

July 2013

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Recommended Citation

Weitzel-O'Neill, P., & Scheopner Torres, A. (2011). Catholic Schools as Schools of Academic Excellence: A Summary of the Third Catholic Higher Education Collaborative Conference Proceedings. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 15 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1501052013>

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Catholic Schools as Schools of Academic Excellence: A Summary of the Third Catholic Higher Education Collaborative Conference Proceedings

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This article summarizes the content and outcomes of the third Catholic Higher Education Collaborative Conference (CHEC), cosponsored by the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College and the Center for Catholic School Leadership at Fordham University. The conference focused on how Catholic higher education can assist in developing and supporting essential components necessary for achieving academic excellence in Pre-K-12 Catholic schools. This working conference featured guest speakers who provided substantive content that invited participants to examine critically and reflect upon focus questions related to academic excellence. A summary of the presentations and table conversations, along with the final recommendations from the participants and follow-up steps that have taken place as a result, are reported.

While studies have found evidence that Catholic school students, specifically, secondary students, outperform their public school peers and that the impact is particularly powerful for disadvantaged students or students from low socioeconomic, minority, and single-parent backgrounds (e.g., Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Jeynes, 2008), most of these studies have become dated and are fiercely debated (e.g., Alexander & Pallas, 1983; Goldberger & Cain, 1982; Murnane, 1981; Noell, 1982). Recent research has found that neither public nor Catholic schools have a consistent advantage over the other in raising student achievement in math and reading, though the impact of poverty is “considerably mitigated for students in Catholic schools” (Hallinan & Kubitschek, 2010, p. 143). Regardless of the research findings, Catholic schools are called upon to ensure “the instruction which is given in them is at least as academically distinguished as that in the other schools of the area” (canon 806 §2). Academic excellence is often a distinguishing characteristic of Catholic schools, one that is central to the mission and identities of these schools. What does it mean to be academi-

cally excellent? In an era of high-stakes assessments and increased accountability, many debate whether Catholic schools should adopt similar policies, using evidence-based practice or objective evidence to inform practice. Others advocate that all Catholic schools should adopt thoughtfully prepared standards to ensure high expectations, a socially just environment, and accountability (Kallemeyn, 2009). Still others call for a definition of academic excellence that focuses on critical thinking, questioning inherited concepts and fostering new ideas.

On September 26, 2010, invited Catholic school educators gathered for the third Catholic Higher Education Collaborative (CHEC) conference hosted at Boston College entitled “Catholic Schools as Schools of Academic Excellence: How Can Catholic Higher Education Help?” This 3-day conference, cosponsored by the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College and the Center for Catholic School Leadership at Fordham University, was the third in a series of six CHEC conferences. CHEC began in 2007 at a national gathering of Catholic colleges and universities to explore ways to support and strengthen Catholic education at all levels. The group agreed to convene a series of six conferences focused on salient topics crucial to the sustainability and improvement of Catholic elementary and secondary schools, including the immigrant Church, leadership, academic excellence, Catholic identity, governance, and accessibility and affordability. Researchers and practitioners come together at these conferences in an effort to examine these topics critically, developing greater understanding of the needs of Catholic schools, identifying concrete ways to support Catholic education, and building partnerships between Catholic higher education and Catholic Pre-K-12 schools.

The CHEC conference hosted at Boston College focused on how Catholic higher education can assist—more and better—in developing and supporting essential components necessary to achieving academic excellence in Pre-K-12 Catholic schools. Speakers posed challenging questions, and, similar to the format of the CHEC conference held at Loyola University Chicago on leadership, significant time was devoted to discussion among participants. Eighty-seven invited attendees from 22 states participated in these conversations, including deans, administrators, and researchers from 24 Catholic colleges and universities; superintendents and other diocesan administrators representing 20 dioceses; presidents, principals, and school administrators from six Catholic schools; and directors and administrators from six Catholic education associations and organizations, such as the Greater Milwaukee Catholic Education Consortium, the Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consor-

tium, and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA).

As in previous CHEC conferences, the goal was to identify specific next steps to build collaboration among and within Catholic higher education, diocesan offices, Catholic elementary and secondary schools, networks, sponsors, and the NCEA. These action steps were meant to ensure that the conversations did not end after 3 days, but rather that ongoing discussions and relationships to support academic excellence in Catholic education would continue. Overall, conference attendees agreed that academic excellence requires national standards grounded in Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT) that form the basis for curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as strong governance and effective leadership and management of temporal affairs. As such, several follow-up initiatives are under way, including continuing work on the national standards initiative that began with the second CHEC conference at Loyola University Chicago and the collaborative development of a new program co-sponsored by the Roche Center and the Chief Administrators for Catholic Education (CACE) department of NCEA: Innovations Institute for Catholic Education. This program will provide a cyclical forum bringing together experts to investigate all facets of selected topics critical to Catholic school viability with follow-up, over time, providing training and coaching for school leaders. The expected outcome will be the adoption and implementation of effective, data-based, innovative models that will ensure schools prosper and succeed. This article provides an overview of the content of the conference, including the speakers, discussion sessions, and outcomes.

Conference Overview

This working conference replicated the dynamic structure used at the Loyola University Chicago CHEC conference on leadership in October 2009 (see Boyle, 2010). Participants were invited to the conference and were expected to work in groups to tackle five questions, with speakers providing substantive context, content, and critical questions about academic excellence in Catholic schools. Each participant was assigned to three different conversation groups to ensure interaction with a cross-section of colleagues. Participants were asked to reflect, evaluate, and share their best ideas based on the presentations and their own experiences, and respond to focus questions in facilitated “table conversations.” The focus questions addressed the main question of the conference: How can Catholic institutions of higher education (CIHE) collaborate to assist in developing, sustaining, and supporting those essential

components necessary to achieving academic excellence in Pre-K-12 Catholic schools? Each table conversation had an assigned facilitator, who led the group in discussion and production of outcomes, and played an essential role in engaging participation from all constituents and ensuring substantive outcomes were generated. Nine table facilitators, including representatives from CIHE and administrators from archdiocesan offices and Catholic schools, met prior to the conference and were provided guidelines to support their role. After the conference, facilitators reported final reflections that were reviewed by Roche Center staff to distill common themes and to inform development of programs, research agendas, and new initiatives to sustain and support academic excellence in Catholic Pre-K-12 schools.

The following provides a brief outline of the content of the five sessions and the table conversations, attempting to capture in a broad way the main themes that arose in the multifaceted conversations that took place during the conference.

Essential Components for Academic Excellence

The third CHEC conference started with a thought-provoking presentation designed to “rock the boat.” Rev. Mark Massa, S.J., dean of the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College, opened the conference with his keynote address (see Massa, 2011, this issue). Fr. Massa discussed John Tracy Ellis’s (1955) critique of Catholic higher education in his article “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” pointing out that many of the same criticisms hold today. For example, Fr. Massa maintained that many Catholic institutions of higher education spend resources on athletic programs rather than focusing on academics. Further, many of those who graduate from these institutions go into business and law rather than intellectual and research endeavors. Drawing on a recent article from Archbishop Dolan (2010), which emphasized catechesis and character formation as the strengths of Catholic elementary and secondary schools, Fr. Massa challenged that Catholic schools should focus on intellectual development and curiosity. “My sense is that Catholic higher education has, by and large, failed to challenge the intellectual world of the teenagers that show up at their doorsteps.” In this keynote, he directly addressed the issue of Catholic identity and CIT in Catholic schools, making the argument that Catholic schools achieve academic excellence through this tradition. He questioned whether Catholic identity and CIT are still emphasized and authentically present in Catholic schools, and asserted that Catholic

elementary and secondary schools can do better to foster intellectual curiosity and analytical skills. These issues were revisited in conversations throughout the conference.

Dr. Lorraine Ozar, director of the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness at Loyola University Chicago, summarized and reviewed the outcomes of the previous CHEC conference. The second CHEC conference, entitled “Developing and Sustaining Leaders for Catholic Schools: How Can Catholic Higher Education Help?,” was a working conference structured around four presentations and accompanying table conversations. Key questions included “Who are Catholic schools for and who should lead them?,” “What are the gaps between higher education leadership programs and Pre-K-12 needs?,” and “Why is higher education collaboration required and what might it look like?” Follow-up actions taken in light of the conversation include the commitment of a small team to develop national standards for Catholic schools, as well as implementing a “resource cloud,” or an online, open access platform facilitating the exchange of information, data, research, and materials to enhance Catholic school leadership. Participants also identified the need for redesign and expansion of higher education leadership programs to address the contemporary context and the need to develop a national agenda for expanding and disseminating research on Catholic education, creating a *de facto* national agenda for Catholic education.

Dr. Patricia Weitzel-O’Neill, director of the Roche Center for Catholic Education, and Dr. Gerald Cattaro, director of the Center for Catholic School Leadership at Fordham University, presented findings from a survey that was administered to the invited participants prior to the conference to inform the conversation. Survey questions focused on academic excellence and what is needed to sustain academic rigor in Catholic schools. The presentation highlighted differences between the perceptions of the 34 higher education professionals and 45 Catholic school practitioners who took the survey. For example, higher education professionals ranked the culture of Catholic schools as the number one academic strength while school practitioners ranked it second. Faculty and staff were ranked as the number one academic weakness of Catholic schools among higher education participants, but was ranked fourth among school professionals. School practitioners ranked curriculum as one of the greatest strengths as well as one of the greatest weaknesses of Catholic schools, describing the curriculum as rigorous, flexible, and solid preparation for college but also as outdated, weak in math and science, limited in terms of course offerings, and textbook driven rather than standards based. Both groups

of participants prioritized the need for professional development in effective assessment practices and meeting the needs of diverse learners.

Table conversations worked to clarify and identify essential components of academic excellence. The nine table conversations were diverse and focused on multiple components, such as curriculum, mission, leadership, personnel, professional development, and financial stability. In general, groups identified the need for standards grounded in Catholic identity both in terms of curricular standards that clearly articulate required knowledge and skills as well as standards for practice that emphasize creating and maintaining professional learning communities among the staff. School leaders and teachers are needed who are dedicated to the mission of the school, well qualified, and committed to continuous growth and learning. These leaders must maintain high expectations for effective instruction and accountability, and model and share the faith. To achieve these essential components of academic excellence, Catholic schools must attain financial stability with socially just salary scales for all staff, and secure financial planning to help address community concerns. Universities can provide financial and professional support for work with schools to ensure professional development opportunities are available that meet the different needs of the schools and support continuous learning in the topics listed above.

Academic Excellence, Assessment, and Catholic Institutions of Higher Education

Dr. Laura O'Dwyer, associate professor in the Department of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, presented on assessment and academic excellence, highlighting a common theme among the conversations at the conference: the need for data-based decision making to inform instruction. Effective assessment, according to O'Dwyer, provides information on what students know and can do. Data from effective assessments are central to informed decision making. O'Dwyer explained that standardized tests do not provide in-time assessment data; results from these tests report summative information that is available only months later, typically after students have already completed the school year. Formative assessments, however, can provide teachers and school leaders with timely, relevant data that can be used to guide instruction, altering the curriculum to meet the needs of a class, groups of students, or individual students. O'Dwyer explained, "When teachers monitor progress using empiri-

cal evidence *during* instruction they can alter course and focus on particular misconceptions held by individual students or groups of students.” That type of assessment, however, requires changes in teaching practices. Assessment must be at the center of the instructional process and school leaders need to prioritize data use in their schools, providing a professional environment that is supportive of evidence-based practice and creating a feasible plan for making data use central to the role of teaching and learning that includes targeted and sustained professional development. O’Dwyer cautioned on several obstacles to implementing this type of assessment, including finding suitable professional development, preparing students to use data to inform their learning, and setting up assessment and data collection procedures that are consistent and useful.

Table groups generated a list of key insights regarding authentic assessment. Central to the discussion was the need for Catholic schools to work collaboratively to recognize and adopt national essential learning standards to guide instruction and assessment practices. These standards would be guided by and help clearly define the objectives of Catholic education, namely, educating the whole child and preparing students for successful, productive citizenship. Assessment modules, including the national outcomes assessments currently used as well as formative assessment models specific to Catholic schools, must be created and utilized nationally to provide transparent data that can be communicated to the larger community and general public. These assessment tools must be adaptable, allowing each school to cater these assessment protocols for their own unique needs and the ability to develop cultures where strategic planning, curriculum, instruction, professional development, and assessment practices are informed by continuous assessment data. Participants noted that a culture of assessment can be achieved only if Catholic school leaders practice transparency by sharing appropriate outcomes data with parents, boards, teachers, pastors, and administrators. This will ensure there is a culture where assessment is valued as a tool for improving learning and instruction, adopting shared assessment language and creating shared attitudes and dispositions within a school community and across Catholic elementary and secondary schools nationally.

Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Boston College president Rev. William P. Leahy, S.J., and Fordham University president Rev. Joseph M. McShane, S.J., discussed ways higher education in-

stitutions can assist Pre-K-12 Catholic schools and how CIT can inform this practice (see Leahy & McShane, 2011, this issue). During the presentation, Fr. Leahy asserted that CIHE should support Catholic schools because “we are all part of the Catholic culture....Whatever we can do to assist schools at any level redounds to the good of all of us in the Catholic community and to wider society.” CIHE can and do support Catholic schools in many ways, but more can be done, including capitalizing on alumni and students across disciplines, not just those in education. Yet, Fr. Leahy cautioned not to overpromise what these partnerships can deliver. Catholic schools need to engage the larger Catholic Church community to ensure long-term sustainability of these schools. Fr. McShane also spoke of the need to “convince the Catholic community of their support of the schools into the future.” Without this support, any plans for improving Catholic schools are for naught. In order to rally this support, a clear, compelling vision for Catholic education must be communicated. Fr. McShane offered several characteristics for this shared vision, including providing a student-centered, nurturing environment offering students support and challenge as well as an “honored and unwavering commitment to academic excellence.” Families are only willing to invest if they know schools hold high expectations and prepare their children for success. The presidents reinforced Fr. Massa’s call for ensuring that Catholic identity and CIT are central to Catholic school culture. Only then will Catholic schools ensure academic excellence and sustained investment from both the Catholic and larger community.

Table groups identified a list of cultural characteristics, practices, and initiatives necessary to sustain school cultures of academic excellence rooted in CIT. Participants admitted that there is a void of CIT in elementary and secondary schools. Clearly defining rigor in the context of the CIT heritage is needed, recognizing that CIT is not just about content but a way of approaching learning that uses tools of discernment and evidence to raise moral and ethical questions across subjects. In order to revisit and renew passion for CIT in Pre-K-12 Catholic schools, teachers need to be trained in the Catholic tradition. Table groups revealed that many CIHE need to do more to advance the conversation of CIT among faculty and students, discussing how this is manifested in CIHE course work and other practical experiences in schools of education. Quality induction and professional development programs are needed for new and continuing teachers to prepare them to engage in curriculum rooted in CIT. Specifically, participants called for more online programs because many Catholic elementary and secondary schools lack proximity to

Catholic higher education institutions.

Religion and Academic Excellence

The first full day concluded with discussion and reflection on religion and academic excellence in a conversation led by Dr. Thomas Groome, chair and professor of the Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College. Specifically, Groome discussed values that distinguish Catholic education and framed his talk on the role of Catholic educators. “The heart of Catholic education is the heart of Catholic educators”: Values that give life “arise from the spirituality of educators.” Catholic schools, therefore, must offer a rich spirituality for educators and students. These schools must be modeled by a commitment to values of the Catholic faith, particularly, Groome explained, in the teachings that God is a “God of justice and compassion, peace and holiness, in bonded partnership with us” and in the idea that God is love, calling us to live in loving community. In fact, in order to “put Catholic spirituality to work” throughout the curriculum, certain faith-based values for the person, life, and the community must become central to all that we do in Catholic schools. For example, we must value life as a gracious gift to be embraced, celebrated, cherished, and defended. Life in the world is sacramental; “we encounter God through the everyday.” Educators, therefore, must teach the whole person and provide formation experiences so that all students become “fully alive in the glory of God” to see God in everyday encounters, and work with others “to make a difference *for life for all*.” To enact these faith-based values, educators must teach students “to think for themselves” and be open to truth, wherever it can be found, and “to practice God’s universal love and compassion for all people.” They must instill a “deep concern for all,” becoming a “person for others” and seeking acts for justice.

Collaboration and Next Steps

The last day of the conference started with table conversations focused on how CIHE must collaborate with one another and with Pre-K-12 Catholic schools and dioceses, producing a list of strategies for implementing innovative initiatives and collaborative partnerships. These served as the basis for the final table conversation, where participants prioritized the list. Participants emphasized the need for collaboration not only between CIHE and Catholic Pre-K-12 schools, but also between Catholic higher education institutions and

diocesan offices to provide coordinated support of and research initiatives on Catholic schools. College presidents need to be more visible in their support of Catholic elementary and secondary schools, investing in resources and staff to help organize support efforts when appropriate. Continued endorsement and increased promotion of the University Consortium for Catholic Education programs (e.g., ACE at the University of Notre Dame, Pacific Alliance for Catholic Education at the University of Portland, Urban Catholic Teachers Corps at Boston College) is needed so more schools and dioceses can utilize these resources. Advancing professional development opportunities that are accessible and meaningful to all professionals, including those with master's degrees, to ensure continuous improvement was also highlighted. Participants addressed the need to prevail upon pastors to be more involved in Catholic schools. Many recommended that seminaries include direct instruction and integrated emphasis on the value of Catholic schools as well as good management, leadership, governance, and human resources practices for the pastor role requiring school management.

Recommendations for Research and Next Steps

The final presentation of the CHEC conference was a panel discussion by four archdiocesan leaders of Catholic schools: Dr. Carol Kostyniak, secretary for Catholic education of the Diocese of Buffalo, New York; Sr. Mary Paul McCaughey, superintendent of the Archdiocese of Chicago; Dr. Mary Grassa O'Neill, secretary of education and superintendent of the Archdiocese of Boston; and Sr. Mary Grace Walsh, deputy superintendent of the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut. These leaders shared their perspectives on academic excellence and the role of Catholic colleges and universities in supporting Pre-K-12 Catholic schools, with a focus on current partnerships that have improved Catholic school programming. All agreed that much was being accomplished due to strong collaborative relationships today. Sr. Mary Grace Walsh, however, challenged CIHE to reach out beyond their local borders, as there are many dioceses, like hers, that lack close proximity to Catholic higher education institutions. All of the speakers discussed the need for *partnership* in any collaboration between elementary and secondary schools and Catholic higher education. These partnerships must recognize the experience, talent, and knowledge of school practitioners, while capitalizing on the expertise of those in higher education to achieve mutually agreed upon goals and objectives. These collaborations must be transparent, involving not only school

leadership, but also teachers, parents, students, and even the parishes when appropriate. Without clearly defined objectives, time lines, and role expectations, these partnerships run the risk of disservice rather than service.

In the final table conversation, groups discussed recommendations for critical and necessary research and identified “must happen” or essential next steps and outcomes representing the conference. Five action steps were identified. The first essential step was the development of national standards for effective Catholic schools that clearly articulate a shared vision and are grounded in mission and CIT, along with explicit assessment models based on these national standards of excellence. Working collaboratively with universities and diocesan offices, the assessment of these standards should be based on benchmarked data and encourage a culture of data collection and transparency. Assessment protocols should be adaptable, so each school can use these tools for its own needs. The second “must happen” next step prioritized by participants was the need for research studies linking CIT with academic excellence, providing needed evidence on the value added by Catholic identity at Catholic schools, which distinguishes them from charter and other public schools. Third, participants called for CIHE with centers for Catholic education to commit to developing research topics with local dioceses, reporting and publishing that research so that superintendents can disseminate findings. These national standards, assessment data, and research evidence on Catholic education can form the basis for a needed national marketing campaign for Catholic schools, the fourth recommended action step. This campaign would help mobilize those within and outside the Catholic community, generating the needed support for Catholic schools that presidents Leahy and McShane called for. We need to be a part of the national conversation on education and we need to engage and inform the larger community about the purpose and work of Catholic schools. Clearly communicating research findings and assessment data is essential to inform and support collaboration efforts across elementary and secondary schools, among dioceses, and with CIHE. Participants, therefore, called for a final recommendation: the need to establish a Catholic education resource cloud, or online, centralized, interactive, and mission-driven database that contains information, resources, research, and best practice guidelines. This resource could help schools and partnerships across the country to adapt and build upon existing programs and best practices rather than duplicating work that has already been done.

Follow-up Actions

Several initiatives are in process as a result of the action steps identified at the conference. First, as reviewed above, there was a clear consensus that national standards of excellence that are grounded in CIT are needed to ensure that academic excellence and essential characteristics are sustained in Catholic schools. This recommendation was also voiced at the second CHEC conference at Loyola University Chicago and gained momentum with this third CHEC conference. Specifically, the conference participants voiced the conviction that collectively endorsed national standards supported and advocated by the bishops and other national leaders offer the opportunity for the Catholic community to clarify the “brand” of “Catholic school”; provide a framework to enhance public policy and advocacy efforts; serve as a basis for accreditation; provide a link to Catholic higher education professional development and leadership programs; and increase funders’ confidence in school capacity for sustainable improvement. Since the second CHEC conference, a national task force of Catholic school educators and supporters, in communication with the NCEA, has been drafting the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, which will provide a national articulation of defining characteristics and performance benchmarks. The first draft was reviewed by participants at the CACE annual conference in October 2010. Based on that feedback, a second draft was prepared and presented for review at the NCEA annual convention in April 2011. The task force is currently working on another round of revisions based on feedback from NCEA and will then invite selected experts, bishops, pastors, leaders in Catholic education, and other key stakeholders to provide a final round of feedback. A fully vetted and revised document will be published in early 2012.

Participants appealed for greater collaboration to share innovative practices that are data based and will contribute to research and to the national conversation. In response to this recommendation, the Roche Center for Catholic Education and the CACE department of NCEA are collaborating to create a new Innovations Institute for Catholic Education. The purpose of the institute is to create a cyclical forum focused on essential topics for the study, adoption, and implementation of innovative and effective applied models that foster excellence and secure vitality in 21st-century Catholic schools. The institute is still in the development phase, but will operate on a 3-year cycle. In this cyclical process, topics will be determined and selected experts will research and provide evidence-based programs for each institute. Those will form the

basis for a forum where selected school leadership and institute staff teams will coach and instruct as they guide school leadership teams to prepare to adopt and implement a major innovation in their school. Continuous assessments of the adoption of the innovative programming will be presented and shared at NCEA and CACE meetings and published in multiple venues.

In addition, there was a call specifically to universities with centers for Catholic education to commit to developing research topics with local dioceses to ensure that studies are meaningful, relevant, and communicated. In response, several centers have embarked on partnerships for research. For example, the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College initiated an applied research-based writing instruction collaborative project for all teachers in an area Catholic elementary school led by Dr. Maria Brisk of the Lynch School of Education. The purpose of the program is to establish and implement a writing and reading program for English language learners that is based on the latest research on best practices as well as the needs of the school community, combining theory with practice in meaningful ways to improve learning outcomes for all students. The project will prepare teachers to provide writing instruction for all learners across content areas. Throughout the program, ongoing assessment of the outcomes will be measured and communicated so all Catholic schools can learn from the project.

Participants also voiced the need for a national advertising campaign to help raise awareness about Catholic schools. At the most basic level it will assist with the recruitment of students, but more importantly it will ensure that Catholic schools become a part of the national conversation, helping policy makers and other constituents understand our mission to educate the soul of a nation and the outstanding value and work of Catholic schools. The Roche Center is currently working with graduate students from the Carroll School of Management at Boston College to investigate and evaluate possible approaches in collaboration with NCEA and other centers for Catholic education at CIHE to begin the campaign in the spring of 2012.

Conclusion

Participants in this third CHEC conference worked together to reflect critically upon academic excellence in Catholic schools, identifying key recommendations to help improve and sustain academic quality in Catholic elementary and secondary schools. With these recommendations, the CHEC conference attendees are seeking to influence the thinking of the critical decision makers

who directly influence the stability and academic content of Catholic schools. As Fr. McShane asserted, we need to think globally, creating a general vision of Catholic education, but act locally, catering to the specific needs of local communities. Within the existing structure of the Church, sanctioned national oversight of these schools is not likely, but the Catholic collective conscience can certainly be formed and reinforced in support of these schools. The Catholic community at large can be socially reconstructed to bring dioceses together, including bishops and local pastors, educating the Catholic community about what bishops and local parish communities can do to adopt national standards of excellence for parishes and schools, secure ongoing improvement and vitality, and establish a place in the national conversation. Each community is unique, and Catholic schools must serve those differences while ensuring the universal mission and essential characteristics of Catholic education are present. Embracing these national standards of excellence will help make certain Catholic elementary and secondary schools are imbued with authentic Catholic identity and are schools of academic excellence.

Educating the nation and our local larger community is crucial to the sustainability of Pre-K-12 Catholic schools. Schools and departments of education at CIHE, policy makers, politicians, researchers, philanthropists, and other stakeholders need to know more about the successful outcomes and the work of Catholic schools and share this knowledge with their constituencies. All stakeholders should commit to share academic and financial data with parish and school communities and the general public to encourage greater collaboration and endorsement for Catholic schools. This collaboration must occur between leaders and practitioners in all education sectors and across faculties at CIHE, especially in schools and departments of education. Our CIHE schools of education and centers of Catholic education must take the lead and include Catholic schools and CIT in America in their “obligatory conversations” as they prepare the future leaders in education. All graduates of these schools should know and understand the importance of all sectors of education locally, nationally, and internationally.

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