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Michael Fierro

Diana Hankins

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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.

MICHAEL FIERRO

Principal, Blessed Sacrament Catholic School, San Antonio, Texas

Throughout the article, the author emphasizes the importance of effective, shared, and collaborative leadership between a pastor and principal in a parish school environment. As the writer explains, “The shared leadership between these two key players, the parish pastor and school principal, is essential for the life and future of Catholic education” (Weiss, 2007, p. 9).

In an ideal world, every parochial school would have a pastor-principal relationship rooted in trust, honesty, and mutual understanding of their role within the faith community. As delegates of the bishop, the pastor and principal have the responsibility of ensuring the school is operating in accordance with teachings and traditions of the Church.

As a parochial school principal, I am in agreement with the author in that “There is no stronger team than the pastor and principal who work cooperatively” (Weiss, 2007, p. 15). I believe this cooperative relationship begins during the interview process for appointing a new school principal. It must be understood from the beginning that both the pastor and principal have distinct roles to ensure the school provides a rigorous academic program while introducing the students to Christ. The pastor is accountable for the entire parish community, including the school and all other ministries. The principal, as chief administrator, is responsible for the educational program, managerial duties, and spiritual development of its staff, students, parents, and families. Ultimately, however, it is understood that the pastor has canonical authority over every ministry in the parish.

Healthy communication between a pastor and principal is essential if either leader hopes to build a relationship of mutual trust and respect. On any given day, I can walk into my pastor’s office and seek advice or express concern on an array of topics. Likewise, my pastor can walk into my office and offer suggestions or share his concerns. Neither one of us takes these questions negatively nor with a feeling that we are overstepping boundaries, but rather with a sense that each person is committed to making our parish

school an educational environment rooted in the teachings and traditions of the Church.

A unique example comes to mind of a circumstance that occurred at our school this past fall with the tragic death of an eighth grade student. It was a sad event that brought a sense of anger, confusion, and anxiety to our faith community. Together, the pastor and I visited the student and family at the hospital, we spoke with parents together, comforted teachers as a team, broke the news of her passing to her classmates, and planned her services. During this time, students and parents saw a team of two individuals with different vocations coming together for the common purpose of leading a faith community in the time of need. We brought to the table various experiences and perspectives that allowed each of us to draw upon our gifts and talents at a time when the community needed genuine guidance.

In closing, I am aware that every parochial school's leadership team is different. There are some schools with a pastor who is inclined to micromanage the school's personnel and curriculum program. Still there are pastors who are only visible during the weekly liturgy and graduation exercises. Moreover, there are principals who feel they are the king or queen of a kingdom and are reluctant to understand the role and authority of a pastor in the parish school setting. As the author states, "collaboration and compatibility between the pastor and principal is essential for the effective operation of the school and all involved in the educational process" (Weiss, 2007, p. 15). As St. Paul wrote, "For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another" (Romans 12:4). We cannot succeed in the ministry of Catholic education unless we fully accept and understand the structure of our organization.

REFERENCE

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DIANA HANKINS

Principal, Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School, Columbus, Georgia

It seems like such a simple statement—that the mission of Catholic schools is best carried out when the pastor and the principal join in a collaborative

effort. From the outside looking in this appears to be such a simple directive, one that should easily be attained. After 5 years of serving as a principal in a Catholic school, I find there is little easy in achieving this goal. My observations are based on my own experience working with two pastors and what I have heard from other administrators from across the nation as we have discussed this topic of pastor-principal relationship.

Life was easy during my 15 years of experience in public education prior to coming to Catholic schools. The relationship of local school administration and district, state, and federal authority, though not without its conflicts, was founded upon educational beliefs that were at least shared in theory, if not practice. This luxury of simple shared beliefs, focused on educational goals, is not the case in the relationship between pastor and principal. *The Code of Canon Law* (Canon Law Society of America, 1983) clearly defines the authority of the pastor and his responsibility for the parish school. However, the role of pastor is stronger and broader than that. As Weiss (2007) points out, Canon 519 states that, “the pastor is the proper shepherd of the parish entrusted to him....He carries out for his community the duties of teaching, sanctifying, and governing” (p. 14). As a part of the laity, I have by virtue of my baptism, ministerial roles in the life of my parish. Using the gifts God has given me, I am called to serve in my community in a way that helps to bring about the kingdom of God. As principal, I am called to serve not only as educational leader, but also as the spiritual leader of the school. The unique roles of each of these callings—pastor as ordained minister and principal as lay school leader—is what puts this relationship in conflict.

Recognizing that this conflict exists, or could exist, is the first step toward leading a pastor and principal toward carrying out their joint mission of teaching. My experience in Catholic education has found both pastors and principals who are dedicated to carrying out their mission.

How can the Church and/or a diocese take measures to minimize the negative impact of this conflict? Beginning in the seminary, training should be offered that addresses the uniqueness of the role and responsibilities of a pastor with a parish school. Once a pastor is assigned to a parish with a school, supplemental training or the establishment of a mentor-pastor relationship should take place. During the interview process of a principal, a focus should be placed on the challenges that exist in the unique mission of Catholic school administration. Staff development for principals should have a focus on this most important relationship. The development of a mentoring program for principals also provides an avenue to address challenges that may arise within this relationship. Respect and communication are the keys to success in the pastor-principal relationship. Bishops and search committees should look closely at the strength of these traits before deciding on

whom to place in these roles. Finally, once a difficulty in this relationship is identified that has a negative impact on the formation of children, it must be addressed directly. The article suggests many ways that seem reasonable. Training and refocusing can overcome most situations. However, if the conflict is based on a power struggle between pastor and principal, I feel that it must be dealt with swiftly. In such a situation, the position of authority has become one of personal needs and not that of the good of the kingdom. This situation can cause the most harm to the Church and the people.

In order to carry out the teaching mission of a Catholic school—academic preparation, faith development, and evangelization—the pastor and principal need to work as a collaborative team for the effective operation of the school. The fulfillment of each of their individual roles in this mission depends upon the strengthening of their relationship. As a Church, we must support the need and development of this strong relationship.

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- Canon Law Society of America. (1983). *Code of canon law*. Washington, DC: Author.
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