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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.

DANIEL F. CURTIN

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During the past several years, the Catholic educational community has witnessed the closing or consolidation of many Catholic schools in the United States. Decisions about the future of many of these schools are based on demographic changes, enrollment issues, and financial costs. In other situations, parish and school communities are involved in a lengthy process that leads to the decision of closing or consolidation. The decisions and process are always difficult and emotional, often leading to unrest in a parish.

I still recall the painful experience of the closing and consolidation of three Washington archdiocesan Catholic high schools into one co-educational institution in 1989. At the time, I served as Secretary for Catholic Education and was asked by the late James Cardinal Hickey, Archbishop of Washington, to take on the task of serving as acting president with the charge of consolidating the schools into one comprehensive Catholic secondary school meeting many diverse needs. This was the most challenging assignment in my 42 years in Catholic education. Although we made many efforts to involve parents, students, and staff members in the planning of the new school, the emotional stress was still evident.

Some faculty and administrators had served in their school communities their entire professional lives and felt much grief about losing their schools. It is a natural reaction to grieve and suffer emotionally when separation occurs. As I look back on that experience, not enough was done to address individual painful experiences of losing what had been an important part of the lives of individuals who invested so much emotion into the institutions and in one another. It is important that grief, sadness, and separation be dealt with before a person moves on to the next stage of life. There is more at stake than finances and curriculum.

How people deal with such loss greatly influences their ability to change from old ways and adopt new ways. While the change is never easy, respecting the grieving process and celebrating the successes of the past can help honor the rich experience that veteran educators carry with them. Ignoring the emotional pain and focusing solely on the bureaucratic dimensions of closing and consolidation can cause pain and anger to deepen, even fester.

The Catholic Church prides itself on pastoral care and compassion for those who are suffering. The Process of Compassion Workshop as outlined by McDevitt, Dosen, and Ryan (2006) goes a long way to support and assist those in dealing with their own feelings of grief and loss. When faculty and administrators are supported in such a way, they in turn will be in a stronger position to assist students and parents with their own emotional feelings.

In both the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' 1972 and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2005 statements on Catholic schools issued by the bishops of the United States, the importance of community is emphasized as a unique value and characteristic of our Catholic schools. This strong family environment for which Catholic schools are recognized and which provide support, care, and concern can easily deteriorate when the school closes. In any community, there should be a compassionate concern for the well-being of its members with the result that a caring atmosphere will assist them in dealing with loss and grief. McDevitt, Dosen, and Ryan (2006) provide a critical component to any process to close or consolidate Catholic schools.

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GWEN BYRD

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In June 2004, three schools in the Archdiocese of Mobile closed. Although we did a self study at each school as well as of the area, and the outcome clearly stated that the closings were necessary, it was devastating in many

ways. Demographic shifts and financial deficits were the reasons for the closings of long-term communities of faith. This caused tremendous confusion and trauma for pastors, principals, teachers, parents, and students. It also caused sadness for the larger Catholic community of the archdiocese. All three of these school communities went through stages of denial and anger. One never reached acceptance. In this case, desperate measures came from parents in the face of their denial and anger. This was not easy at the time, although we believed that time would heal.

Our office worked with the process from the beginning, and we played a strong role in the final announcement of closings to parishes and families and tried to be there for them during the emotional times. We were present for the emotional but meaningful rituals of closing at each school. Even though we did not name it as such, we had a process of pastoral care for all those in the closing school communities; however, by not naming our process we had no concrete way of evaluating its success. We offered sessions for parents and students, and career sessions for teachers in their individual settings. We worked with placing students in new schools, gave preferential hiring to teachers from the closing schools, and worked with the receiving principals in accepting these new students as well as their parents into their communities.

The receiving schools made special accommodations for transitioning students, families, and teachers. They offered days to visit, socials for parents, and financial incentives. No parish had to subsidize its students for the first year in the new school, and they stayed as members of their regular parish. The students wore their uniforms from their own school the first year, receiving families were paired up with new families, receptions at the new schools were held, and leadership visited the closing schools to get a better understanding of the environments from which they were coming. Teachers talked with teachers from the closing schools to get suggestions on dealing with students they knew would have a difficult transition time. Principals met with parents in individual and group sessions to address their concerns and just to listen.

Now that we are 2 years out from the closings, we have found that several things have happened. Parents who had strong leadership roles in their former school had difficulty finding their place in their new school community. Parent leadership was already there. We also found that some families found it necessary to change schools at the end of the year. We think this occurred because they were trying to recreate the same environment of their old school. On the other hand, the transitioning teachers seemed to make a more successful transition and found new communities quickly. It appeared that most students also made successful transitions. The children at the new schools were welcoming and excited about their new classmates. The incom-

ing students found the new social scene accepting and a new world to explore.

We are looking to our third year after the closings, and it does seem that time has healed the hurt of the closings. As traumatic as it was for all involved, new life has sprung due to the outstanding leadership of the receiving school communities. The transition from old to new was as compassionate and peaceful as possible. Of course, we all know some hurt and loss will always remain.

DOMINICA ROCCHIO, S.C.

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When I read this article I was reminded of an incident last summer while on vacation with some friends who left to return home before I did. A letter informing them of the closing of their parish school was waiting for them. They called me that evening, and the sense of surprise and almost despair was palpable in their voices. Suddenly, because of my position in a diocesan office, I was the person they called to ask for information and help and to seek comfort in their loss—the equivalent of a sudden death in their family.

Sadly, school closings have become all too frequent in the last 5 years. This period has been painful, and in some cases, we may have lost the creativity and ingenuity so characteristic of our activities in the past. We are so much better at openings or expansions than we are at closures or mergers. We are moving toward new designs, different governance structures, and new ways to image what we have known for years. What we have known is and has been successful; what we are moving toward is unknown and untested in many dioceses.

It is the role of leadership to help others deal with loss and change. This means that those of us in leadership need to have an understanding of the grieving process. As we progress toward a possible refounding of our school networks, we can run the risk of being confounded by our own inability to let go of the past or be lulled into a state of inertia not unlike what happens to us when we experience the death of a loved one.

There are restraining forces (lack of money, buildings in need of repair, worry about the future) and driving forces (excellent leadership, history of success, multicultural schools) that describe the present situation. The

restraining forces identify factors that can keep the schools in their present state or cause further decline. The driving forces, if fostered, will support the movement to a desired future that will be different from the past.

This is truly a time of transition and in such a time, there are always the competing as well as the compelling voices urging us to go in one direction or another. But careful planning takes time, discernment, and agreement on the role of Catholic schools in the overall educational mission of the Church. The bishops of the United States have stated that they, in cooperation with the total Catholic community, are committed to overcoming the challenges that have brought us to the present situation (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). Time is of the essence especially in the Northeast and Midwest sections of our country because there are the unintended results of school closings which are becoming increasingly evident: parents hesitate to enroll their children in an elementary school that may not be open in a few years, future teachers and potential administrators no longer see Catholic schools as a viable place to advance a teaching or an administrative career, graduate programs in non-public education experience difficulty attracting candidates for advanced degrees.

I want to borrow from the refounding writing of sociologist Arbuckle (1995), who claims that refounding, different from renewal, creates radical new ways to deal with problems or situations and needs the collaboration of three types of people: (a) authority figures—the gatekeepers to change who by their position (i.e., diocesan official, boards of trustee members) can prevent or foster change; (b) refounding people—those with above average gifts of imagination, intuition, and innovation (i.e., the dreamers among us); and (c) renewal people—those who possess nuts and bolts skills and a commitment to the mission.

We need a national conversation that brings together the above types of people to design a future for Catholic schools. We need to imagine a new future. Our collective voice remains strong and we need to move forward. Do we believe that the Spirit, who led our bishops to establish the vast network of schools we have known, is still the same Spirit who is leading us in different directions?

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