



October 2016

## Catholic School Principals' Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Practices During Times of Change and Uncertainty: A North American Analysis

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### Recommended Citation

Polka, W., Litchka, P., Mete, R., & Ayaga, A. (2016). Catholic School Principals' Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Practices During Times of Change and Uncertainty: A North American Analysis. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 20 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2001102016>

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## **Catholic School Principals' Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Practices During Times of Change and Uncertainty: A North American Analysis**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This article is dedicated in memory to the Reverend Dr. Stephen J. Denig whose research acumen and scholarly inspiration resulted in the development of this study and subsequent article.

## Catholic School Principals' Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Practices During Times of Change and Uncertainty: A North American Analysis

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*The authors of the article outline a historical review of Catholic education and student enrollment in North America and a recent perspective of Catholic school principals' decision-making and problem-solving preferences. The purpose of this article is to provide the reader with an understanding of events which impacted the evolution of Catholic school boards and their administrators in America and Canada as well as current leadership practices. The authors utilize a survey instrument derived from Wayne Hoy's decision-making and problem-solving research. Their quantitative findings come from 121 principals of K-12 schools situated across the United States and the province of Ontario. This study shows there are no differences in the leadership approaches to solve contemporary problems in North American schools regardless of varied historical, cultural and economic contexts. This article presents support for reinforcing the Catholic mission within school boards and support for leadership and administration programs in North America.*

Keywords: Catholic, North American, Principals, Decision-making and Problem-solving

*Our vision is clear: our Catholic schools are a vital part of the teaching mission of the Church.*  
(USCCB, 1990)

**A**t no time in the history of education in North America and globally has there been more pressure on school leaders to improve the achievement of all students. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the

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<sup>†</sup> Rev. Dr. Stephen J. Denig, who passed away on May 22, 2013, was an integral part of the research team. He contributed to the research design, data collection, and analysis and we greatly appreciated his contribution to the article.

passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2002, and the subsequent *Race To The Top* legislation with serious financial incentives in 2009 in the United States coupled with increased national and international attention to global student achievement comparisons such as *Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)* and *National Student Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)* has promulgated an age of intense accountability, unabashed scrutiny, and comprehensive intervention upon public, private, and parochial school leaders at unprecedented levels.

Often at the apex of this tension is the school principal, who has the daunting responsibility of ensuring that students and teachers are provided with the leadership and resources necessary to reach established standards and institutional expectations for academic achievement, while at the same time dealing with diminishing resources, changing student demographics, and increasing mandates from local, state, and national levels of governance.

### School Principal Preparation

Catholic school principals, like most principals in both the United States and Ontario, the most populous province in Canada, received their principalship training and/or certification via university programs that were based on accepted standards for leadership practices.

The following six generic school leadership standards were initially established by the ELCC/ISLAC consortium and provide a valuable conceptual framework for the work responsibilities of school administrators whether in the public, private, or parochial context in the United States or Canada:

- *Standard 1:* Facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.
- *Standard 2:* Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
- *Standard 3:* Ensuring management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
- *Standard 4:* Collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
- *Standard 5:* Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
- *Standard 6:* Understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (National Policy Board for Education Administration, 2011).

However, in Ontario, the Ministry of Education developed a specific Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals to “develop, support and sustain the highest quality leadership possible in schools across the province” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, para. 1). The document outlined the following “leader practices and competencies” for both Catholic and public school principals:

- *Setting Directions:* The principal builds a shared vision, fosters the acceptance of group goals and sets and communicates high performance expectations.
- *Building Relationships and Developing People:* The principal strives to foster genuine trusting relationships with students, staff, families and communities, guided by a sense of mutual respect. The principal affirms and empowers others to work in the best interests of all students.
- *Developing the Organization:* The principal builds collaborative cultures, structures the organization for success, and connects the school to its wider environment.
- *Leading the Instructional Program:* The principal sets high expectations for learning outcomes and monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of instruction. The principal manages the school effectively so that everyone can focus on teaching and learning.
- *Setting Accountability:* The principal is responsible for creating conditions for student success and is accountable to students, parents, the community, supervisors and the board for ensuring that students benefit from a high quality education. The principal is specifically accountable for the goals set out in the school improvement plan (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Accordingly, school administrators both in the United States and Canada and either in public, private, or parochial schools possess and practice similar roles and responsibilities for the management and leadership of their respective educational organizations. The key decisions they make and the significant problems they solve relative to the people, things, and ideas of their organizations may be different based on their historical context but since the above leadership standards are their generally accepted leadership expectations there are, no doubt, similarities in their official and unofficial principal behaviors. Key indicators of their leadership behaviors are the types of approaches they most frequently use to make decisions and solve problems within their school context. This interest in the similarities and differences of

leadership approaches employed by Catholic school principals to make decisions within their school contexts in North America became the catalyst for this research project.

### **School Leadership Decision-Making and Problem-Solving**

Polka, Litchka, Calzi, Denig, & Mete (2011, 2014) studied decision-making and problem solving among school superintendents in five northeastern states of the USA using Tarter and Hoy (1998) decision-making models. They found that incremental and classical approaches in decision-making and problem-solving are most frequently used. Shared decision making and mixed scanning model are also used frequently. The garbage can also called "hope chest," political, and satisfying models approach were used occasionally. Context has an influence on the type of decision-making and problem solving approaches in use more than the school leader's background and experience (Polka et al., 2011a, 2014). They recommended further studies in decision-making and problem solving approaches for a better understanding. Their 2011 study was replicated in 2013 by researchers in the Midwestern United States who reached similar conclusions based on their analysis of 281 school leaders (Noppe, Yager, Webb & Sheng, 2013). The present study is a follow up to those previous articles and it focuses specifically on Catholic school principals in North America.

The problems that school leaders face include student enrollment, relationship to parents and the wider community on issues of accountability, dealing with team building and transforming schools for teaching and learning (Noppe et al., 2013). Catholic school principals are no exception to these problems that confront school leaders. These situations demand choices in order to address those problems. According to Tarter and Hoy (1998) decision-making approaches are "rational, deliberate, purposeful actions" that start with development of a decision strategy and moves through implementation and appraisal results (as cited in Noppe et al., 2013, p. 105).

Factors that influence decision-making include leadership preferences of the individual leader: what makes sense when weighing the consequences of choices and ethical principles. Authentic leaders are those who demonstrate knowledge of the issues at stake, their ability for moral reasoning, and their sensitivity to the needs of others (Begley, 2006).

Decision-making of principals center on teacher support, curriculum supervision for student achievement, and transforming the schools in such a way that it delivers effective teaching and learning (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe & Meyerson, 2005).

School leaders' decision-making involves developing a shared vision, assisting in building teams, and reaching consensus about goals to be achieved as well as high standards for work of colleagues (Leithwood, 2005). It requires caring dispositions and cognitive skills, passion for the education of children and concerns about equity in educating all students. Successful school leaders also demonstrated a high degree of sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of teachers and students as well as parents and community members (Leithwood, 2005). Decision-making of school leaders lead to student achievement, support staff/teacher development, and school or organizational processes. The external factors that influence school leaders decision-making include the national policy context (e.g. accountability), size and location of the school as well the level of trusting relationships among colleagues (Leithwood, 2005).

### **Catholic School Principals Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Approaches**

In addition to the general school administrative milieu, Catholic school leaders also face the never-ending struggle of increasing, or, at best, maintaining their enrollment levels, keeping their tuition as low as possible, and continuing to provide a quality education that is competitive with the neighboring public schools and nearby private schools (Ciriello, 1998; Shelter, 2006). Thus, the contemporary Catholic school principal is under a tremendous amount of pressure to succeed or perhaps share the fate of hundreds of other Catholic schools over the past two decades: school closure.

Furthermore, Catholic school principals are often faced with serving multiple masters involving the parish pastor, the local governing board, and the regional archdiocese; these parties are influenced to one degree or another, by state and federal mandates, and the national and international conversations about education among policy makers, researchers, and higher education leaders (Ciriello, 1998). In addition, the parish pastor, who may or may not have formal educational leadership experiences in leading a school, and the diocese are often at odds over who has the ultimate authority to lead and manage the local Catholic schools. In many dioceses across America this has led to tension and uncertainty for the Catholic school principal, as they wonder who are their ultimate supervisors, and in fact, can they serve multiple masters?

### **Brief History of Catholic Schools in North America**

In order to better understand the contemporary state of Catholic school administration in North America, the authors present a historical review of Catholic education in both the United States and Canada as well as a recent picture of perspectives regarding decision-making and problem-solving among Catholic school principals as they face the realities of leading schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While Catholic schools are immune from much of the federal and state legislative interventions and consequences regarding student achievement, principals of Catholic schools face many of the same pressures as their public school counterparts in terms of accountability, diminishing resources, and changing student demographics. However, it is from the principal's office that teachers are supervised, curriculum decisions are made, finances are managed, and resources are allocated in an environment in which, more times than not, is dominated by declining enrollments and resources (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Marzano, Frontier & Livingston, 2011). Thus, studying the various approaches used by practicing principals in making decisions and solving problems is valuable to understanding and appreciating contemporary school administration.

### **Impact of Catholic Education Trends on School Principals in the United States and Canada**

Although there has been this continuing commitment to Catholic education, the impacts of declining enrollments and the closing of schools continues to occur throughout the United States. While a number of new Catholic schools have been built primarily in outer urban and suburban areas, the net effect is the demographics of Catholic schools, particularly in urban areas is significantly changing. As of 2005, the enrollment of students in Catholic schools who are not Catholic was approaching 14% and that the number of lay people who are school principals and administrators increased to about 95%. Furthermore, Hispanic/Latinos make up more than 40% of Catholics under the age of thirty, and 44% of Catholics under the age of 10 (USCCB, 2005). Diocesan leadership continues to struggle with how to successfully stem the tide of dwindling enrollments, school closings, and depleting financial resources in an era of increased accountability and increased diversity. Of critical importance is how schools within a diocese are managed by their leaders to survive and thrive.



And, even though contemporary Canadian school leaders do not face the same intense enrollment issues or acute financial woes of their counterparts in the United States, they still need to make decisions and solve problems related to school administration within a contemporary context that is similar in terms of the accountability and achievement demands promoted by external forces.

### **A Brief History of Catholic Schools in the United States**

In 1894, a conference of Catholic bishops from across America occurred in Baltimore, Maryland. One of the focal points of this meeting was to discuss the status of education in America, in particular, regarding the millions of Catholics, many who were first generation immigrants and living mostly in the industrial urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest. An outcome of this conference was that each diocese across the country was encouraged to establish at least one Catholic school in each of its parishes so that Catholic children could become educated and have their faith strengthened and sustained (Walch, 2003).

As shown in Table 1, by 1920 there were more than 8,000 Catholic schools in the United States enrolling almost two million students, which was more than eight percent of the total elementary and secondary school enrollment in the United States

Table 1

*Number of U.S. Catholic Schools and Student Enrollment By Decade (1920-2010).*

School Year	Schools	% Change	Student Enrollment	% Change
1919-20	8,103	--	1,925,673	--
1929-30	10,046	23.97	2,464,467	27.98
1939-40	10,049	0.03	2,396,305	-2.76
1949-50	10,778	7.25	3,066,387	27.96
1959-60	12,893	19.62	5,253,791	71.33
1969-70	11,352	-11.95	4,367,000	-16.88
1979-80	9,640	-15.08	3,139,000	-28.12
1989-90	8,719	-9.55	2,588,893	-17.52
1999-00	8,144	-6.59	2,653,038	2.48
2009-10	7,094	-12.89	2,119,341	-20.12

*Note.* Adapted from McDonald & Shultz, 2011

From 1920 to the early 1960s, as the nation endured the Great Depression, World War II, and the prosperous 1950s, the number of students attending elementary and public schools across the United States increased significantly. Catholic schools were no exception since from 1920 to 1960, the number of Catholic schools increased by more than 59%, while student enrollment in these schools more than doubled as illustrated in Table 1. However, during this time, Catholic schools were organized in various ways, some were parish schools, others were owned by individual churches and managed by their pastors while others operated by diocesan bishops and others were mainly secondary schools, supported by independent religious orders such as the Christian Brothers, Jesuits, and Vincentians. Principals and teachers were mostly religious brothers and sisters, who focused on the mission of getting their students to work hard, to behave, and eventually succeed in traditional educational settings (Nuzzi, Frabutt, & Holter, 2012; Palestini, 2009).

However, it was in the early to mid-1960s when significant changes began to occur throughout the United States. The social and political inequities facing black Americans and other minorities who in many cases were mired in poverty, as well as the controversy of American military involvement in Vietnam began to shape public debate and discourse, raising questions as to whether or not America was, in fact, living up to its democratic ideals that had been founded two centuries earlier. The federal and state governments during this time were able to pass legislation in support of improving the lives of minorities and the poor, including the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* and the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*. These legislative actions promulgated additional funding to public schools especially in the heavily populated urban areas. Subsequently, it caused an increase in the gap between public school funding and Catholic school funding.

At the same time, the Catholic Church was in the center of discourse regarding its roles and responsibilities to Catholics around the world, including those in America. The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) concluded its work in 1965 leading to significant changes in the roles of both the priests and nuns in the many Catholic churches and schools across America. Many priests and nuns began to leave their religious life. In addition, there was a decrease in religious vocation and consequently, Catholic schools began to hire more lay people as teachers and principals. The once prosperous and invigorating cities, where the Catholic church and its schools had been a foundation of social and religious life for many generations of Catholics, began to change as crime, violence, poverty, and crumbling infrastructures took

hold (Heft, 2011; Mueller, 2000). The exodus of middle class Americans to the suburbs also increased and since there were few Catholic schools in these areas, many Catholic families enrolled their children in the public schools.

Not only did this exodus have an impact on enrollments in the urban Catholic schools, but more Catholic children were now beginning to be educated in a secular environment. From 1960 until 2010, the number of Catholic schools declined by almost 45% and enrollment in Catholic schools decreased by almost 60%. Since 1990, over 1300 Catholic schools have closed, with more than 300,000 students being uprooted and moved to the public schools and other private schools across the United States. As shown in Figure 1, the number of students enrolled in Catholic schools as a percentage of students enrolled in all U.S. public and private elementary and secondary schools declined. This reflects recent enrollment figures in Catholic schools and presents an ominous future for Catholic elementary and secondary education in the United States and those who manage them.

### **A Brief History of Catholic Schools in Canada**

The history of Catholic education in Canada is different from that in the United States because Catholic schools in Canada are officially established and funded by the government at about the same level as the public schools. The Catholic schools, also known as Separate Schools, enjoy a solid cultural and economic partnership for education with the official local, provincial, and federal governance systems (McDonough, 2012). In Canada, there is no “Wall of Separation” between State and Church as officially recognized and practiced in the United States (Alexander & Alexander, 2011). Consequently, during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century there has not been such a precipitous enrollment decline in Canadian Catholic schools but there are similar administrative issues as in the United States related to current financial concerns, accountability issues, and student achievement expectations all of which constantly present impacts on enrollment.

In Ontario, currently the most populous province of the ten Canadian provinces with about 38% of the total Canadian population, Catholic education was established prior to Canada’s Confederation in 1867 (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2014).

In 1846, there was legislation in Ontario, establishing the right of Catholics and Protestants to start publically funded schools (McGowan, 2002). This legislation was inspired by Michael Power, the first Bishop of Toronto, and first Board of Education Chair (McGowan, 2002). Consequently, *The Schools*

*Act of 1841* and *The Scott Act of 1863* promulgated Catholic schools to be built and operated in the province of Ontario. In 1867 Canada's Confederation based on the *British North America Act* devolved the responsibilities of education to the provinces and, specifically, *Section 93* stated that denominational schools were protected, including Catholic schools (McGowan & Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA), 2001).

In 1984, the Ontario Provincial Government passed legislation that allowed full funding for Catholic schools. While some political groups and citizens challenged the decision, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the province's plan was legal and within *Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (McGowan & OCSTA, 2001).

Table 2 depicts the Catholic school enrollment in Ontario Catholic schools only because neither the Federal Government of Canada nor its agencies collect and make public national school enrollment data. Consequently, the researchers used the data available from Ontario for comparison purposes to the United States since Ontario is currently the most populous province of the ten Canadian Provinces and as such may be considered as representative of trend data for the country as a whole. Nonetheless, Table 2 provides evidence of the significant different contextual experiences relating to student enrollment that have been facing Catholic school principals in our two North American countries.

Table 2

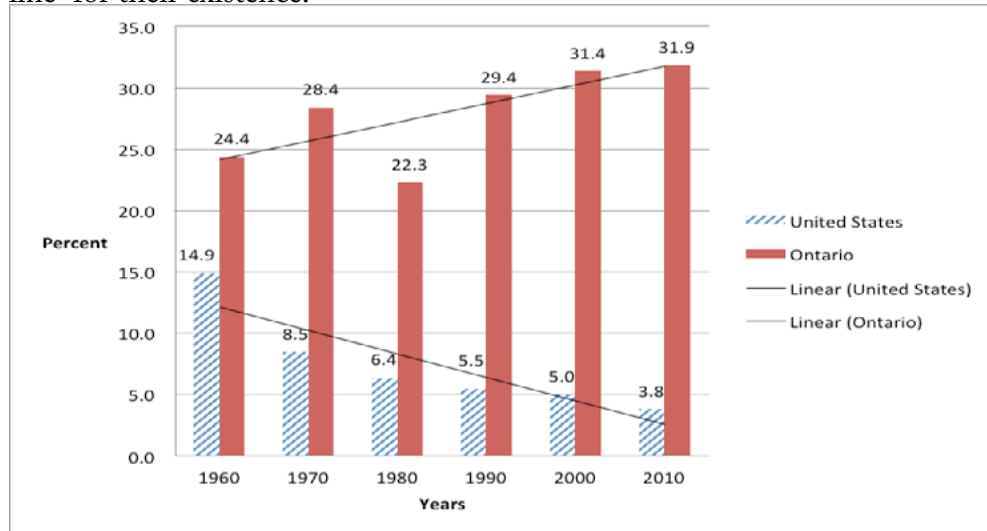
*Ontario Catholic Schools and Student Enrollment by Decade, 1959-60 to 2009-10*

School Year	Schools	% Change	Roman Catholic Student Enrollment	% Change	Total Enrollment
1959-60	1,303	--	263,769	--	1,081,649
1969-70	1,343	3.07	413,556	56.79	1,456,117
1979-80	1,336	-0.52	416,147	0.63	1,866,107
1989-90	1,551	16.09	560,072	34.59	1,902,141
1999-00	1,617	4.26	670,337	19.69	2,131,626
2001-10	1,663	2.84	659,392	-1.63	2,061,390

*Note:* Adapted from Ontario Ministry of Education, 1975 & 1979/1980; Ontario Ministry of Treasury and Economics, 1982 p.170-171; Ontario Ministry of Education Quick Facts 1989-90, 1999-2000 & 2009-10.

When comparing Table 2 with Table 1 it becomes very apparent that Catholic school leaders in both countries are faced with different enrollment concerns but still need to focus on managing the people, things, and ideas of their respective schools within an ever-changing context. The Canadian Catholic school context as reflected in the Province of Ontario is fairly stable vis-à-vis enrollment and financial issues, whereas, Catholic school administrators in the United States have major concerns with rapidly declining enrollment rates and lack of government funding.

Figure 1 provides an historical illustration of the past fifty years of Catholic school enrollment in North America in order to further elucidate the differences in Catholic school administrative contexts between the United States and Canada based on enrollment data that for schools is the very “life-line” for their existence.



*Figure 1.* Catholic School Student Enrollment in both the United States and the province of Ontario, Canada (1960-2010). Student enrollment is quantified in millions for the United States and hundreds of thousands within the province of Ontario in Canada.

### **Current Perspectives on Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Approaches by Catholic School Principals**

A quantitative research study was designed and implemented by the authors to obtain a current perspective on decision-making and problem-solving approaches employed by Catholic school principals in effectively managing their schools in today’s ever-changing North American environment. The

general subject population for this study consisted of Catholic school principals throughout both the United States and Canada.

In the *Handbook of Research on Catholic Education*, the Catholic school community proposed a research agenda which included further investigation of leadership and delegation models (Hunt, Joseph, Nuzzi & Geiger, 2003). They noted that more information on the topic will be of great benefit to future administrators in higher-level education as well as educational institutions (Hunt et al., 2003). This study correlates well with these goals as it offers insight regarding the types of decision-making and problem-solving styles Catholic schools principals in North America prefer. Consequently, understanding these styles currently implemented by principals will improve the knowledge base about Catholic school leadership and may provide valuable information for enhancing the preparation of future Catholic school leaders in both the United States and Canada.

Researchers from Niagara University, a Catholic-Vincentian university and Loyola University Maryland, a Catholic-Jesuit university both located in the northeast United States, decided to focus on Catholic school principals decision-making and problem-solving experiences. They previously conducted a similar study in the United States with school superintendents (Polka et al., 2011) and after informed discussions with various colleagues, they determined that studying decision-making and problem-solving of Catholic school principals would also contribute to the general education leadership knowledge base as well as provide the information they sought about Catholic school leadership.

Accordingly, from April 2011 to September 2012, the researchers contacted 24 Catholic school districts across the United States and the province of Ontario via postal mail regarding this school leadership study. Of the 24 districts, roughly 12% were located in a rural area with the remaining districts in an urban environment. In the United States, the schools are governed by the Catholic Archdiocese or Diocese of the region. In contrast, Ontario Catholic schools have their own separate school board system. Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval was obtained from Niagara University prior to contacting participants. All of the school dioceses and board contacted had their own in-depth application process for external research approval that was followed if the principals within those respective school districts decided to participate in the research study. There were 12 school dioceses and boards situated throughout the North East, Central, Mid-Atlantic, and South Atlantic areas of the United States as well as the Eastern and Southern regions

of Ontario, Canada who participated in the study. A total of 162 Catholic elementary and secondary school principals responded to the online survey; however, after data quality sifting 121 participant data scores were considered useful for the study were obtained.

### **The Quantitative Instrument**

The survey instrument that was used by the researchers was a modification of the instrument implemented in their previous study of superintendents in the United States (Polka et al., 2011) and consisted of the following two parts:

- Part A. Demographic Data
- Part B. Decision-making/Problem-solving Approaches

The *Demographic Data* component (Part A) of the survey instrument was designed to identify relationships between the independent variables associated with the individual background and experiences of the respondents and the dependent variables associated with the survey questions and/or statements related to the decision-making and problem-solving approaches employed by the participating principals. The following four independent variables were specifically enumerated in this part to solicit information from each participant: 1) gender, 2) age (separated into the following categories: 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 55+, 3) nationality (American or Canadian) and 4) years of experience.

The *Decision-making/Problem-solving Approaches* (Part B) also known as the (*Denig-Polka*) *DM/PS Survey* section consists of thirty-five (35) statements initially developed from the research of Hoy and Tarter (2008) (Denig, Polka, Litchka, Calzi, & Brigano, 2011). The purpose of this part of the survey instrument was to identify trends regarding the frequency of the following seven approaches used by educational leaders when confronting problems and making decisions associated with school administration: *Classical, Incremental, Garbage Can or "Hope Chest," Shared Decision-making, Satisficing, Mixed Scanning, and Political*. In the previous study (Polka et al., 2011), it was determined that instead of the eight categories as referenced in Hoy and Tarter (2008), there would be seven used for the survey instrument. The two categories associated with shared decision-making in the Hoy and Tarter (2008) text were combined into one category of shared-decision making to streamline the original survey (Denig et al., 2011). Those resulting seven categories of decision-making and problem-solving are also used in this study.

Therefore, the following seven decision-making and problem-solving

practices were examined within Catholic school leadership contexts in both the United States and Canada in this study: *Classical approach*, *Incremental approach*, *Garbage Can approach* or *“Hope Chest” approach*, *Shared Decision-Making approach*, *Satisficing approach*, *Mixed Scanning approach*, *Political approach*. Each of these approaches is further explained below from a Catholic school leadership research perspective to provide greater comprehension of the significance of these approaches to contemporary school management.

The *classical approach* consists of a rational systematic means-ends analysis focused on optimizing organizational goals. This approach is commonly implemented in Catholic schools due to their structural and philosophical orientation. Bryk, Lee, & Holland (1993) noted that decision making of Catholic school principals tend to be “paternalistic” in character and mention that they employ the “approach of a wise and caring parent” (p.299) in their decision-making and problem-solving. In addition to the other functions of a spiritual and instructional leader, the principal is also “finance manager” and demonstrates “skills in planning and managing the schools financial resources” (Schafer, 2004, p.248). In discussing Catholic school leadership responsiveness to national and global changes and its impact on Catholic education, Mulligan (2005) argued that Catholic school leaders need to “keep the vision of Catholic education front and center in school life” (p.217). Subsequently, the classical approach is a leadership style consistent with historical and contemporary Catholic school orientations.

The *incremental approach* consists of a successive search for reasonable alternatives to facilitate good decision-making. In the context of rapid changes in the environment of Catholic Schools, leaders are adaptable. Accordingly, several researchers have identified that the Catholic school leader “is flexible and open-minded” and that Catholic schools cannot afford to be locked in a fixed type of leadership and decision-making (Mulligan, 2005, p.218). Heft (2011) even noted that among Catholic school principals that “leadership takes many different forms because a particular style of leadership moves some people but not others” (p.92). In addition, Heft (2011) stated that to compensate for “the inevitable blind spots that even the best of leaders have, mentors can play a key role” (p.92) in facilitating the incremental search for reasonable alternatives when making decisions and solving problems in school settings.

The *garbage can or “hope chest” approach* involves both contemporary and historical context scanning and using previously identified solutions to solve emerging problems. The school leader’s decision-making needs to take into



account past experiences when confronted with new challenges to seek the “best fit” options. According to Mulligan (2005) a school leader “reflects often on his or her own practice and practice of the school community” (p.218) when deciding issues related to the people, things, and ideas of their current leadership context.

The *shared decision-making* approach includes empowering others to assist in finding solutions to problems meaningful to the people most impacted by those problems. Catholic school principals’ decision-making is “participative” and “collaborative” and seeks to empower others (Palestini, 2009, p.36). Another researcher, Ozar (2010), reaffirmed the significance of shared-decision making in school leadership settings based on interviews conducted among well-known Catholic educators and administrators and came to the conclusion that “on the person of the principal we need a new model built on shared leadership” (p.115). According to Bryk et al. (1993), Catholic schools fosters a sense of community that “respects the dignity of each person, where members are free to question within a commitment to genuine dialogue, and where an ethos of caring infuses social encounters” (p.299). Heft (2011) stated that Catholic schools’ leaders “act justly when they enable people to work together so that students may truly learn and mature” (p.118). Dias and Halliwell (1996) found that faculty involvement in “shared decision-making in Catholic elementary school is alive and quite well” (p.59). Thus, the shared-decision making approach to making decisions and solving problems is used and emphasize in contemporary Catholic schools.

The *satisficing approach* involves making decisions that are acceptable to most of those impacted by the problem or the issue. Since Catholic school decision-making is and should be about serving the good of those for whom the school exists, the students, school leaders’ decision making is, therefore, often based on serving the “higher good” (Weiss, 2007, p.22). This requires the school leaders to resolve tensions in their relationships in order to make decisions that will serve the good of students and teachers. The Catholic school leader “embraces the role of mentor, especially for young teachers...loves kids and focuses on student needs” (Mulligan, 2005, p.218). Catholic school leadership is “self-motivated toward the achievement of mutually developed goals in an environment of mutual trust and respect” (Palestini, 2009, p. 21). In the spirit of St. Ignatius, most Catholic principals and administrators lead with “mind and heart and exhibiting care of the person” (Palestini, 2009, p. 50). Thus, the satisficing approach is frequently used by Catholic school principals to make decisions and resolve conflicts within their school settings.

The *mixed scanning approach* involves considering broad ends and tentative means that focus on adapting decisions to policy guidelines associated with the vision and mission of the organization. Catholic school principals demonstrate leadership skills in “developing a Catholic school culture, identify needed changes, supervise instruction, provide for the individual needs of the students, and exhibit leadership in curriculum development” (Schafer, 2004, p.247). In addition, Carr (2000) investigated how self-efficacy and motivation relate to school principals' spiritual leadership roles, and found that, “principals with a combined mission-related motivation orientation and a high sense of spiritual leadership self-efficacy have high levels of spiritual satisfaction” (p.64). The Catholic school principal has an “interior life and can articulate his or her spirituality” (Mulligan, 2005, p. 217). This makes them effective bearers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, builders of community of faith, and service to others. The Catholic school leader tries to imitate the “servant leadership” of Jesus Christ, and “carries out his/her duties that nurtures the growth of future servant leaders while simultaneously developing personal growth toward greater heights of community-service” (Nsiah & Walker, 2012, p.152; Nuzzi, Holter & Frabutt, 2012). Lavery and Hine (2013) studied the role of principals in promoting students leadership in Catholic schools, and determined that principals believed that the “most appropriate form of student leadership in Catholic schools embodies the leadership style of Jesus Christ,” servant leadership (p.54). The mixed-scanning approach reflects the servant leadership style that Catholic school principals employ in their decision-making and problem-solving as they comprehensively manage the people, things, and ideas of their respective schools.

The *political approach* involves objectives that emerge spontaneously but are personally driven by the leader's need to maintain their personal and positional power and influence (Hoy & Tarter, 2008, p. 85). However, in the Catholic tradition, the locus of authority rests with the bishop as clearly articulated by Shaughnessy (2005): a “school can call itself Catholic only with the approval of the bishop. Catholic schools are subject to their bishops in matters of faith and moral and in all other matters prescribed by the Church's Code of Canon Law” (p.68). Catholic school governance is not a democracy, the bishop has the “final responsibility for the diocese,” and at the parish level, “the pastor has the final responsibility” (Shaughnessy, 2005, p.69; Weiss, 2007). Conflicts may arise if “the principal cannot accept the authority and power” of the pastor or the bishop (Weiss, 2007, p.9). But, as in any organization, the leader who possesses the role and responsibility for a key component of the organization, like a specific school, will employ their political savvy

as well as their personal and community relationships in order to maintain their position of power and influence within their span of control (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Morgan, 2006). Catholic school principals employ political approaches when making decision-making and solving school related problems that involve their faculty, parents, community leaders, local school board members and parish members.

In this survey instrument, as in the original research study (Polka et al., 2011), there were five statements for each of the seven decision-making and problem-solving categories: *Classical approach*, *Incremental approach*, *Garbage Can or "Hope Chest" approach*, *Shared Decision-Making approach*, *Satisficing approach*, *Mixed Scanning approach*, *Political approach*. Participants were expected to respond to each statement based on their agreement according to a 5 point Likert-type scale (*Strongly Agree - Strongly Disagree*)

Thus, the *DM/PS Survey* component (Part B) of this research instrument provided respondents with the opportunity to identify their agreement with each of the seven various decision-making and problem-solving approaches initially articulated by Hoy and Tarter (2008). The reliability of the 35 questions in this Part B of the survey is .709 according to Cronbach's Alpha measurement. Therefore, the *DM/PS Survey* Part B of the instrument has both construct validity based on the original work of Hoy and Tarter (2008) and reconfirmed by studies conducted by members of this research team and reliability in relationship to the decision-making and problem-solving approaches of contemporary school superintendents (Denig et al., 2011 ; Polka et al., 2011).

The survey instrument was accessible via an Internet URL that was emailed directly to principals with information and instructions on how to open and complete the survey.

### **Demographics of the Sample**

The final sample population for this study of 121 participants included: 77 females or 64% of this sample were females, and 44 males or 36% of this sample were males. Additionally, 62 principals or 51% of this sample were over 55 years of age, and 36 principals or 30% were between 46-55 years old. Regarding nationality, the majority of participants 85 principals or 70% were American Catholic school principals and the remaining 30% or 36 were Canadian Catholic school principals. Nearly 30% of respondents had 11 to 15 years of experience as a principal with the next highest experience range as 20+ years with 23% of the sample population.

### Analysis of the Survey Data

Table 3

*Rank Order of Category Mean Scores of Problem-solving/Decision-making Practices*

Rank Order	Category	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
1	Garbage Can or "Hope Chest"	15.39	2.568
2	Satisficing	14.76	2.882
3	Political	13.10	2.145
4	Shared Decision-Making	11.38	2.348
5	Classical	8.98	1.677
6	Incremental	8.76	2.015
7	Mixed Scanning	8.20	2.010

The researchers also applied SPSS statistical treatments to the Part B data of this survey instrument and identified various levels of significance and correlation between and among the data. A series of independent-sample t-tests with nationality as the independent variable and agreement with using the decision-making and problem-solving approaches as the dependent variable were applied and there was no statistical difference between American and Canadian Catholic school principals. Moreover, in applying t-tests to examine the potential difference between gender and the agreement with using the decision-making and problem-solving approaches, no significant differences were identified.

Further analysis via an ANOVA, with age as the independent variable and the agreement with using the decision-making and problem-solving approaches as the dependent variables also revealed no significant differences by years lived. However, an ANOVA with years of experience as the independent variables and the agreement with using the decision-making and problem-solving approaches as the dependent variable revealed some significant findings (see Table 4).

Where a significant difference was detected, a Scheffe post-hoc analysis was conducted. The ANOVA displayed significant differences with the *Satisficing* problem solving approach  $F(4, 10) = 2.482, p = .048$ . In addition, further post-hoc comparisons using the Fisher LSD test revealed that Catholic school principals with 16-20 years of experience ( $M = 16.64$ ) were more likely to agree with using the *Satisficing* problem-solving approach than their colleagues with 11 to 15 years of experience and those with over 20 years working as a principal.

Table 4

*ANOVA Results Regarding Principal Years of Experience*

Category	F	P
Classical	.139	.967
Garbage Can or "Hope Chest"	1.208	.311
Incremental	.130	.971
Mixed Scanning	1.021	.400
Political	1.926	.111
Satisficing	2.482	.048
Shared Decision-Making	.239	.916

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

Therefore, as a result of this study, the researchers have determined that, overall, the decision-making and problem-solving approaches of contemporary American and Canadian Catholic school principals are similar. In addition, gender does not influence the choice of problem-solving usage by Catholic school principals. Perhaps the Catholic school principals with 16–20 years of experience had a greater penchant to use decision-making approaches based on the impact of the decision upon the people with whom they have worked for such an extended time.

The similarities in problem-solving and decision making use preferences by those in educational leadership roles within the United States and Canada provide support for leadership and administration programs within North America. This study is a good start to guide research in this area at this time.

The researchers note that there were some limitations to this study. The processes associated with obtaining permission for external research were more extensive and time-consuming than originally predicted. In addition, some school boards contacted were more reticent than others in allowing their principals to participate in the study. The researchers acknowledge that many principals do not have extra time at school; however given the 10–20 minutes estimated to complete the survey, it was predicted that more principals would participate.

In addition, the delivery of the survey in several Ontario Catholic schools in 2012 coincided with political unrest regarding education in the province of Ontario. The Liberal Party introduced the Putting Students First Policy

(otherwise known as Bill 115) that provided the provincial government greater control over local school boards (Braga, 2012). Some of the controversial components of the Bill 115 were the two years wage freeze for teachers, a reduction in sick days and the ability of the government to end any strike action by the teachers (Braga, 2012). This politically charged atmosphere prior to and during the establishment of Bill 115 could have had an adverse impact on the motivation of Canadian principals to complete the surveys associated with this research study.

Consequently, university administrative certification program administrators and professors with international programs situated along the US-Canada border, like Niagara University, may take comfort in noting that if they have students from Canada studying school leadership in their programs in the US or if US students are studying school administration in Canada, there really is no difference in terms of the decision-making and problem-solving issues used in course references and case studies. This research study also reinforced the significance of using the aforementioned ELCC Standards as a generic leadership conceptual framework for the development of school leaders in various national contexts with different historical, cultural, and economic realities. This study shows there are no differences in the leadership approaches to solve contemporary problems facing schools no matter how different the historical, cultural and economic realities of the various contexts since there may be no two more diametrically opposite contexts than the realities and exigencies of Catholic school leadership in the United States and in Canada.

While there is no difference in decision-making and problem-solving practices, it is recommended that given current trends, school leaders, especially Catholic school principals, directors, and policy-makers, in North America may want to consider a refocus on the mission of Catholic education with strong emphasis on moral development to further sustain and advance their survival. And, those Catholic educational leaders in the United States may want to reference the Canadian Catholic school history and experiences as reviewed in this article as they continue to pressure for more state and federal aid to Catholic schools as viable and valuable options in their respective educational milieu. Without the historical, cultural, legal, and economic "Wall of Separation," Canadian Catholic education appears to be alive and well and plays a vital role in the advancement of Canadian society.

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