliminary conclusions about trends witnessed in the experience of these schools and suggests lines for further inquiry in this relatively unexamined phenomenon.*

## VALUE OF THE EXPOSÉ

There is value in understanding the social dynamics involved in the creation and sustenance of independent Catholic schools. Such schools are relatively new endeavors that operate at the fringes of the traditional Catholic educational establishment. The National Association of Private Catholic and Independent Schools (NAPCIS), an agency whose purpose is to network and accredit these schools, estimates that there may be as many as 170 independent schools in existence. Most of them are small, with fewer than 100 students, and are governed by lay boards. There are some 60 schools formally affiliated with NAPCIS. Of these 60, NAPCIS officials report that many have undergone a serious power struggle over governance and that 12 NAPCIS schools have either split or are the result of a split. The authors were

interested in the phenomenon of the creation of the schools, and then why they seem to experience governance crises so frequently. The investigation of the schools presented here is a preliminary attempt to determine if there might be patterns in independent Catholic schools that may offer clues to explaining the nature and effect of the multiple conflicts that appear to confront them.

## NATURE OF THE INQUIRY

Background information was acquired through several years of experiential and anecdotal data gathered by the lead researcher, who had involvement with independent Catholic schools as an educational consultant and as a board member of the National Association of Private Catholic and Independent Schools. Attendance at relevant conferences, meetings with founders of independent Catholic schools, and the experience of operating several independent Catholic schools helped generate a broad and detailed knowledge base of the phenomenon. To begin specific lines of inquiry into independent schools, the authors sought to observe, over time, four specific schools in an attempt to understand how the participants made sense of their experiences and arranged the organizations they created.

The names and other identifying data of the schools in this article have been changed. The first school set is St. Ignatius with its spin-off, St. Patrick. Their split occurred more than a decade ago. The wounds of the split were somewhat scabbed over and each school is somewhat stable at the present time. The second set of schools examined in this article is St. John with its spin-off, Holy Redeemer. This split was only a year old at the time of inquiry. The pain and instability associated with the split was pronounced and volatile. Multiple site visits, informal interviews, a survey of documents, and formal interviews with founders, board members, teachers, parents, and the superintendents of the two dioceses in which the four schools exist, helped generate a complex and detailed account of the experiences of the schools. Rich description and thick case studies of these two/four organizations have surfaced some preliminary trends which may serve to help in organizing further inquiry into the phenomenon. The authors have attempted to make sense of these accounts by situating these descriptions within a conceptual framework and then suggesting various organizational and political theories in a preliminary attempt to try to account for the similar experiences these schools seemed to encounter.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK INFORMING THE ACCOUNT**

The conceptual framework informing the exposé is based on the work of Thompson (1967) and Parsons (1960), who posited that organizations operate at three distinct levels of responsibility and control; the core level, the managerial level, and the institutional level. The core level is where the production functions of the organization occur and inputs are changed into outputs. This is the level of the students and the curriculum. The managerial level refers to the part of the organization that designs and controls the systems of production and directs and gathers resources, both human and physical, to produce the desired output. This is the level of the mid-level school administrators. And finally, at the institutional level, the school's managers attempt to relate to the broader environment, establish boundaries, and secure the legitimacy of the organization. This is the level of the president and the governing board. This tripartite framework, in conjunction with political theory and organizational theory, helps explicate the experiences of St. Ignatius/St. Patrick and St. John/Holy Redeemer.

### **WHAT CAUSED THE TWO ORIGINAL INDEPENDENT CATHOLIC SCHOOLS TO FORM?**

Institutional level analysis can help flesh out the answer. The institutional level of organizational experience is where issues of legitimacy, rules, and vocabularies of structure come into play. Both St. Ignatius/St. Patrick and St. John/Holy Redeemer were founded by members of the Catholic laity who were concerned about fundamental issues of what it means to be a "faithful Catholic" and what intellectual, cultural, and theological elements should be emphasized in a Catholic school. The founders stated that they perceived their local diocesan or religious order-run Catholic schools as too closely resembling their public school counterparts in academic program, pedagogy, and acceptance of prevailing cultural norms. The founders also believed the mainstream Catholic schools had theology programs which were weak in their presentation of Catholic doctrine. There was also an explicit desire on behalf of the founders of both St. Ignatius/St. Patrick and St. John/Holy Redeemer to escape the sex education programs mandated by the Catholic diocesan officials, even though the superintendents each stated that they felt such programs were in accord with, and faithful to, Catholic doctrine. Both superintendents stated that they believed that while there was, perhaps, some weakness in Catholic catechesis in the past, current catechesis and training in Catholic human sexuality was indeed fully faithful and appropriate. The operators of the independent schools in this article were not in agreement

with this assessment, stating that their goal was to foster and protect what they believed was authentic or faithful Catholic education. They seemed motivated by a reactionary hope that, eventually, the institutional Church educational system would return to its historical roots of serving as a means to socialize children into a strong, ethnic, and decidedly Catholic culture.

The shifting focus and nature of Catholic schools, which is part of the genesis of the conflict between the founders of the independent schools and their local diocesan education offices, is discussed in an important article by Baker and Riordan (1998), entitled “The ‘Eliting’ of the Common American Catholic School and the National Educational Crisis.” They discuss how Catholic schools in America were originally founded to protect the religious and ethnic heritage of immigrant Catholics, who did not feel safe in the heavily Protestantized public school system. Over time, as Catholics entered the mainstream of American culture, and public schools became more secularized, the logic inspiring the tremendous sacrifices necessary for children to attend Catholic schools began to diminish in the eyes of some. Social changes, combined with the promulgation of the documents of Vatican II, introduced a period of shifting paradigms and conceptions among many Catholics, especially related to Catholic schools.

Since the late 1960s, enrollment has declined by 57% in Catholic elementary schools and 44% at the secondary level (Baker & Riordan, 1998). The post-Vatican II decline in the number of Catholic schools has only recently leveled off. Those schools that were able to stay open in the face of the increasing expenses resulting from lower parish subsidies and fewer priests and nuns working in the schools and fewer Catholics choosing the schools for financial and ideological reasons, often found it necessary to shift part of their focus to offering a more secure and academically challenging educational environment to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, rather than stressing religious orthodoxy tailored almost exclusively to Catholic parishioners.

It was a direct response to the “eliting” process and an attempt to put Catholic religious formation at the heart of the schools’ lived mission that motivated the founders of St. Ignatius/St. Patrick and St. John/Holy Redeemer. The Holy Redeemer principal remarked,

Many parents today want their kids in Catholic schools, but are not Catholic themselves, and don’t want their kids to make a transformation into the faith. We want our students to learn about the faith and to take it on as an identity.

As a result of conflict with institutional level officials about theology, lay operators sought to open their own independent schools where they could

instill a theological outlook more in line with their views. The battle over theology, however, then became an institutional level battle over the rules and structures governing Catholic schools. The battle occurring at the institutional level was actually twofold: a primary battle over Catholic theology that was then transferred and redirected by diocesan officials into an institutional level conflict focusing institutional regulations.

The result of these conflicts was a complex relationship between each school and the local bishops and superintendents. In each case examined, the school sought to curry favor with the local bishop and avoid interaction with the bishop's appointed superintendents. In each of the two dioceses reflected in the cases, there also appeared to be some dissonance between the positions struck by the bishops and the superintendents toward such schools. The founder of St. Ignatius claimed that the bishop in charge at the outset told the founder to go ahead with the idea for the school, and to keep him personally informed, but not to work through the diocesan superintendent, who was not supportive of the endeavor. This bishop gave permission for St. Ignatius to be called "Catholic" and he, and his eventual successor, visited the school several times, but the superintendent, and the eventual successor, never visited. St. Patrick, the breakaway school that split off from St. Ignatius, was also visited by the bishop, but not the superintendent.

Although St. Patrick has a virtually identical mission, curriculum, and structure to St. Ignatius, and the new bishop has appointed a priest to minister there, the school has not received status as an official Catholic school from the new bishop. The new bishop and superintendent in the diocese have struck a more nuanced tone. The new bishop will say Mass at the independent schools, but maintains a distinction between these schools and the diocesan schools. Mass is offered as a general pastoral outreach to all in his flock. The current superintendent is not hostile to the concept of independent Catholic schools in the diocese, but has some reservations and hopes that both sides will "try to walk and talk gently in each other's direction." He would welcome some sort of direct affiliation with the schools, but would need to be confident in their stability, enrollment, basic curriculum, and sense that they are willing to be "a part of the family" and work with the other schools. He is open to developing guidelines to work with them.

Similar ambiguities surround St. John/Holy Redeemer. The bishop has visited St. John, but the superintendent has not. In this particular diocese, there are four independent Catholic schools operating; one is officially recognized as Catholic, although operating outside direct diocesan control, and three others are not officially recognized as Catholic, including St. John/Holy Redeemer. The bishop and chancellor have openly stated their encouragement of Catholic education in whatever form it may take, includ-

ing independent Catholic schools. The superintendent is more hesitant in working with such schools and insists that, "If these schools want a part of the system they would need to essentially follow the diocesan school manual." The superintendent stated that,

A lack of communication and a lack of apparent interest in seeking to work with the superintendents is a problem. It seems frequently they do not make overtures or attempts to come to talk with us. In talking to some of my superintendent counterparts their take seems to be similar.

Neither diocese reflected in this article has a specific policy for dealing with this new type of school. The ambiguous status of these schools, their instability, and their function as a lightning rod for theological conflict seems to have raised questions and concerns that have not yet been resolved.

This nebulous state of events caused a degree of soul searching among the independent schools as well. Indeed, the very use of the term "independent Catholic school" is problematic, because it invites the question, "independent of what?" Independence from the Church was not the intent of any of the founders contacted. Actually, they stated that the explicit reason for founding the schools was to socialize children into that very entity, the Catholic Church. The operators of the schools reviewed in this article wanted to be independent from many of the institutional level bureaucratic norms and politics extant in many parishes, dioceses, and religious orders. One independent school leader described it as not being free from, but rather free to establish the curriculum, free to hire teachers, and free to determine the school program. This fine line and area of ambiguity seemed to be a sincere concern of the four schools contacted in this inquiry.

However, the abstract nature of the questions faced by the four independent schools was not nearly as problematic as the real world problem of attempting to operate outside of the established norms, without a support structure, without institutional financing, and without the institutional legitimacy that the diocese provides its member schools. The operators each reported that trying to run a school was much more difficult than they ever imagined. The complexity and hazards of their environments created unforeseen challenges and questions about how each of them should organize, persist, and govern their schools.

## **HOW DID THE ORIGINAL INDEPENDENT CATHOLIC SCHOOLS ORGANIZE?**

Institutional level analysis helped articulate why the two original schools formed. Core level analysis will help to convey how the two schools organ-

ized by gathering their founders, establishing their missions, and creating their core curriculums. The original schools in this study, St. Ignatius and St. John, both began by gathering a founding group of likeminded people. For St. Ignatius this was a group of three families who had previously worked together on pro-life causes, anti-outcomes based education initiatives, and efforts to get sex education out of Catholic schools. At St. John, the founding group was a single family consisting of an older patriarch and his adult children. In each case, the founders were entirely unified in mind and heart, and sought to ensure that unity by maintaining unilateral control of all aspects of the school. They sealed off managerial-level power.

Founders of St. Ignatius and St. John also attempted to seal off the core by articulating a clear mission statement. The mission statements of the four schools informing this article were remarkably similar. St. Patrick, listed here, could suffice for all of them:

The mission of St. Patrick grammar and prep as a private school loyal to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, consecrated to Mary, and committed to proclaiming the sanctity of all human life, is to serve, supplement and support families in their primary mission of educating their children. In cooperation with parents, St. Patrick prepares young people for college and life by forming them in Catholic truth, virtue, and fellowship while inspiring them to seek intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic and physical excellence.

The values, tasks, assumptions, and norms that inform the cores of the two original schools were also remarkably similar and are almost interchangeable. The core academics at each suggest a back-to-basics preference emphasizing such elements as phonics instruction, significant memorization, and works of the Western canon. Each also evidenced a deep suspicion of multiculturalism due to its perceived relativism. The St. Ignatius curriculum is based on the assumption that a hierarchy of values should be recognized in the choice of subjects and experiences, and that certain subjects have more intrinsic value, and contribute more directly than others to the attainment of educational aims of the school. Their belief is that curriculum should stress formational more than informational subjects (i.e., religion, English, literature classics, mathematics, etc.). The core at both schools is designed to produce middle class graduates, schooled in the Western canon and steeped in traditional Catholicism, who can continue on to study at the collegiate level.

## **HOW DID THE ORIGINAL SCHOOLS PERSIST?**

The two original independent schools used similar strategies to persist. Critical to their efforts was heavily buffering the core, especially by limiting



the number of students. Both schools wanted to be large enough to be financially stable, but not at the expense of watering down the core or altering structures to appeal to a larger audience. Fewer students meant fewer variables. Another buffering technique used was to carefully screen students and parents and to insist on full support of the schools' religious and academic mission. Students with serious academic difficulties were discouraged from enrollment. School leaders also buffered the core by employing exclusively Catholic workers to manage the core, and requiring that all staff reflect a Catholic philosophy of life and conduct. Each school required teachers and administrators to take the "Oath of Fidelity," which the Catholic Church requires of her bishops and pastors to assure doctrinal orthodoxy and strict adherence to Church teaching. Both schools had a deep concern about modern pedagogy and professional teachers or administrators who were trained in educational specialties, and tried to keep such influences out. Controlling the number and type of students and the values of the faculty were essential buffering strategies employed to protect the core at both St. Ignatius and St. John.

Buffering strategies, originally employed to protect the core, also had a destabilizing effect on the two schools. Limiting students and attempting to seal off power from other stakeholders greatly threatened financial viability. Each of the schools was engaged in dramatic attempts to stay afloat. None received the 30% subsidy most parishes offer their own Catholic schools. However, they were in competition with the parishes for students and wanted to keep tuition low to remain accessible to large families. The circumstances created tension and a constant struggle for resources.

St. Ignatius was able to compensate for its large and continuing deficits by selling books and educational services to other orthodox Catholics, especially through the use of the Internet. This "business arm" generated enough profit to help fund the school, but even with these outside sources of revenue, money was tight. St. John continued to draw upon the financial recourse of the founding family, but seemingly unending deficits resulted in anxiety, self-doubt, and unilateral budget decisions.

## **HOW AND WHY DO THEY BREAK APART?**

The conflicts that impelled the two original independent Catholic schools to set up and organize outside of the traditional institutional norms were not the only conflicts they faced. A second wave of conflicts also impacted the two schools and led to a secondary set of breakaway schools. The first break and continued conflicts on the institutional level were significantly about theology, as Catholic laity sought to influence the Catholic Church. The secondary break found its impetus at the managerial level as laity battled over the

control of each school and the fundamental question: Whose school is it? It was the question of who should serve as the managers of the core that caused the secondary splits at St. Ignatius and St. John. The principal, who organized the St. Patrick break from St. Ignatius, identified the governance headaches that come from leaving the institutional Church:

The great weakness in leaving the institutional Church for the schools is ambiguity about the control of the schools. Now, who's in charge when we open up the schools? We say it's the parents' school, and emphasize that the parents are the primary educators of their children, but you can't have all the parents running the school. I mean, I guess you can, but what happens is, some parents want to run the school one way and some will want to run it another. Who's in charge of the parents? Who's over them? That's when we get the breakups.

At St. Ignatius and St. John, structural elements and the distribution of powers set up by the founders created an environment that eventually resulted in a split. At St. Ignatius, the split occurred after 15 years of the original founding board's guidance. At St. John, the split occurred after 13 years of continuous control by the founding family. The splits were over issues of power, which Morgan (1997) defines as the medium through which conflicts of interest are ultimately resolved. Power is the deciding influence of who gets what, as well as when, and how. Morgan identifies key sources of power: formal authority, control of scarce resources, use of organizational structure, rules, and regulations, control of the decision-making process, control of knowledge and information, control of boundaries, ability to cope with uncertainty, control of technology, symbolism, and the management of meaning, structural factors that define the stage of action, and the power one already has. The founding board at St. Ignatius and the founding family at St. John held virtually all of the sources of power and exercised that power unilaterally. In each case, those in control never hid the fact that they, alone, would assure the continuity and application of the school's specific and unwavering mission. In return for their tremendous sacrifice and dedication over many years, the founders laid claim to the right and responsibility to shepherd all aspects of the school to keep it faithful. In both original school cases, failure to effectively engage in productive decision-making processes, such as consensus building, and creating an environment where all stakeholders had access to the mechanisms of decision making, led to institutional instability. In each case, trust in the leadership eroded as the perceived failure of management to listen was interpreted as a sign of not caring.

At St. Ignatius, the founding board did at one point admit a popular teacher into its ranks in an attempt to provide for some element of stakeholder input, especially as some perceived the board president (who was also the

founding principal) to be irascible and difficult to approach. The teacher, who subsequently founded his own school just down the road recalls:

During the 4 years I was on the board, more and more often I was thinking in a little bit different way than the rest of the board....I couldn't help being put between the parents and the board. When I saw this, I knew it was a problem. I saw that it was inevitable that [the founding principal] would eventually decide I was not on his side; I was with them, because I was the one who was always approaching him with the dissatisfaction of the parents. Parents were talking to me because I was approachable....The things that were bothering me were also bothering a lot of others.

The teacher resigned from the board mid-year; by the end of the year he had helped form a breakaway school. About 13 of the 20 families at the school decided to leave with the new leader and open St. Patrick a few miles away.

At St. John, the school parents accepted the family's complete control over the school it had founded and substantially bankrolled until it was perceived that the family had overly privileged its own children in an expulsion case. Influential family members succeeded in overruling a popular principal regarding the discipline of the founding family's children. The conflict ultimately resulted in the mid-year dismissal of the principal. A majority of the staff and families experienced this as a serious abuse by the founding family for personal gain. At the end of the year, 8 of 12 faculty members and about half of the students and families left *en masse* to form their own school, Holy Redeemer. This particular case is especially problematic, as a private Catholic organization came to be treated as personal property. In a sense this was not so much a "private" Catholic school as a "personal" Catholic school.

The damage that a "personal" school can create, as seen in the case of St. John's, is that a Catholic child can experience his or her Catholic institution split apart because of the will of an individual or a particular family. This is understandably problematic from the perspective of the superintendents in each of the dioceses where these splits occurred. Each superintendent emphasized that it is important for the Church as an institution to be perceived by its children as stable and beyond discernible political, and certainly beyond personal, control. In a typical Catholic school, there are mechanisms in place to prevent such abuses. The bishop, a pastor, or the superintendent, can step in and resolve the situation according to basic justice, due process, and standard expectations of the general community. The superintendent in the St. John/Holy Redeemer case remarked:

These splits can cause such harm, especially to the children. Children aren't so dumb. They see what's going on. It isn't fair to those children to be put into that kind of environment. Why should they see it growing up in a system that should be safe and secure for them, one that they will identify as being Catholic? This is damage that is done to them under the guise of Catholic education. That's not acceptable to me.

When an entity seeks to function as a Catholic institution, there are certain paradigms that are expected: hierarchy, stability, and institutionalization. Each of the schools this article examines split apart over managerial control, not about theology or curriculum. Each split was a result of stakeholders seeking a voice in the education of their children. In the original schools, founded and controlled by a particular group of parents, the ability to vote out the founders or the board was not an option.

According to "dissatisfaction theory," when constituents in a democracy grow discontented with the elites, they throw, that is vote, them out. In the realm of public education, changes in elite power usually manifest via a Turning Point Election Process (TPEP). The TPEP process involves: (a) the ascension of voter discontent, (b) a triggering election, (c) a realignment election, (d) articulation of a new policy mandate, and (e) a final test election (Iannaccone, 1983). This mechanism was not present in the original independent Catholic schools.

Without the ability to change the school by democratic vote, the solution for resolving an intolerable situation, for those not part of the power elite, was to leave the original school. Ironically, the founders of St. Ignatius and St. John had done this very thing themselves; they left the diocesan system claiming that system denied them the ability to create a satisfactory Catholic ethos. Now, the pattern repeated, only now parents split from other parents in an attempt to gain power and access to a school more in line with their expectations.

The willingness of the original founders of St. Ignatius and St. John to see their schools split rather than to compromise, seems to verify Iannaccone's (1983) observation that once a person or group possesses an established power, the individual or group is often so concerned with protecting the rights and privileges such power brings, and clings to power so blindly, that they risk destroying the very entity or organization upon which their power is based. Michels (1915) similarly observes:

One who holds the office of delegate acquires a moral right to that office, and delegates remain in office unless removed by extraordinary circumstances or in obedience to rules observed with exceptional strictness....Custom becomes a right. One who has for a certain time held the office of delegate ends by regarding that office as his own property. (p. 81)

Michels attributes this idea to the noble human sentiment of gratitude: “The failure to realize a comrade who assisted in the birth of the [organization], who suffered its many adversities, and rendered it 1000 services, would be regarded as a cruelty and an action to be condemned” (p. 124). As the leaders’ length of tenure or grip on power grows, it can, according to Michels, result in a type of closed caste. The ossification of such a system can result in a catastrophic change if the leadership pursues policies that overly strain social relationships, or if they act in complete blindness. Such appears to have happened in the original two schools.

The experience of St. Ignatius and St. John, and the acknowledgement from NAPCIS officials that a number of other independent Catholic schools have had a considerable amount of difficulty establishing relations between the founders and those who follow them, suggests that founders like those who began St. Ignatius and St. John evidently have the vision and passion to start independent schools but, by general temperament, may have difficulty sharing or transferring power. The transition from the crisis mode that impels the initial creation of the schools, into an institutional mode that is necessary for long-term survivability, may call for different skill sets and personality types. After the initial rush, sacrifice, and significant goodwill efforts in a valiant cause of championing religious orthodoxy, the grinding and complex difficulty of running a multifaceted school can threaten the viability of the enterprise; for the enterprise transcends the work of simply transmitting religious orthodoxy.

One way to conceive of this dynamic is through the metaphor of “pioneers” and “settlers.” The pioneers approach the unknown with initial energy, courage, vision, risk-taking propensities, and an uncompromising passion to do something new, and to do it “my way.” Once ground has been broken and the trails opened, more practical-minded settlers move in. With increased numbers and increased complexity comes the need for more structure, bureaucracy, collaboration, and community effort. For some pioneers, such necessities, entitlements, and intra-relational complexities are exasperating. In addition, the incredible amount of energy and stress required to create a new organization can also wear down the pioneers. Is there something in the very temperament of those inspired to start such an enterprise that can work against long-term success?

In dealing with the founders, we may have encountered a unique type of individual, one who, out of the need for control, establishes a new entity, and then is put in a position of passing that entity on. Michels (1915) insightfully comments,

The abandonment of a public position obtained at the cost of great efforts, and after many years of struggle, is a luxury which only an exceptionally endowed person, with the spirit of self-sacrifice, can afford. Such self-denial is too hard for the average man. (p. 206)

The difficulty in letting go is articulated by a St. Ignatius founder, who remarked:

We couldn't walk away because our hearts were so much in this school. This was our baby. It seemed as if they want us to step down because we were too old and new blood needed to take over. But we weren't willing to do that. We were afraid the academics would suffer and we didn't know what would happen with the rest of the program as well. I couldn't stand around here and watch the program change in ways that were unacceptable.

Impelled by a sense of clear and critical mission, and an ardent desire to serve the common good, pioneers start a new organization, but are ultimately confronted with inherent difficulties in organizing, difficulties that thrust these founders and visionaries into ironic, problematic, and perhaps even irresolvable situations.

When the two communities at the focus of this inquiry finally broke apart, the processes of disintegration also seemed to follow a pattern suggested by organizational theorists. Dyck and Starke (1999) posited a theory of group exit based upon their study of various small Protestant congregations that split apart. The authors suggested that such breaks happened in stages, beginning with a period of relative harmony where potential conflicts exist beneath the surface, until, at some point, a conflicting idea or event occurs and ideas for change begin to develop. Those who want to keep the status quo, and who perceive that an organized element is seeking to change their institution, initiate a period of resistance, during which there is more open competition for the hearts and minds of community members. If the resistance leads to some extreme polarizing event, where personal feelings, emotions, and egos get actively involved, a period of intense conflict results. If and when a final justifying event or fight occurs, or if those who were seeking change perceive that, ultimately, they will not be heard and are being treated as enemies, the subgroup enters the final stage, formal group exit. In this stage the split occurs as the breakaway group leaves, often with a sense of euphoria, while those who remain in the parent group may feel depressed and abandoned. This basic process took place in the schools involved in this study.

## HOW DID THE NEW BREAKAWAY SCHOOLS ORGANIZE?

The answer to this question is brief, but nonetheless striking: The two breakaway schools, St. Patrick and Holy Redeemer, organized and offered the same core as St. Ignatius and St. John, the communities they left. A critical mass of dissatisfied parents, about 50% of the total in both cases, left the schools according to the paradigm suggested by Dyck and Starke (1999). The dissatisfied stakeholders, led in the case of St. Ignatius/St. Patrick by a popular teacher, and in St. John/Holy Redeemer by a popular principal, organized their own school offering the same basic core technology, and the same basic governance style, under “new management.”

Mosca (1939) predicted such a process of governmental isomorphism when he observed that when new leaders drive out the old or start new communities, they can marshal fresh political forces, and sometimes, new leadership seems to arise out of nowhere. However, after a time, they too become stabilized ruling elite. Pareto (1935) termed this process “The Circulation of Elites.” The control of the masses by the elite is a permanent fixture of organizational reality, according to Pareto. Quite quickly, any ruling class tends to become more and more exclusive and learns how to monopolize, acquire, and hold power to its advantage. Mosca stated, “Then, at last, the force that is essentially conservative appears: the force of habit” (p. 602). The new power is established, and inertia and tradition ossify the structures.

Eventually, however, the new elite at the breakaway school arranged for a degree of power sharing in an attempt to secure more resources and enhance institutional legitimacy. The two breakaway schools eventually tried to structure inclusive mechanisms to some degree. It is particularly interesting to note that when the new St. Patrick school formed, it created a controlling board with no democratic elections. There was a sense that the new management of the school needed to be insulated enough from democratic influence to maintain its vision. However, even in its infancy, St. Patrick did attempt to allow for a greater parent voice, by holding a strategic planning session with all families, seeking their input, sending home periodic parent survey forms, and forming parent advisory groups to aid the board in issues of policy, finance, fundraising, and other key areas.

Through its first 8 years, the St. Patrick original founding board maintained complete control of all aspects of the school. One founder observed, “Really, our board and governance structure was not a whole lot different from St. Ignatius’s. We had a board structured much like theirs. The difference was we had a headmaster who would listen to people.” Essentially, the outcome was a simple switching of the personalities in control of a basically oligarchical system.

After 8 years of operating in this manner, the St. Patrick board recently decided to reorganize. As part of an effort to move beyond a “mom-and-pop” type of organization into a more institutionalized format, the original founding board members stepped off the board and turned over control of the school to a new group that they selected. They hoped that this would help attract future donors, families, and others, and to enhance the school’s sense of legitimacy. Referring to his own experience in resigning from the board and turning over control of the school to others, the St. Patrick founding principal remarked:

I felt that in order for the school to succeed, it’s not a question of my personal power....Personally, for me, this change was hard. It’s very difficult because you no longer have the power to do things according to the vision you think you have been given by our Lord and your own common sense. So it’s a tough adjustment. But, I think I’m starting to make it. It’s been a year and a half and I’m starting to enjoy the freedom it has given me. The most difficult thing was going from being your own boss to having five or six bosses....At first, it was awkward about how I related to the board and how they related to me, but now things have settled down a bit.

He said that the change and governance style has also had benefits:

I do think it helps the families get a sense of “this is our school.” “I can be on this committee; I can be on that. I can do this; I can do that.” I don’t think I feel so much like it’s just me running this school. I think initially there are people who decided this was my school. But I don’t want it to be my school: I want it to be St. Patrick.

This process of institutionalization is perhaps a key to reducing the instability that can plague independent schools and may help to integrate them into a more sure-footed relationship with the Catholic Church. There is perhaps some merit in the two diocesan superintendents involved with these schools taking a standoffish approach to them until institutionalization brings a greater measure of stability. Scott (1998) described institutionalization as the process by which “actions are repeated and given similar meaning by self and others” (p. 134). It is part of the process by which social reality is constructed. Scott believes that “social life is only possible because and to the extent that individuals in interaction create common frameworks and understandings that support collective action” (p. 135). To the extent that personal schools, especially as evident in St. John, undermine collective action by using an organization to benefit some individuals to an unacceptable degree, they cannot successfully institutionalize. Successful institution-



alization is aided by a management structure that provides for authentic collective action. One indicator of that kind of collective action might be the occasion of the school board leadership being completely transferred to a second generation of leadership that does not include founders, employees, spouses of employees, or school founders. The superintendent of the diocese surrounding St. John/Holy Redeemer remarked:

Frankly, I think the original founders have to have a change of heart. They have to be able to say, "time for us to step down and give up the reins." It's not an easy thing. But I think if you have the heart you can do it. If you need to be the controlling factor, then you may not be able to do it.

Such authentic institutionalization may help ensure that the school functions as a private rather than a personal organization.

## **HOW DO THE NEW SCHOOLS PERSIST?**

When the breakaway schools formed, the core technology did not change. The books, curriculums, values, norms, traditions, and missions remained substantially those of the parent school. The two biggest challenges to the breakaways' persistence were space and finances. The breakaways each sought to use empty Catholic school buildings, but were denied their use by the diocese. In both cases examined, the superintendents were concerned that the general public might assume that an "independent school" is part of the diocese if it were using church property. The superintendents expressed concern that if the schools failed or were the subject of scandal, the diocese could be tarnished by an organization outside of its control. In the case of the two breakaways in this study, each finally rented space from Protestant churches. The facilities in each case were older, in need of painting and basic upkeep. The start-up schools relied on donated or discarded items to set up basic office and classroom space.

Each school also had tremendous difficulty paying the rent on these facilities and meeting payroll, especially in the first year. Survival was not assured. Dramatic fundraising efforts, volunteer workers, and teachers working part-time with non-existent or reduced benefits and sometimes without promised pay, helped the schools stay afloat in extreme financial duress.

The two breakaway schools were free from direct dependency on any one family or business, but, subsequently, more dependent on a variety of families. They exhibited more mild, but still substantial, buffering strategies to attract students, and thus tuition. Dependency on tuition left school administrators more responsive to their stakeholders, but also much less financially secure. Being beholden to the parents was cause for some concern, lest the

schools be forced to “water-down” their core to attract more resources and be more responsive to parents, who may not be fully socialized into the complete orthodox Catholic core mission and vision. Very early into their young existence the schools were experiencing the same “eliting” pressures that they believed so dramatically affected mainstream Catholic schools before them. And so the cycle continues.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The complex nature of the four schools examined in this article and the difficulty in running them suggests, even to their own founders, that they are a temporary answer, not a long-term solution. The founding principal of St. Ignatius remarked:

The small-school thing is a thumb in the dike until the Church gets back together hierarchically. It's a way-by, a pullout along the highway, until it's safe to pull back in. And the schools, for the most part, are doing a good job....This type of autocracy won't work on a large scale because there are too many different personalities. There will be those who come on board and want something different than what you've got; your autocracy is going to be challenged by others. What we want is unity under the hierarchy, and that's what we should seek out; not now, but we should prepare for it. Not now, because we can't trust in the people currently in charge.

It is ironic that the independent schools examined here tried to operate outside the Church structure to accomplish their theological goal of supporting the Catholic Church, yet the lack of structure came back to threaten their viability and ability to accomplish their theological goals. The lack of structure also added another barrier that prevented them from being accepted as fully “Catholic” enterprises in the eyes of Church officials.

The four independent schools presented were born in conflict. Their genesis occurred when parents saw no other viable option for instilling their values in their children. Institutional level conflict with Church leaders led to the founding of these schools. However, subsequent managerial level conflict led to the schools splitting apart as parents battled the question: Whose school is it? In these schools, conflict led to action and action led to change. On the level of the individual schools presented, there is a sense of immediate urgency in these various conflicts. Their existence is at stake. However, on the institutional level of the Catholic Church, such conflicts may be pressing, but they are not life threatening to the Church. It will take time for the Catholic Church to process and respond to the conflicts and dynamics. The Church perceives itself as a living organism: It refers to itself as the living

body of Christ. It, too, is subject to change. However, the Church is slow. Changes often take generations to occur and be absorbed into its operating framework and paradigms.

Given that this article focused on the experiences of just four schools in two dioceses, caution is advised regarding limitations on any suggested conclusions, and particularly, questions about the transferability of generalizations are warranted. Anecdotal evidence through conversations and “sharing the stories” suggested to the authors that the dynamics affecting St. Ignatius/St. Patrick and St. John/Holy Redeemer may be affecting other independent schools as well. However, a further formal study seeking to address the applicability of conclusions preliminarily suggested here to other independent Catholic schools is advisable. In addition, this article is perhaps the first account of independent Catholic schools presented in a scholarly journal. Although this article focused on just four independent schools, there appear to be as many as 170 others in existence that have not been studied or analyzed in any systematic way. Lines of inquiry for further reflection might include: a formal study of the attitudes of bishops and superintendents toward independent Catholic schools; a study of any policies that might be in place about the ways dioceses relate to independent schools; and perhaps a complete demographic accounting of such schools, including size, location, founding, philosophies, and where appropriate, details of any split. There is much to be explored as the independent school movement develops and grows.

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*Dan Guernsey is President of Ave Maria College in Ypsilanti, MI, and a board member of NAPCIS. James Barott is Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Dr. Dan Guernsey, Ave Maria College, 300 W. Forest Ave., Ypsilanti, MI, 48197.*