

COVID-19 and Catholic Schools

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## Navigating the Uncharted Pandemic Waters: An Examination of the Role of the Catholic School Superintendency in Response to COVID-19

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*The management of multiple dilemmas became a norm overnight for Catholic school superintendents navigating the COVID-19 pandemic as they quickly moved to making decisions that would have long-term effects on the system of schools they led. This paper attempts to make sense of the new educational dilemmas that have confronted Catholic school superintendents during these past several months. Utilizing the 2019 framework for navigating and managing professional dilemmas in educational leadership (Spillane & Lowenhaupt), we explore educational dilemmas Catholic school superintendents face during this pandemic. We show in this paper that Catholic school superintendents have drawn on their professional expertise and tailored their responses to these COVID-19 dilemmas in illustrative and instructive ways for considering how the U.S. Catholic school system may better respond as the pandemic continues.*

### Keywords

Superintendency, Leadership, Coronavirus, Dilemmas

Over the course of two and a half weeks in spring 2020, stay-at-home orders went into effect across the United States due to the coronavirus (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). The management of multiple dilemmas became a norm overnight for Catholic school superintendents who quickly had to move to making decisions that would have long-term effects on the system of schools they led. This paper attempts to make sense of the new educational dilemmas that have confronted Catholic school superintendents during these past several months. Though educational dilemmas, as defined by Cuban (2001), are “messy, complicated, and conflict-filled situations that re-

quire undesirable choices between competing, highly prized values that cannot be simultaneously or fully satisfied.” (p. 10), we show in this paper that Catholic school superintendents have drawn on their professional expertise and tailored their responses to these COVID-19 dilemmas in illustrative and instructive ways for considering how the U.S. Catholic school system may better respond as the pandemic continues.

We begin this paper by providing an overview of the Catholic school superintendency and the roles and responsibilities Catholic school superintendents are expected to fulfill. We then introduce a framework for navigating and managing professional dilemmas in educational leadership (Spillane & Lowenhaupt, 2019), extrapolating from this framework three central dilemmas most resonant with the roles and responsibilities Catholic school superintendents have had to prioritize during this current crisis. We then discuss each of those three dilemmas in detail, drawing on the experiences of Catholic school superintendents from across the country in order to demonstrate the challenges that come with navigating these dilemmas and to explain how (arch)dioceses can respond in innovative and adaptive ways to this current system crisis.

### **The Catholic School Superintendency and Confronting Dilemmas**

It should be noted that the title “superintendent” as well as the office of the “superintendency” can be counted among the many Catholic contributions to the history and development of educational leadership in the United States. Like many titles and terms popular in modern English, the term superintendent has its roots in the Medieval Latin infinitive *superintendere*, meaning to concentrate strongly or in a focused fashion. The superintendent, that is, the one who is sharply focused over a variety of issues, is thus an overseer of sorts, managing diverse responsibilities and complex needs. In sixteenth-century Catholicism, this was the preferred title for clergy who supervised local churches within a certain geographical area (Jeffers, 1991).

Catholic school superintendents serve according to the mandate of the bishop and how each individual bishop defines the role of the superintendent (Ouellette, 1990), or as Vanders (2000) stated, “The precise duties of the office are not so clearly defined as to make the work of . . . the superintendent always the same” (p. 2). Superintendents in the early years of the 20th century were “occupied primarily with organizing a system (administration), standardizing the curriculum (curriculum) and improving teacher education (teachers)” (Augustine, 1996, p. 49). Dixon (1987) identified six major areas of

pressure on the Catholic school superintendency: the financing of schools, the governance of the school system, personnel issues, pastor-related problems, legal issues, and the closure or consolidating of Catholic schools. These major areas of pressure persist today, with the heightened pressure of foraging a system forward during a time of pandemic. But Vanders' (2000) review of the literature noted that,

Only seven major research studies have been conducted on the Catholic school superintendency: Vehr (1924) on the administrative functions of the diocesan superintendency, Voelker (1935) on the historical development and functional status of the diocesan superintendent's office, Wilson (1953) on the structure of the diocesan superintendency, Ward (1957) on patterns of administration in the diocesan school system, DeWalt (1965) on the status and functions, and of the diocesan superintendency, Dixon (1987) on a national profile of the Catholic school superintendent, and Ford (1989) on the evaluation procedures of Catholic school superintendents. (pg. 5)

Since 2000, minimal research, outside of Vanders' investigation of motivation and job satisfaction of Catholic school superintendents, has occurred indicating a need for additional research on this role.

Most Catholic school research of the past twenty years, rather, has tended to emphasize the problems and challenges facing the entire system of schools in the United States (e.g., Grace & O'Keefe, 2007), the new school governance models that are being developed to enhance school operational vitality (e.g., FADICA, 2015, 2020), or the relative effectiveness of individual schools or school models (e.g., Freeman & Berends, 2016; Weitzel-O'Neill et al., 2019). Subsequently, (arch)diocesan school systems have tended to accept that the Catholic superintendency should help advise and oversee a portfolio of schools but not be actively invested in the day-to-day management of those schools (Dosen & Rieckhoff, 2016). But this has left a gap in what superintendents can draw on in order to take a research-informed perspective about how to meet their responsibilities while responding to new crises that develop.

In addition, even before the current pandemic necessitated school system leaders to rethink what schooling should look like, Catholic school superintendents were confronting a world in which declining enrollment and increasing school closure trends had continued steadily (McDonald & Schultz,

2019) leaving their work in constant uncertainty. Catholic school systems have had an increasingly difficult time figuring out how to maintain operational vitality while reconfiguring the school system to better achieve their mission. As discussed in Neumerski and Cohen's (2019) analysis of systemic change across school systems, an illustrative archdiocesan system "has built tremendous flexibility into its model as a means of adapting to the new environment with which it must work. It remains to be seen if the new flexibility will be enough, or if school enrollment will continue to decline" (p. 904). Catholic school superintendents have been told *what to do* to change systems, but lacking the kind of research that would better inform their decision-making, Catholic school superintendents do not have much to refer to other than their own experiences when considering *how to do it*.

If the above brief literature review of the Catholic school superintendency establishes the position as a complex role, the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the new intensification faced by decision-makers across (arch)diocesan school systems. It has been established that Catholic school superintendents are regularly positioned at busy intersections of power during normal operational times. But the new pandemic and associated economic crises have increasingly highlighted the way Catholic school superintendents are asked to meet finance, governance, legal, personnel, school oversight, community and parent engagement, and institutional Church responsibilities simultaneously and without recourse to a knowledge base that can inform them about how to manage these responsibilities effectively.

Therefore, the best sources for understanding the challenges confronting the Catholic school superintendency are Catholic school superintendents making sense of these challenges in their sites of practice. The rest of this paper reflects recent work we have done in monitoring Catholic (arch)diocesan responses to the COVID-19 pandemic via news outlets and in dialogue with superintendents across the United States. As mentioned above, we detail in this paper the professional dilemmas confronting Catholic school superintendents amid the current pandemic and take stock of the ways these leaders have called forth innovative and adaptive responses. Ultimately, since this paper seeks both to summarize innovative responses to dilemmas and to produce knowledge that could effectively guide other Catholic school superintendents navigating similar dilemmas, we draw on Spillane and Lowenhaupt's (2019) framework for making sense of the educational dilemmas that arise in specific, concrete sites of practice.

In their in-depth research into the principalship, Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019) sought to better understand how school leaders manage dilem-

mas that have no clear answers and develop the practical wisdom necessary to navigate the recurrence or emergence of dilemmas over the professional lifespan. They argue this framework, broken into a set of eleven categories of dilemmas organized by the kinds of questions confronting leaders, is best used when countering the “problem-solving mentality that tends to drive much of the work of educators and, indeed, the general culture in which we live. We are often motivated to jump headlong into implementing solutions for problems without acknowledging the unresolvable trade-offs and conflicting values” (p. 22). We found this framework to be particularly helpful in amplifying the voices of Catholic school practitioners responding to this current crisis given that this pandemic is forcing Catholic school system-level leaders to make decisions without much guidance. In particular, we found three of Spillane & Lowenhaupt (2019)’s eleven categories of dilemmas to be particularly salient: the diplomacy dilemma, the responsibility dilemma, and the buffering-bridging dilemma.

In the remaining sections of this paper, we identify key challenges rising to the surface of the Catholic school superintendency amid the pandemic response aligned to each of these three dilemmas. The current pandemic is, unsurprisingly, causing Catholic school superintendents to re-characterize what success looks like as system-level leaders of relatively decentralized school systems as they navigate these three primary sets of dilemmas. Through the identification, categorization, and analysis of the innovations and adaptations made by Catholic school superintendents in response to these new pandemic dilemmas, we contribute additional evidence of the practical/pragmatic wisdom emerging from the Catholic school superintendency. This practical wisdom is intended to help other Catholic school superintendents confront COVID-19 related dilemmas and better enact Catholic education in their (arch)diocese.

### **The Diplomacy Dilemma**

How do you make decisions when there are multiple groups of people asking you to prepare a school system for change as a result of the pandemic, but the things those groups are asking you to do are at odds? Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019) define the diplomacy dilemma as “the challenge of responding to some stakeholders without alienating others” (p. 41). Catholic school leaders are typically forced into making decisions where it is impossible to meet all of the demands placed on them by stakeholder groups as diverse as students, parents, faculty, (arch)diocesan leadership, and external



philanthropic organizations. Now in this pandemic, parents are demanding that schools be organized to provide the best and safest possible learning environments for their children while diocesan and external organizations are asking leaders to prepare for doing things differently with fewer resources. How does one lead a system of Catholic schools taking account of each stakeholder group's demands without spreading conflict among groups? For this section, we focus on three challenges related to the diplomacy dilemma surrounding: mission, policy reinforcement, and planning.

### *Challenges*

As established at the beginning of this article, Catholic school superintendents exist in a space that is unique among systems-level school leaders in the United States. As Dosen and Rieckhoff (2016) describe the role in their analysis of the organization of Catholic school leadership structures,

The Catholic superintendent's role is tending the big picture. The day-in, day-out running of Catholic schools and their supervision is left to individual principals and their administrative teams in those schools that have a leadership team. Thus, while the superintendent is responsible for vision and coordination, the individual principal has responsibility and authority to administer the individual school in ways that best meet the needs of the particular situation. (p. 41)

This quotation highlights the fundamental tension of the Catholic superintendent: ensuring that mission is lived out across school communities by engaging stakeholders at multiple levels while providing enough space for individual schools to make their own decisions consistent with their school's identity, charism, and governance structure.

But this engagement plays out more as policy reinforcement and consultation rather than policy creation and holding schools accountable. While superintendents do often have to make decisions about which schools remain operationally viable, they often don't have the power to effect the kind of change to transform a single school from at-risk to sustainable. One of the reasons for this constraint is that contemporary Catholic school superintendents lead a portfolio of schools within a system that, according to Peurach et al. (2019), functions in a market-driven capacity, in which it is assumed positive outcomes can happen by "reducing central office control, increasing school autonomy, and introducing market competition will improve quality

and reduce disparities by stimulating school-level entrepreneurship and innovation responsive to families, communities, and broader policy pressures” (p. 831). The market-driven constraint on many Catholic school superintendents, though emphasized by national Catholic education leaders as a key factor in Catholic schools adjusting more quickly to the pandemic than public school counterparts (Baxter, 2020), can negatively impact a superintendent’s ability to establish universal response protocols.

Superintendents are being asked to create plans for issues related to school reopening and ongoing pandemic management; how to manage parents that either no longer can or don’t feel able to pay full tuition for distance learning or any education; how to design new distance/at-home teaching and learning environments that meet all students’ needs across socioeconomically and racially diverse communities, some who need more child care or technological support than others; how to close schools and facilitate grade reductions so that the most seats can stay open for the most number of students; how to communicate with families about the health and safety of students and what reopening or not will mean for those children (Porter-Magee, 2020; Uhl, 2020).

Creating a plan to address each of these complex yet technical challenges would allow a Catholic school leader to successfully prepare an entire school community to meet the needs of as many stakeholder groups as is reasonably possible. Public school districts and state departments of education are right now engaging in the kind of planning designed to maximize each group’s demands (Bailey & Hess, 2020). But Catholic school superintendents, by design and by function, have fewer powers to enact such plans strategically and systemically. The diplomacy dilemma for Catholic school superintendents is clear: there aren’t enough powers within the Catholic school superintendency to meet all groups’ demands during this crisis so which group should be addressed first using this limited power?

### *Innovation and Adaptations*

The emphasis in the Catholic school superintendent response to the diplomacy dilemma has been to find a way to communicate to all stakeholder groups within (arch)diocesan communities that Catholic schools are still functioning and will do what it takes to create high quality educational experiences. Similar to what a group of leading Catholic school advocates have done with articulating the value proposition of Catholic education during this pandemic (Donoghue et al., 2020), Catholic school superintendents



are finding that the best way to meet the demands of all stakeholders is to let them know how valued they are and that the work of the central office is to increase school quality as much as possible.

The first thing that Catholic school superintendents have done to use their power to address the diplomacy dilemma is to bring people together from within the Catholic school community in their (arch)diocese and to maintain frequent communication. The impetus behind this response, adapting to the social distancing and physical distancing imposed by closed school buildings or reduced access into buildings, is to let families know that the Catholic school communities still exist despite the distance and that all members of the community are suffering through these crises together. Concretely, Catholic school superintendents have increased the number of newsletters and videos they have posted on social media or enhanced the way they communicate with different school families. Some have started to use Facebook live, others have made sure to directly contact families via individual phone calls or e-mail communications. Even a handful of check-ins a day with a sample of families from across school communities have allowed the Catholic school superintendents with whom we've worked to check in on the welfare of their communities.

The second thing that Catholic school superintendents have done is to re-emphasize the quality, particularly as it relates to digital learning. Though there is not yet a unified resource for Catholic school educators to follow (Greeley Center, 2020), there are still professional standards that can help leaders plan for what schools should look like no matter the condition (Weitzel-O'Neill et al., 2019). Catholic school superintendents are investigating the best practices for distance learning, blended learning, and technology/software acquisition in order to use their consultative power to help individual schools create individualized plans for the new kinds of teaching and learning demands. Freeman and Berends (2016) and Wodan (2020) have shown the Catholic school effect/advantage can still be created when the right capacity is built into a school system. Catholic school superintendents are doing what they can to ensure that as schools develop plans for bringing students back to some form of physical school in the 2020-2021 academic year, the value proposition that parents believe to be present in Catholic schools (FADICA & NCEA, 2018) will not be diminished.

Catholic school leaders are called, along with all members of the Church, to build an education system marked by, among other things, subsidiarity, ac-

cessibility, charity, justice, and a spirit of communion and cooperation (Miller, 2007). Responses of Catholic school superintendents to the diplomacy dilemma show us that it is within the powers of the Catholic school superintendent to create open lines of communication with parent groups about what the value of a Catholic education is and to let all families know that the real value of being part of a Catholic school community is being known and loved. This is what Bishop Robert McElroy (2019) has written about as the “spirit of synodality” that is co-responsible, missionary, and participatory. In addition, Catholic school superintendents can design the educational work of their school offices to build capacity in light of what we know high-quality Catholic education can look like (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012). Though doing this work will not allow Catholic school superintendents to adequately meet all demands for fiscal responsibility at all schools, it will allow everyone who participates in the system to know that the system is working toward specific, concrete educational goals and that they as stakeholders have a role to play in the system continuing.

### **The Responsibility Dilemma**

“Managing the multiplication of professional responsibilities while also dealing with a deep sense of being ultimately responsible for the success or failure of everything” that goes on within the system of schools “is one of the most pressing and enduring challenges” surfacing the responsibility dilemma (Spillane & Lowenhaupt, 2019, pg. 23). Catholic school superintendents recognize they can’t do it all, and often have a handful of associates or assistants to support schools, but similar to principals they feel a need to have a hand in everything because it is they who are ultimately responsible (Spillane & Lowenhaupt, 2019). For this section, we focus on three challenges related to the responsibility dilemma surrounding: human resources, finances, and legislation.

### *Challenges*

A major responsibility dilemma in the area of human resources confronted superintendents almost immediately upon the suspension of face-to-face schooling and working: What to do with hourly employees? Typically, such workers are not paid unless they work, but such a response seemed cruel and unfeeling given the overall national and international circumstances. Feelings of solidarity aside, superintendents realized funds must come from somewhere and the suspension of regular income from parishes left dioceses

and schools struggling to pay hourly workers even though they might have concluded they should.

The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), a federal loan initiative managed by the Small Business Association, provided an opportunity for small businesses such as schools and parishes and even dioceses, to keep their workers on the payroll (U.S. Small Business Association, 2020). While some dioceses initially were slow to apply out of fear of unnecessary church-state entanglements, the PPP has been an effective bridge mechanism for many church-related institutions to provide an ongoing salary for hourly workers for a limited amount of time. The most recent available data suggest that more than 12,000 Catholic churches in the U.S. applied for PPP loans and 9,000 received them (Capatides, 2020). Superintendents were keenly aware of the struggles faced by many hourly employees, both at schools and in the central office, knowing that the salaries in question supported housing, food, medical care, and even tuition. Laying off or furloughing such employees without pay was rightly viewed as a highly undesirable outcome to be avoided as much as possible, hence making the PPP a viable and welcome choice.

The financial crunch, however, is far from over and may be just beginning. Another responsibility dilemma facing superintendents concerns finances. Many parents remain unemployed. Parish income from weekly offerings, summer festivals, social events, and endowments is at historic lows. Parish support for schools will be radically impacted, as will the ability of many parents to pay tuition. Fall enrollment declines are likely and, depending on the severity of those declines, adjustments to school personnel may be needed. Simultaneously, however, new post-pandemic models of education are being discussed that seem to require more classroom space for social distancing, smaller class sizes, smaller teacher-to-student ratios in any given setting, and perhaps the addition of more staff rather than less (WKRN Web Staff, 2020; Blad, 2020). In short, returning to school in the post-pandemic era appears to require more investment of resources, not less. In fact, this possibility surfaced in a telephone call with President Trump on Saturday, April 25, 2020, where both Timothy Cardinal Dolan, the Archbishop of New York and Sean Cardinal O'Malley, the Archbishop of Boston, pressed the president for ongoing support in the area of tuition assistance for families. Dolan particularly remarked that "we are worried about September" and the president was quick to respond that more aide was coming (White, 2020). Presidential politics aside, all educational and church leaders fulfill their responsibilities by closing monitoring federal and state legislative developments during these times.

In addition to monitoring federal and state legislation, vigilance and advocacy for resources, and accessing allocated funds became a third responsibility dilemma for superintendents. To address the impact that COVID-19 has had on elementary and secondary schools across the United States, Congress set aside approximately \$13.2 billion of the \$30.75 billion allotted to the Education Stabilization Fund through the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER Fund) (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2020). The Department of Education awarded these grants to state educational agencies (SEAs) for the purpose of providing local educational agencies (LEAs) with emergency relief funds. Questions quickly arose for superintendents regarding accessing these emergency relief funds including such things as: What formula would be used to determine the level of funding that was going to be provided? What to do if the SEA disagreed with federal guidance? What if LEAs were not collaborative when Catholic schools requested use of allocated funds? As Congress passed the CARES Act ESSER Fund, many superintendents found themselves in a greater legislative advocacy role than ever before. Superintendents expeditiously moved into supporting lobbying efforts, ranging from supporting the launch of statewide petitions to governors regarding fund allocation (Catholic Schools Office: Archdiocese of Boston, 2020), to attending the above mentioned phone call with the President of the United State where over 600 Catholic educators were present to advocate for greater financial support for the faith-based schools (Malone, 2020). This advocacy work has been necessary leading up to the passage of the CARES Act, and still today, as evident by the actions of those in opposition to non-public schools receiving such funding. In the ramp up to the authorization and funding of the CARES Act, Senator Patty Murray, Ranking Member on the Committee for Health, Education, Labor and Pensions in the U.S. Senate, argued that equitable services not be provided for students in non-public schools or at least that a waiver be provided in law to grant discretion on the matter (CAPE, 2020). This view did not prevail in the final passage, largely because of the advocacy of the non-public school community and its vocal and thoughtful representatives.

A related legislative challenge on this same topic surfaced on May 12, 2020 when the State Superintendent of Instruction in Indiana officially rejected the guidance provided by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and its leader, Secretary Betsy DeVos, regarding the implementation of the CARES Act, specifically pertaining to the participation of non-public

schools and how their proportionate share of funds would be calculated and used to support student services (Fittes, 2020). In a historically unprecedented departure from standard operating procedure, established past practice, and in the view of many, the spirit of the law itself, McCormick directed officials at the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) to ignore the federal guidance (Heinnefeld, 2020). It should be noted that while several other national educational organizations, teachers' unions, and state departments requested clarification of said guidance and even its reversal, McCormick is the first person openly defying the federal guidance, a position which will likely result in other state leaders doing the same. The situation in Indiana is particularly challenging to its diocesan superintendents, whose students and families could lose approximately \$10 million in educational support services, tutoring, counseling, technology resources, and even school sanitation costs if McCormick's directive goes unaddressed (Taylor, 2020). Superintendents play a key role managing this new legislation and feel the weight of legislative advocacy as they are being thrust into the political arena to fight for every dollar during a most economically distressing time.

### *Innovations and Adaptations*

To navigate these responsibility dilemmas, Catholic school superintendents, and educators and families in their (arch)dioceses have had to innovate and adapt quickly to these human resource, financial, and legislative challenges. Zoom, Skype, Facebook Portal, Google Hangouts, and other conferencing applications quickly became the quotidian tools for leaders. Daily staff meetings for chancery personnel or school faculties were the norm, often taking the form of a briefing or emergency update. Task forces or committees were organized to divide labor, share responsibility, and rapidly address the dynamic and dangerous situation at hand. While such organizational practices are common in crisis management, Catholic leaders benefit from the call to community, to share such suffering, and to comfort and encourage one another with the assurances of a shared faith. Whatever the concern—health, safety, personnel, finances, facilities, or instructional practices—the oft-repeated secular claim of “being in this together” takes on a theological overtone in Catholic communities such as schools, parishes, and diocesan offices because of faith conviction that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, loved children of the same God, united as one human family by God's design and grace. At the end of a day filled with video conferencing and Zoom calls, one might very well be exhausted from the sheer intensity of it all. At week's end,

eyes may roll and heads shake at the suggestion of a weekend call, but truth be told, the summons to committee work, a task force, or a staff meeting is simply another form of a call into community and into a deeper experience of whom God has created us to be, i.e., eternally and irreversibly in union and communion with one another.

This solidarity and community orientation makes some administrative actions required by the pandemic especially regrettable and personally painful. Among such actions, reported by many Catholic schools, dioceses, and universities include salary reductions of varying percentages, draconian cuts to non-essential services and purchases, severely curtailed travel, and even suspension of matching contributions to retirement funds. Such adaptations to the human resources and financial challenges discussed, while arguably needed in the short term to guarantee institutional survival, still deliver painful blows to the texture of the community and the unity of its people.

Regrettably, and likely irrevocably, some leaders have already concluded that no innovations or adaptations will suffice to successfully maintain school operations moving forward and closures for the 2020-2021 school year have been announced (Klein, 2020; Mayrand, 2020). Caution is advised to leaders, parents, teachers, and readers regarding the simple and typical Google search for closed Catholic schools. As many schools used the term “closed” to indicate the suspension of face-to-face on campus operations for the 2019-2020 school year, such searches can yield inflated results. One recent story reporting that an archdiocese planned to close 93 schools was referring to, of course, its plan for the pandemic and its movement to online instruction, and not its intention to permanently close 93 Catholic schools (Taylor, 2020).

Many dioceses have used the federal tax filing deadline of April 15 every year for their own contract renewals for teachers and principals, or even the end of the school year. With the uncertainty created this year, a “closure clause” in some contracts has been implemented as a safeguard should the school not have sufficient enrollment to open for the next school year (Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 2020). Whether or not this adaptation of a closure clause will be exercised will most likely depend on fall enrollments.

Thus, the responsibility challenges facing the church, its schools, leaders, parents, and students are many and varied. Innovations and adaptations to the responsibility dilemmas related to human resources, finances, and legislation continue to unfold and responsive action is being taken in a manner trying to uphold the values of community and unity, which are core



to Catholic education.

### *The Buffering/Bridging Dilemma*

The buffering/bridging dilemma draws from the experience that it is necessary to draw boundaries around schools to create a safe learning environment while simultaneously building bridges to the community (Spillane & Lowenhaupt, 2019). In this time of the pandemic, when such boundaries are often erased as schooling now enters into homes via virtual platforms, and an entire system adopts a new instructional approach, new buffering/bridging dilemmas arise that can distract from learning. For this section, we focus on the responses to three specific buffering/bridging challenges surrounding digital security, supporting parents, and providing for the spiritual and overall mental health needs of students and families.

### *Challenges*

Virtual engagement and learning experiences are exploding in number during the crisis, as millions of students, teachers, principals, superintendents, and as much as the workforce as possible migrate to online support systems, including new learning management systems. While virtual Catholic schools of some type have been in existence for many years, the planning behind such efforts were many years in the making and implemented thoughtfully and strategically, neither quickly nor in the emergency fashion dictated by recent events (Kelly, 2002). In its best form, online or virtual learning is planned and structured to be so from the outset. Learning objectives, course materials, activities, readings, skills, and even assessments are designed with the virtual learning experience in mind and with consideration of the virtual learner. The abrupt and forced virtual learning experiences demanded of both students and teachers is, therefore, better characterized as emergency learning, for it lacked the intentionality of a true distance learning situation (Hodges, et. al., 2020). Moving instruction to an online format involves much more thought and reconsideration than simply digitizing physical materials, as millions of students and teachers have recently discovered (Craig, 2020).

With such emergency learning came the speedy adoption of virtual learning platforms for instructional purposes. Many Catholic educators were new to utilizing these platforms in daily life, let alone new to utilizing such platforms as Zoom, Google Hangout, for classroom instruction. And the rush to such video conferencing adoption was significant, as evident in the spike of users in one platform, Zoom, which went from 10 million daily us-

ers in December, 2019, to 300 million daily users in April, 2020. As teachers incorporated these platforms into the classroom, establishing boundaries that would keep these remote learning environments safe emerged as a challenge within the buffering/bridging dilemma. How do leaders and teachers keep their students safe in the virtual world? How do educators manage privacy as virtual learning occurs in homes? These questions arose for superintendents as video conferencing was adopted to simulate in-person teaching. As many schools began using videoconferencing for live instruction, the thought of establishing boundaries to keep unwanted individuals out needed to be considered. These types of cyberattacks where an outside individual hijacks a videoconference created a digital insecurity for teachers, parents, and students (Lorenz, 2020). Providers quickly shared information on how to prevent such attacks which included instruction on how to utilize the technology to prevent unwanted users (i.e. use a meeting password, or use waiting room features) (Aten, 2020). Educating leaders, teachers, and parents to adopt the necessary security measures to avoid such cyberattacks took time (Warren, 2020). Superintendents had to buffer/bridge this dilemma, as they required schools to move to virtual learning, while simultaneously instructing leaders and teachers how to keep the virtual world safe.

As schooling transitioned into homes, creating a safe learning environment for students, also meant being responsive to the needs of families during this time. With unprecedented job loss for some, wage cuts or reduction in hours for others, compiled with school milk/lunch programs suspended, many families faced food shortages and insecurity. With the uncertainty of jobs returning, and a potential second wave of the virus in the fall, a surge of homelessness looms in many states, as parents will be unable to make rent or mortgage payments (Mosiman, 2020). Parents who remained employed and were required to work remotely faced stressful home environments, juggled job demands while having to home-school their children. The American Psychological Association recently published results of a "Stress in America" survey and found the stress level reported by parents averaged more than 20 percent higher than that reported by adults without children, with 7 of 10 parents with children noting managing their child's online learning is stressful (Perry, 2020). As many parents found themselves thrust into the role of teacher or at least co-instructor with a virtual teacher, they found their workload quickly doubled. Teachers who themselves are parents of school-aged children find themselves in a nearly impossible situation, juggling competing demands. Parents of children with special needs face even greater

lack of support as schools are closed, and services such as occupational, physical, or applied behavior analysis therapy suspended due to the need for social distancing. Furthermore, models currently being proffered for the start to the new school year do not seem to take into account this competing set of demands on teachers and in particular on teacher-parents. For example, with half-day models or a rotating schedule of attendance, will teachers then be teaching both online classes and in-person classes? When students are not in school for a half-day or when their rotating schedule dictates, who will care for them if parents are working? It seems unlikely that many school budgets will permit hiring more teachers to support such a schedule, and even less likely that schools can accommodate current enrollment levels, full attendance, and maintain the physical distancing required prior to a vaccine. These considerations are increasingly frustrating, causing much anxiety and uncertainty across our educational communities. As Americans report significant and sustained increases in depression and anxiety, identifying these mental health needs is challenging in the current environment, with stay-at-home orders and social distancing (Holland, 2020). Educational and church leaders such as superintendents, principals, pastors, and pastoral ministers are not only concerned about the social and emotional needs of students and children, but also with the spiritual and overall mental health needs of the adult community.

Catholic leaders all over the world are increasingly sensitive to the specific spiritual needs and hunger of the faithful as well as to their overall mental health needs (Dachs, 2020). The absence of community liturgical prayer, the unavailability of the sacraments, the disruption to daily family routines and rituals, and the general sense of fear surrounding physical closeness to others have all contributed to a widespread malaise and acedia, creating another buffering-bridging challenge for superintendents. While families may indeed be blessed in many ways by the opportunities created by stay-at-home orders, spiritual nourishment opportunities are having to be navigated by families in a manner that is more than simply showing up to church. Gathering for virtual masses, or morning prayer, means the home has become the center of worship for families who intentionally are taking the time from their stressful days to come together in prayer.

#### *Innovations and Adaptations*

Despite these bridging/buffering challenges numerous Catholic school superintendents responded swiftly and innovatively to address these issues. This ability to adapt provided the necessary guidance to support families and children during this time of great stress and uncertainty. As a

Catholic community, we are called to care for the least among us, and show compassion to all of our brothers and sisters. Actions of superintendents, educators, and entire school communities demonstrated how coming together to support one another critical.

Communication to educators and parents became a priority for superintendents as coronavirus became a reality, “facing pressure from parents, conflicting messages from experts and initial silence from the federal government, superintendents began making their own decisions to close” (Cristakis, 2020). Superintendents quickly communicated the closure and how families would work with leaders and teachers to educate their child(ren) at home. Such communications took the form of weekly newsletters, updating of diocesan websites to include a COV-19 resource page, and social media outlets provided timely updates. Communications provided parents instruction on what would be taught, and on such things as how children would be kept safe in the virtual world. Diocesan leaders further bridged the digital security challenges by revising and updating their technology policies and approaches, in large part because previous policies considered electronic communications between teachers and students as an ancillary activity that one would engage in only episodically and for a specific, limited need rather than as an essential and indispensable daily occurrence (Catholic Schools Office, Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, 2020). Superintendents further navigated the digital security challenges by instructing teachers and parents on how to establish expectations and manners of communications so students know what is normal and not normal behavior online. With the desire to maintain a “classroom environment” in the virtual space, norms included such things as the video needs to remain on, eye contact should be maintained, to mute your microphone when not talking. This establishment of virtual learning operating norms sought greater student engagement and awareness of security matters. As schools look to the fall, plans for reopening will likely be communicated in a similar manner utilizing multiple platforms and outlets to ensure families have the necessary information for a healthy, safe return to school.

The COVID-19 pandemic, has created a “shadow pandemic” as many families and children face hunger due to job loss. Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops’ international relief and development agency, recently launched an effort to draw awareness to the global hunger needs, and those here in the U.S. as demand at food banks has skyrocketed (Martin, 2020). Feeding hungry families who are struggling financially has been a bridge superintendents have had to cross, doing as Christ said, “When I was hungry,

you gave me food” (Matthew 25:35). Some Catholic schools responded by passing out meals in drop-off lines, at times three meals per day, while other schools established emergency funds, accepting food and money for volunteers to deliver food to homes (Martin, 2020; Cumiskey, 2020). This adaptive response demonstrated how Catholic schools deliver more than academics and faith, that they care deeply for the well-being of the whole person and entire family. To assist those facing mental health issues, primarily anxiety and depression during this time of pandemic, diocesan communications included tips and suggestions on how to care for children with such needs and mental health phone consultations were made available (Cavallucci, 2020).

In addition to providing for mental health needs, amazingly and with both haste and care, Catholic leaders have been quick to adapt to the lack of spiritual in-person gatherings. Virtual masses, prayer groups, virtual liturgy of the word for children, and online retreat experiences have been created. Some of these spiritual offerings even specifically directed to the challenges of isolation, disrupted routines, and fear associated with the current crisis.<sup>1</sup> Ministering to the spiritual needs, while also tending to the academic, and mental health needs, demonstrates how the superintendent played a critical role as a bridge builder for families and children, providing them the necessary resources during these moments of great uncertainty.

### Conclusion

The complexities of the Catholic school superintendent role have compounded during this time of COVID-19. As these system-level leaders navigate the uncharted pandemic waters, they have faced numerous dilemmas that required them to make undesirable choices between competing demands, knowing that some principals, teachers, parents, students, and community members would be in alignment with their decisions, and others would not. As the pandemic continues to unfold, and schools look to reopen safely in the fall, it is inevitable that more diplomacy, responsibility, and bridging/buffering dilemmas will surface. Facing such dilemmas courageously, compassionately, and with community will be critical to the strengthening and sustaining of our Catholic schools during this time.

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1 See <https://spark.adobe.com/page/J4q1aUM7w06X2/> for an Ignatian retreat during a pandemic and <https://spark.adobe.com/page/NV8l3vddVvqdY/> for a similar experience from the Marianists.

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