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Responses From the Field

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RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

In an effort to encourage dialogue and reflection on matters of common concern and interest, we invite responses on selected articles from other educators, who engage the text critically and offer some reflections about its utility and validity.

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Jesus, the master teacher, reached out to the marginalized of society. Catholic social teaching mandates, therefore, that we continue this educational model in our Catholic schools and make every effort possible to provide a high quality education for students with learning differences. This is both a clear mission of the Church and an ongoing challenge, as DeFiore (2006) aptly describes. As with all objectives set forth by the various ministries of the Church, the extent to which we are successful rests largely with the overall level of commitment to the particular mission. Although the bishops have indicated their support, the financial realities of providing services for children with special needs in our Catholic schools is a major barrier to building effective programs. In addition to financial challenges, Catholic schools are limited in their capacity to meet the needs of a diverse population of learners due to an underlying belief on the part of many Catholic educators that children with special needs would be better served elsewhere.

As DeFiore points out, many innovative diocesan and school-level initiatives have been put in place and participating schools have had a fair amount of success in meeting individual needs. Sadly, DeFiore indicates that the average number of students with special needs per Catholic school is only 15. Given that approximately 11% of the general school population presents with a learning difference, of which 75% are diagnosed with a specific learning disability, this is an extremely poor show of support for this category of learners. It is arguably the students with learning disabilities that Catholic schools are most likely to be successful serving, given the strong emphasis on community.

Dioceses and schools that have attempted to meet the needs of this population have typically done so through inclusion, resource pull-out, and special separate schools. Like our public school counterparts, we incur greater

cost as we move along the continuum of least restrictive environment options. At a time when Catholic schools face the greatest financial challenges in their history, the desire to reach out to the marginalized is often eclipsed by the need to tighten budgets for the general population just to stay in operation.

Of the three models above, it is the inclusion model that has the most likelihood of surviving stiff budget cuts. More of our limited dollars need to be spent at this level if we are to increase the number of students we are serving. The typical teacher in a Catholic school has an expectation for excellence. When a student does not come equipped with the ability to achieve the standard performance, the teacher experiences a myriad of possible reactions. There can be blame aimed toward themselves, the parent, or the student. There may be a strong desire to help the student, but a feeling of professional inadequacy may surface. Sadly, there may be an assumption that the child cannot possibly be successful in a Catholic school.

A paradigm shift among Catholic educators can have a tremendous impact on a school's ability to serve students with mild special learning needs. Administrators' and teachers' attitudes toward diverse learners can be changed only through effective professional development in identifying and understanding the types of learning differences that can be adequately supported in the general education classroom, particularly specific learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder. Educators need to feel competent in their ability to support these students through effective strategies and intervention before they can display a change in affect. Our staff development dollars would be well-spent on comprehensive, schoolwide professional development that involves everyone from paraprofessionals to administrators. It is a commitment that must start with superintendents, flow down to principals, and be carried out by classroom teachers.

As DeFiore states, we are at a place in the history of special education legislation that is both discouraging and hopeful. In order for Catholic schools to move beyond serving students with only mild disabilities, we will require funding that is adequate to provide a wider base of support that includes provisions for resource teachers and special needs programming in every school. Providing direct instruction for students with moderate disabilities and wide performance gaps is simply not feasible in an inclusion setting. Without moving further along the least restrictive continuum, we will be limited to serving only a small part of the population of diverse learners. If there is a commitment to reaching these students in our Catholic schools, it will be necessary to seek funding with more zeal than we have previously demonstrated.

The federal funds available under the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) for parentally-placed students in private schools must be accessed by every Catholic school. While this funding is not sufficient to meet every need, it is significant enough to fight for. In addition, more effort to influence legislation at the state level must be put forth. When only a handful of states are providing support at the level of New Jersey, it is clear that more energy and resources need to be spent on this major source of education funding in other states.

While we have come a long way in our ability to serve students with special needs, our Catholic schools still fall short as a collective group. Providing teachers with the skills to include as many learners with mild disabilities as possible will go a long way toward promoting a paradigm shift that embraces inclusion. With adequate funding, expansion of special programming to include well-prepared resource personnel will bring even more of the marginalized students into the fold. At a time when public dollars are difficult to obtain, we would do well to help state legislators see the wisdom of following the example of federal support under IDEIA. Only through these initiatives will we be able to reach diverse learners and truly live out our mission as the universal Church.

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DeFiore (2006) provides a comprehensive review of elements that have shaped the state of special education in Catholic schools. The article speaks of the bishops' vision without teeth and the theoretical support provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA). DeFiore discusses the demand for services that are not met

because of a lack of resources, expertise, and funding. The article concludes by allowing that much has occurred over the past decade, but more is needed. To meet this need, DeFiore states that diocesan and local leaders must face the challenge of inspiring the laity to respond to this need with the necessary enthusiasm.

We believe that high quality special education comes out of a culture of inclusiveness and is not impacted as greatly by resources as DeFiore and others would suggest. The focus on the inequities in funding between public and private schools often provides an opportunity to justify the inability to provide services for children with special needs. In truth, special education is mandated but not fully funded in public schools as well. At the time that the original special education act, Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, was signed into law, President Ford warned that the mandates would far exceed the allocated resources. His hope was that Congress would revise the law to be more realistic before it was enacted in 1978. These revisions never happened and the mandates of the law continue to exceed the funding (Freedman, Bisbicos, Jentz, & Orenstein, 2005).

The pockets of excellent practice that are evident in many Catholic schools demonstrate that Catholic school teachers and administrators can develop an attitude of inclusiveness as well as problem-solving models that allow excellent programming and accommodations to develop in settings that are not funded adequately. For example, Dayton Catholic Elementary School serves an at-risk population in an urban setting without adequate funding for children with special needs. The teachers and administrator have worked hard to develop the skills needed to make accommodations for all children in their school. They have a well-established intervention assistance team that provides support for the child, the teacher, and the parents as all stakeholders work together to educate the children in the school. This problem-solving model and emphasis on the notion that all children can learn has led to a climate of learning and acceptance.

Change substantive enough to provide all children in Catholic schools an appropriate education, necessitates a reexamination of the historical diocesan parish school structure. In our opinion, the moral mandate to serve all Catholic students is a matter of designing an educational system that accommodates all. Under the current structure of diocesan parish schools, DeFiore clearly articulates that this is not probable. A united national Church effort, like the one outlined by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in their 2005 document is needed. Leaders from education, business, the community, as well as the Committee on Education of the USCCB and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), given the mandate to envision a system and a resource structure for meeting the moral

responsibility to the Church to provide appropriate education for all of its members would be a first step in changing the current fragmented approach to serving students with disabilities in Catholic schools.

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The newest United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (2005) document calling for renewed support of Catholic education brings a sense of déjà vu to those who seek inclusion of children with disabilities and want a detailed plan. Fortunately, DeFiore's (2006) article on "The State of Special Education in Catholic Schools" fills a gap in our understanding of a major challenge facing the Church.

DeFiore documents our efforts to offer educational experiences in the least restrictive environment while highlighting our chronic lack of funds and resources to adequately serve children with special needs. He notes the sad reality that parents of children with disabilities "are confronted with a hard choice: enroll in a Catholic school and possibly forego essential rights and services for their child or enroll in a public school and retain those rights and services" (2006, pp. 463-464).

The reason our schools receive only a pittance rather than a fair share of those funds Catholics pay every day in taxes is explored in Lockwood's (2000) article "Anti-Catholicism and the History of Catholic School Funding" which explains that

While many assume prohibition of aid to Catholic schools or voucher programs to Catholic school parents to be a question of constitutional interpretation of the First Amendment Establishment Clause, the history of Catholic school funding

is essentially rooted in America's unhappy history of anti-Catholicism. Unfortunately, that anti-Catholic heritage has become entrenched in judicial interpretations and public policy....Forbidding aid to Catholic school children or to the parents of Catholic school children is, no matter how such actions might be interpreted, a remnant of 19th century anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant prejudices. (para. 2)

Today's political environment makes changes in this source of funding unlikely. However, if we concentrate solely on the lack of such resources we may miss the long-term price paid in lost credibility and moral consistency by not supporting inclusion. Parishes are losing out on the gifts that accompany our shared vulnerability, and sadly, each year more and more families that encounter rejection of their children are seeking spiritual solace elsewhere.

Of course, DeFiore's conclusion – the challenge is whether diocesan and local leaders can inspire the laity to respond to this need for fiscal support of special education with necessary enthusiasm – is correct. What is suggested in this brief response is that the catalytic effect of our shared vulnerability could generate a sense of fellowship and meaningful cooperation as we seek to foster that essential enthusiasm.

Negative judgments of an individual child's innate abilities and value to the parish have an impact beyond the pain and discrimination felt by parents. As the repercussions move beyond the classroom, siblings and their friends may question the teachings of a Church which makes such judgments, particularly if they themselves are a part of the excluding school. Their sense of fairness is tested. Additionally, the negative stereotypes used by the culture of death are reinforced and statements like, "It would have been better if this child with disabilities had not been allowed to live," make sense to those individuals who are unsophisticated about the options and opportunities available for such children and whose sense of the culture of life are vague or undefined.

If our children are allowed to experience what it feels like to fill an important role for another, they have learned lessons essential in building a stronger Church. As long as we foster total independence, emphasize winning, and shy away from incorporation of those whose limitations require a greater awareness of our mutual needs, we fail to profit from the potential catalytic effect offered by our shared human fragility.

Anyone who has assisted with Special Olympics knows these athletes will race with all their hearts but will stop to help a fallen friend. Perhaps they play a Good Samaritan role. Or perhaps they simply serve as a catalyst in bringing about greater understanding of Christ's message. In today's materialist society, it would seem such sensitivity might be a parish goal.

Whether we like it or not, disabilities are the normal outcome of the risks and stresses of the living process, which can occur at any point in life from conception to the final stages of death. And for some unknown reason, God persists in placing his gift of life into very vulnerable bodies. We may rail against that reality, but we cannot change it. And the demands upon our parish schools will not decrease since more and more of our children are surviving early challenges to their lives. As Catholics, we can never seek to block their existence.

What Christ did with a few fish and loaves may seem a miracle possible only in the past, but with God's blessing, we can unite in creating modern day miracles of inclusion and welcome. Let us think beyond the current stereotypes. May Christ guide us in this endeavor.

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