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National Catholic School Standards: Focus on Governance and Leadership

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The recently published National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS) (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) provides Catholic school educators and stakeholders with research-based criteria for operating a mission-driven, program-effective, well-managed, responsibly governed Catholic school. The standards serve as the framework within which discussion of Catholic school governance and leadership must now take place.

Background on the Standards

The NSBECS offer nine defining characteristics, 13 standards, and 70 benchmarks for effective Catholic elementary and secondary schools. The defining characteristics flow directly from the Holy See's teaching on Catholic schools as compiled by Archbishop J. Michael Miller, CSB (2006), and from statements by Pope Benedict XVI and the American bishops. The characteristics define the deep Catholic identity of Catholic schools and serve as the platform on which the standards and benchmarks rest, justifying their existence and providing their meaning. The standards describe policies, programs, structures, and processes that should be present in effective and authentic Catholic schools in four domains: mission and Catholic identity, governance and leadership, academic excellence, and operational vitality. Finally, the benchmarks provide observable, measurable descriptors for each standard. Benchmarks provide a solid basis for developing a more detailed self-assessment and diagnostic instruments, data collection and reporting structures, and accreditation tools, as appropriate at the local, diocesan, regional, and national levels.

The publication of NSBECS marks the completion of a two-year national collaboration and consultation among stakeholders invested in the future of PK-12 Catholic schools, including diocesan personnel, school leaders, Catholic educational networks, the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), Catholic university scholars and leaders, bishops, parents, and funders. Following the 2009 CHEC Conference on leadership, sponsored

by the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness (CCSE) in the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago, CCSE director, Lorraine A. Ozar, convened a national task force to craft a “set of non-negotiable characteristics of essential Catholic schools” (Loyola University Chicago, 2009, p. 3)—the number one actionable item to come out of the conference deliberations. Participants reasoned that articulating a national consensus about what constitutes an excellent Catholic school would clarify the “brand” of Catholic education and serve as a basis and support for school accreditation, national policy and advocacy efforts, Catholic higher education leadership program development, and advancement.

Over the two-year period from February 2010 to March 2012, the task force wrote, vetted, and revised four drafts. Following publication of the NSBECS, a second national task force developed stakeholder perception surveys and benchmark rubrics for schools to use in assessing performance on the defining characteristics, standards, and benchmarks. The standards and benchmarks, perception surveys, and rubrics are now available open access at the Catholic School Standards Project website (www.catholicschoolstandards.org). Additionally, AdvancED has incorporated the standards into their accreditation protocols for Catholic schools and dioceses. To date, over 1,300 schools in 66 dioceses have opted to use these tools.

Accountability for Governance and Leadership

For the first time ever, the NSBECS has offered the Catholic educational community an agreed-upon, highly credible set of criteria by which Catholic schools can hold themselves accountable to those who benefit from their services (e.g. students, parents/guardians and families, faculty, and staff), to donors and contributors, to the Church, and to civil society. One key area for accountability addressed in the standards and benchmarks is the domain of governance and leadership.

In his guest editorial in *Momentum* introducing the NSBECS, Michael J. Garanzini, S.J. (2012), President and CEO of Loyola University Chicago, articulates a central premise that grounds the development of the standards and benchmarks and which relates to governance and leadership:

Authority and control of Catholic schools will remain a local affair. Parishes, dioceses, religious communities, and the governance mechanisms which they create will be responsible for the ultimate

decisions regarding our schools, but they need objective benchmarks for determining when a school is doing the job it should be doing. A “good housekeeping seal of approval” is needed to signal to a wider public what we mean by quality and excellence. (p. 9)

In the section that follows, we examine the specific expectations for accountability on the parts of governing bodies and leaders, as described in the NSBECS.

Governance and Leadership Central to School Success

The National Standards provide the structure and framework for Catholic school success. They provide very explicit and clear direction for the critical work of K-12 governance and leadership on two levels. First, the pivotal role of governance and leadership as the entities responsible and accountable for the incorporation of all standards across the four domains is repeatedly cited and affirmed in the language of the standards and benchmarks. For example, many benchmarks begin with this phrase or a similar one, “The governing body and the leader/leadership team ensure that . . .” (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012, p. 12), and the benchmarks are used to measure a school’s status in achieving a standard. Specifically, the Foreword for section II on governance and leadership, affirms that the “success of this [school] mission depends on the key components of effective governance, which provide direction or authority, and leadership, which ensure effective operations” (p. 17). Effective governance and leadership ensures Catholic identity, academic excellence, and operational vitality. Governance is central to the achievement of full compliance with all standards and, in turn, facilitates and sustains the successful school.

On a second level, the National Standards guide the work of the board and board committees to pilot an effective mission-driven Catholic school. Board committees are able to initiate their responsibilities by intentionally addressing standards five and six by engaging in self-assessment utilizing the benchmark and rubric worksheets. Based on data from self-assessments, boards are able to set the standards as guiding principles by which board committees are empowered to lead and be responsible for school accountability. Once board roles and expectations are clear, and strategies are in place for board stability, growth, and enhancement, the board is positioned to address the remaining domains of mission, academic excellence, and operational vitality.

For example, a board begins with standard five, which focuses on governance and three fundamental characteristics. First, a governing body “recognizes and respects the role(s) of the appropriate and legitimate authorities” (p. 18). Next is the expectation for the board to “exercise responsible decision making (authoritative, consultative, advisory) in collaboration with the leadership team” (p.18), which requires the board to work consistently with the school leaders. Finally, this criteria mandates the board’s responsibility “for development and oversight of the school’s fidelity to mission, academic excellence and operational vitality” (p. 18), requiring the board to continuously improve and to hold the leadership team and staff accountable for mission, excellence and vitality.

The criteria for the scope of analysis and planning of the work related to standard five are delineated in the corresponding six benchmarks and rubrics for assessment. These benchmarks address areas such as board diversity; systemization of policies and leadership succession; relationships with (Arch) bishops, (Arch)Diocesan offices, and canonical administrators; and formation, training, and self-evaluation (See www.catholicschoolstandards.org for the rubric associated with each benchmark.)

Following the benchmark assessment, analysis, and planning based on standards five and six, it is advantageous for boards to begin intentional work on one of the other three domains. Often this work is distributed across committees, with some boards emphasizing the immediacy of operations. Perhaps a board may prioritize section IV, operational vitality, which includes standards 10, 11, 12, and 13. This domain addresses the concrete realities that are based on the truth that “Catholic schools are temporal organizations committed to the Church and the mission of Catholic education” (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012, p. 27). Noted in this section are issues to be addressed, including socioeconomic challenges and the need for financial planning, human resource management, professional formation, facilities maintenance, and institutional advancement utilizing contemporary communication. Further, school boards are called to “define the norms and expectations for fundamental procedures to support and ensure viability” (p. 27). Moreover, “boards need to focus on the “operation” of the school—how it works and how it is supported” (p. 27).

A useful example is standard 10, which requires an excellent Catholic school to provide “a feasible three to five year financial plan that includes both current and projected budgets and is the result of a collaborative process, emphasizing faithful stewardship” (p. 28). Examination of this standard high-

lights the emphasis on planning, transparency, collaboration, and stewardship. The corresponding eight benchmarks are explicit and stress the importance of policies and practices that should be in place while itemizing essential elements of sound financial practice, such as levels of investment, partnerships, revenue sources, cost target areas and attention to creating a climate of transparency with financial educational materials available to the community. Working with this standard as a guiding principle, a school is positioned to enhance the financial viability of a successful school.

Recently, working with over 20 K-12 school leadership teams and board representatives as well as with individual school boards the staff of the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College adopted an approach employing the materials and logic cited above for governance and operational vitality. Workshops begin with an overview of the standards and their significance, setting the stage for conversations, followed by presentations and discussions of the key concepts outlined in the forewords of both sections. More importantly all participants evaluate and score their school boards, utilizing the rubric worksheets designed for each benchmark. This exercise permits the workshop participants (board members) to practice using the rubric, engage in initial analysis of data, and design a plan to utilize the rubric with multiple constituencies after returning to the school community. It is recommended that board leaders and their members begin with standards five and six, followed by planning with their respective leadership teams how to assess progress in the other three domains.

Feedback from these workshops, and the reported work going forward, suggests that this approach is providing a new lens for internal assessment, new measures for accountability, and—above all—a positioning system (GPS) for boards to govern and plan for mission, academic excellence and operational vitality.

Key to achieving the desired outcomes for board workshops, focused on incorporating the standards and benchmarks is the participation of multiple stakeholders and the adoption of clear guidelines on how to access and use the benchmarks as measures of a school's status related to standards. These considerations are captured in the following quotes from evaluations of recent workshops, such as, "The fact that pastors and board members participated was very beneficial in that we can all begin to move toward adhering to the benchmarks and standards together...all on the same page." Another participant observed, "The on-line rubrics are most helpful in beginning the evaluation of our school's effectiveness."

The *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* repeatedly stresses and affirms the critical leadership role for effective governance and leadership. Section III is devoted to this topic, and reference to the role of governance is continuously cited in all domains and all standards. Quite simply, an effective Catholic school begins with effective governance and leadership, and an effective school is a successful school.

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