



October 2017

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### Recommended Citation

Huchting, K. K., Cunningham, M. P., Aldana, U. S., & Ruiz, D. (2017). Communities of Practice: A Consortium of Catholic Elementary Schools' Collaborative Journey. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 21 (1).  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2101042017>

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## Communities of Practice: A Consortium of Catholic Elementary Schools' Collaborative Journey

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*Archdioceses and dioceses around the United States continue to brainstorm innovative ways to market their schools in an education system that provides a number of choices to parents and their children. Applying Wenger's (1998) learning theory entitled Communities of Practice (COPs), the purpose of this case study was to investigate one such plan to improve the viability of three inner-city Catholic elementary schools that had similar missions, were located within just a few miles of one another, and served the same neighborhoods of a working-class, culture-rich Latino community in Southern California. Data collection included in-depth interviews with principals and teachers and site visits that involved observations of classroom lessons and joint faculty meetings. Data were analyzed using a two-step coding scheme that was grounded in the main tenets of the theoretical framework. Findings showed the early stages of an interschool consortium that consisted of multiple levels of distributed leadership and the development and maintenance of COPs among principals, teachers, parents, and students. The findings of this study offer a potential model for Catholic schools in similar contexts.*

### Keywords

Consortium schools; Distributed leadership

**W**ithin the Catholic education community in the United States, most single-parish elementary schools are fairly autonomous. Ultimate authority within a parish school lies with the pastor; day-to-day educational operations are left to the principal; and, single-parish elementary

schools are mostly tuition funded with occasional support from the parish or diocese when absolutely necessary. In order to keep enrollment high and maintain financial stability, many single-parish elementary schools focus on recruiting and enrolling as many students from the surrounding areas as possible. This focus on enrollment, however, can lead to a competitive environment when there are other single-parish Catholic elementary schools in the same neighborhood. Additional issues experienced within single-parish schools include the inability to collaborate and share resources given that these schools usually have one class per grade and one teacher for each content area at the middle school level. These dynamics make grade-level and subject-area collaboration nearly impossible. Finally, principals rarely associate with principals from other local Catholic elementary schools because of the perceived competition. In light of these struggles and with declining student enrollment nationwide (McDonald & Schultz, 2012), innovative governance models have emerged in parish schools (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011). However, there is very little descriptive, explanatory, and evaluative research as to their status. The purpose of this case study was to begin filling that need by investigating a consortium of three Catholic elementary schools that serve a historically working class Latino community and, during the past two school years, have attempted to create and implement an inter-school collaborative venture.

### Literature Review

According to the Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church (Canon Law Society of America, 1983), parish schools are described as autonomous. The pastor is responsible for the well-being of the parish, and by extension, the viability of the parish school (Canon Law Society of America, 1983). Typically, this means that the pastor hires a principal to oversee and lead aspects of the school related to academics. Additionally, the principal often must oversee the school's operating budget. Principals also often receive support from parent groups and school boards who provide advice about the operations of the school. The operations of the parish school are typically done at the local level and the relationship between the parish school and the central administrative office, often situated within a diocese, is encouraged by the principle of subsidiarity (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). This means that the principal must interact with the central administrative office, often led by a superintendent who provides an academic vision for all schools; but, ultimately the academic leadership of a parish school lies with the principal, with delegated authority from the pastor.

While the responsibilities of the parish principal are numerous, strong leadership is critical to the success of the school. Specifically, research highlights the important role of strong leadership as a key predictor of Catholic school viability. In fact, the two primary predictors of Catholic school vitality that emerge in the literature include strong organizational leadership and Catholic identity (CID). According to the literature (Burnford, 2012; Convey, 2012; Fuller & Johnson, 2014; Manning, 2014), CID and organizational leadership of Catholic elementary schools are positively related and predictive of Catholic school vitality (Hobbie, Convey, & Schuttloffel, 2010). Specifically, CID is significantly and positively correlated with perceptions of leadership and institutional integrity, which defines organizational leadership. In other words, as perceptions of leadership increase, perceptions of Catholic identity increase as well. CID and organizational leadership also correlate positively with faculty efficacy and academic emphasis, which are considered indicators of school vitality (Hobbie et al., 2010). It is clear from the research that school vitality is strongly related to perceptions of strong organizational leadership, and perceptions of strong leadership are connected to perceptions of a school's Catholic identity.

While leadership is a critical component of Catholic school viability, unfortunately, over the course of the last 60 years in the United States, student enrollment in Catholic schools has declined, resulting in numerous school closures nationwide (McDonald & Schultz, 2012). Due to Catholic schools' financial dependency on tuition dollars, an overwhelming majority of these school closures occur in inner-city, working class, and under-resourced neighborhoods (Hunt & Walch, 2010). In order to suppress this trend, dioceses, parishes, and schools have tested various governance and funding models (DeFiore, Convey, & Schuttloffel, 2009). For example, some elementary schools have moved away from the typical, autonomous parish school model and embraced a more collaborative approach by creating either inter-parish schools (multiple parishes feeding into one elementary school), K-12 school systems (multiple elementary schools feeding into one high school), or university partnership schools (schools co-owned by a parish, a diocese, and a nearby Catholic university) (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011). These newer models have prompted changes to typical financial structures; traditional tuition-based funding expanded to include parish and diocesan subsidies, large-scale scholarship funds, development programs, economies of scale, endowments, patron programs, private philanthropy, and public funding (i.e., school choice, voucher, and/or tax credits) (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011).

One particular model, known as consortium schools (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011), are schools that share administrative duties, resources, common policies, and classroom practices. The purpose of this case study was to evaluate three Catholic elementary schools attempting to create such a consortium.

### Conceptual Framework

Consortium models emphasize shared resources, policies, and practices and can therefore be evaluated through the conceptual frame of Communities of Practice (COPs), which is a branch of sociocultural theory. COPs are groups of people “who share a common purpose and learn how to pursue this purpose from one another” (Scanlan, 2013, p. 352). This framework posits that a superordinate goal is more effectively and efficiently achieved when groups of individuals share a common vision and frequently interact with and support one another (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). According to Wenger (1998), COPs have three overlying characteristics: members of COPs (a) are in pursuit of common goals, or a joint purpose, (b) are mutually engaged in professional relationships that establish and sustain the community, and (c) employ the same “repertoire” (Scanlan, 2013, p. 352) of tangible and intangible artifacts—e.g., standardized and shared terminology and curricular foci and sequencing—that facilitate common practices. Scanlan and Theoharis (2015) also suggest looking at COPs as having three dimensions—the *what* (i.e., common goal), the *who* (i.e., mutual engagement), and the *how* (i.e., shared repertoire).

The theory of COPs is not new to research in Catholic K-12 education. For example, Scanlan (2013) found “constellations” (p. 381) of COPs within a Catholic elementary school located in an urban, working-class community. Because of an increase in the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in the school, faculty and staff decided on providing a socially just education as their common purpose (Scanlan, 2013). In other examples, Scanlan, Kim, Burns, and Vuilleumier (2016) and Scanlan and Zisselsberger (2015) investigated the Two-Way Immersion Network of Catholic Schools—a nationwide network of 12 Catholic elementary schools “transitioning from monolingual to bilingual environments” (p. 13)—through the lens of the COPs framework. They found within the network a tentative yet effective multidimensional system of COPs that organically emerged within schools. At times, though not as often, the COP emerged across schools as well. The COPs within this network of schools shared the common purpose of learning how to effectively implement a two-way immersion program (Scanlan

et al., 2016; Scanlan & Zisselsberger, 2015). As such, COP has been applied in previous research on Catholic schools and serves as an appropriate lens to analyze the current consortium.

### Method

The purpose of this case study was to investigate three Catholic elementary schools that, during the two school years prior to the study, attempted to create and implement an inter-school collaborative consortium. The following research questions guided our qualitative inquiry: (a) How is the consortium operationalized across the three schools? (b) To what extent does the consortium reflect a COP? and (c) To what extent is the consortium effective?

### Context

The diocese in which this consortium of elementary schools operated is located in Southern California and consists of 40 schools—33 elementary (K-8) schools serving a total of 12,330 students and seven secondary schools with a total of 6,569 students. The 40 schools in the diocese are supported by a centralized administrative office, led by the superintendent of schools. At the elementary schools, the pastors remain the parish school leaders. Their primary focus is on their parish and within this diocese academic authority is delegated to the principals who work closely with the superintendent. The superintendent of schools sets the academic vision for all of the schools in the diocese and is very active in providing support to the schools.

All three schools in the consortium are single parish elementary schools with one class per grade and a mean enrollment of 189 students ( $M = 189$ ), which is approximately two-thirds of each school's ideal enrollment. The three schools are within three miles of each other and located in a historically working class community where the majority of residents are Latino. The student demographics within each of the three schools mirror those of the community. Most of the students' parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico or other Central American countries; for many students, Spanish is spoken at home and English is their second language. Understanding that they served the same neighborhood, shared the same vision, and weathered the same short and long-term challenges to remaining viable, the three schools joined forces to form a consortium in hopes of growing and developing the school communities.

### Design and Procedures

Utilizing a case study approach (Yin, 2009) to understand the experiences of the various levels within the consortium, we gathered data from various stakeholders to understand how the inter-school collaboration was implemented. Because our focus was on the academic collaboration across schools in the consortium, we concentrated our study on key stakeholders with influence on academic-related initiatives, including the superintendent, principals, and teachers. Over two academic years, we conducted two rounds of principal interviews, classroom observations, observations of consortium-wide joint faculty meetings, and one-on-one interviews with teachers from the three schools. We also met regularly with the superintendent of the diocese. Our initial phase of data collection included interviewing the principals at the end of the first year of the consortium. Not long after the start of the following school year we began visiting classrooms at each of the three schools. These classroom observations were spread out over the course of the second year of the consortium. Each site visit lasted approximately half a school day, during which time researchers visited different classrooms so as to observe as many lessons as possible, observing lessons for approximately 30 minutes at a time. We were able to visit most, if not all, of the classrooms during each individual site visit. The second round of principal interviews took place approximately halfway through year two of the consortium. We also observed joint faculty meetings where faculty from all three schools gathered to discuss issues across schools; faculty from across the schools then broke out into smaller groups by grade-level or subject-area for concentrated meetings about pedagogy and curriculum. The last phase of data collection included interviews with teachers.

### Participants

Throughout the study, ongoing conversations and meetings occurred with the superintendent of schools, who at the start of the study was entering his sixth year in the position. The superintendent is a White male. He holds an administrative credential and two Master's degrees in education. Prior to this position, he worked as an administrator in one of the high schools in the diocese, serving the school for 27 years. His role in the diocese is to set the academic vision, support the principals, and build a school system that supports all families in the diocese.

Four principals ( $n = 4$ ) were interviewed in this study. One of the three schools experienced a leadership transition during the study; as such, both

principals were interviewed. The principal who left partway through the study self-identified as Latina and was a member of a Religious Order. She served as that school's principal for 11 years and worked as a teacher or administrator in Catholic education for a total of 42 years. She left the school because her Order reassigned her to a principal position at another school in the diocese. She held a master's degree and California state credentials for teaching and administration. The incoming principal self-identified as a White female and was entering her ninth year as a Catholic school principal. Prior to that, she was a teacher in Catholic schools for 30 years. Like her predecessor, she too was a member of a Religious Order.

The two other principals remained at their schools throughout the entirety of the study. One of them self-identified as a Latina; she held a master's degree and was on her fourth year as principal of the school. Prior to her current position, she was a principal at a different Catholic school for 11 years and prior to that she taught in a Catholic school for 14 years. The last principal involved in the study was a White male who was on his 15th year as a Catholic educator, all at the same school. He taught for seven years and then transitioned into administration. At the time of the study he was in his eighth year as principal of the school. He held a doctorate in education along with a California state teaching credential.

Five teachers ( $n = 5$ ) from across the three schools participated in one-on-one interviews. After attending joint faculty meetings where teachers from all three schools met by grade-level or subject-area—depending on whether they were elementary or junior high—to discuss pedagogical methods, these five teachers were purposively selected for individual interviews in order to gain their insight into the effectiveness and quality of the collaboration among the teachers across the three schools. We purposefully chose two teachers from the elementary level and two from the junior high level so that we would have a sample from each type of breakout session (grade-level in elementary versus subject-area in junior high); and, we chose the fifth teacher because, in addition to being a junior-high language arts and social studies teacher, she was the technology coordinator at one of the schools and played a large leadership role in teacher collaboration. The two elementary teachers taught fourth grade and self-identified as female. The technology coordinator was also female. Both junior-high teachers were male; one taught science and religion and the other taught science and social studies.



### Instruments

Given that our research questions were descriptive in nature, we created semi-structured interview protocols for the two rounds of interviews with the principals and the one-on-one interviews with the teachers to solicit in-depth descriptions of the consortium and their perceptions of the collaboration across the schools. The semi-structured format allowed researchers to follow the participants' flow of the conversations while maintaining focus on describing the consortium model. Specifically, in their initial interview, we asked the principals to describe the consortium in detail—how it began, their involvement in its creation and development, its strengths and areas of challenge, their goals for the consortium, and an overall assessment of the collaborative venture. We also asked principals to provide an overall assessment of their school (i.e., its current strengths and areas of needed growth). For the second round of principal interviews, we asked them to discuss the details of the consortium-wide technology initiative and to provide a status update on the consortium as a whole—its development over the course of the second year, if the purpose, goals, and vision had changed, and their hopes for, and predictions of, its future. The teachers' interview protocol included questions about their perceptions of the consortium, their evaluation of the collaboration among the teachers and principals across the three schools, and their predictions of and hopes for the consortium in the future.

In addition to the principal and teacher interviews, we conducted classroom observations at each school and observed joint faculty meetings where faculty from all three schools came together. During these observations we collected detailed field notes, taking particular notice of teachers' practices and discourse, lesson content and materials, the physical environment within the classrooms and hallways, student behavior, meeting topics, teachers' opinions of and comments about the other teachers within the consortium, perceptions of the three principals, issues within the community, and anything else we thought was relevant to the consortium and its stakeholders.

### Analytical Plan

All qualitative data—principal interviews, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and faculty meeting observations—were transcribed and coded using two separate rounds of coding. During the first round of coding, data were placed into one of three codes that theoretically mirrored Scanlan and Theoharis's (2015) and Wenger's (1998) three dimensions of COPs: (a) the *what* (i.e., common goal or joint enterprise), (b) the *who* (i.e., mutual engage-

ment), and (c) the *how* (i.e., shared repertoire). Distilling the data further, the second round of coding yielded the following emergent themes: (a) marketing, (b) collaborative leadership, and (c) Catholic identity (CID). These themes—marketing, leadership, and CID—align to the literature related to parish school vitality. This approach to qualitative data analysis allowed for rich, in-depth, multidimensional inquiry that thoroughly addressed each research question.

### Findings

Findings are organized by themes, highlighting how the consortium was operationalized across the three schools. These findings indicate the consortium's effectiveness and suggest that the consortium contains emerging COPs.

#### Marketing

When asked to describe the consortium's goals, teachers and principals mentioned the following: (a) provide the best Catholic education possible for the families in the community; (b) provide a rigorous and engaging curriculum for all students; (c) develop collaboration among the teachers across the three schools; and (d) provide opportunities for students and families of the three schools to interact with one another. Principals further added that these goals assist with marketing efforts of the school. While principals and teachers articulated and focused on how the collaborative venture would benefit the students through a strong Catholic academic experience, we learned that the superintendent actually created the consortium as a marketing tool for increasing enrollment and ultimately reaching financial stability at all three schools. Reacting to the difficulties maintaining comfortable enrollment in the three schools, the superintendent created the consortium. Without the joint venture, the three schools would have been left on their own to market their individual schools to the surrounding neighborhoods, which, because the schools were so geographically close to one another, could have led to the schools targeting the same families. Since these schools seemed to have the same mission and serve the same demographic within the community, the diocese thought it best to take a collaborative approach to marketing the schools as opposed to leaving them to compete against one another. The consortium was therefore created with the ultimate joint enterprise of collaborating on marketing the schools, which, according to the principals, was important for developing relationships with donors. Rather than trying to

promote their individual schools, the principals preferred having to sell the idea of supporting a larger, multi-institutional movement that was committed to providing quality, Catholic-centered educational experiences for families in an under-resourced yet culturally rich section of Southern California.

**Increasing enrollment.** The activities surrounding the marketing of the consortium illustrate the shared repertoire that emerged across schools. Specifically, developing an identity for the consortium was the first step to marketing the three schools in order to increase enrollment. The principals understood that they served mainly working class Latino families from the surrounding community so they focused their initial efforts on that specific demographic. It was also important to the principals to create a consortium-wide climate that was reflective of a rich Latino culture. In addition, many of the families in the local neighborhoods wanted their children to experience a Catholic education but chose not to enroll their children knowing that they would struggle to afford the costs. Therefore, the principals knew they had to make specific plans to communicate with these families and inform them of the various financial aid options that were available within the consortium. One principal talked about the importance of not trying to compete against, and out do, the other schools in the diocese that served wealthier populations but to focus on providing an accessible, high-quality Catholic education for the families in their local community:

We don't try to be something we're not. If you're looking to be an institution that serves a community that is more used to an elite status, there are schools out there for you. This is trying to provide an opportunity to people that wouldn't have it otherwise. That's our role as I see it.

Furthermore, many of the local court houses and government buildings were located within blocks of the three campuses so the principals talked about future plans of marketing to families who travel to the area for work but live in other parts of the county.

In addition to creating a consortium-wide identity, the schools and their stakeholders implemented common marketing strategies to increase enrollment. The first strategy, which materialized from the principals' general philosophy of parents being primary marketers for the schools, was a program where a group of Spanish-speaking consortium parents reached out to the community and helped the schools recruit new families also with Spanish-speaking parents—a very large portion of the population in the local neigh-

borhoods. Sometimes, when the program parents found families that were interested in enrolling their children in one of the three schools but needed a significant amount of financial aid, they brought the families to campus and guided them through the slightly onerous financial aid application. The second strategy was to showcase the students. For example, the principal in charge of the band and choir scheduled concerts at the main cathedral at diocesan headquarters so that people interested in donating to and supporting Catholic schools in the diocese could see how students were benefitting from the programs available at the schools. The principals were of the belief—and rightfully so—that additional donations could lead to increased availability of financial aid for working class families and ultimately gains in enrollment. And lastly, the principals believed that if all the stakeholders were committed to improving the educational experiences of the students already enrolled in the three schools then word about the consortium and its dedication to excellence would spread throughout the community.

**Financial integrity.** A principal summarized the collective ideology regarding admissions and finances within the consortium:

It's our mission to provide a quality Catholic education. That means it's our job to find the money and to articulate the story and develop the donors, and I think that's what this school does. And we really work at making the school affordable for the people that walk in the door.

One example of a joint initiative related to financial integrity is found in the agreement across consortium principals that they would keep the price of tuition the same across the three schools so as to control for the element of financial competition and so families would not choose one school over the others because of an apparent bargain. In addition to the uniform cost of tuition across the three schools, the price of attending a consortium school was the lowest of any Catholic elementary school in the diocese. Needless to say, the consortium principals did what they could to make Catholic education affordable for the residents of the surrounding community.

Regarding admissions policies, the three principals chose to accept all families that were willing to enroll their children and typically did not turn away potential applicants solely on the criterion that they may not be able to pay full tuition. As an example, a principal stated that “if a parent wants to give [her] child a Catholic education, [she is] not going to be denied because of finances.” With this last policy in place, it became necessary for the princi-

pals to approach each prospective family as its own separate case file in order to assess true financial need and the realistic availability of tuition assistance. And, in the eight years preceding the study, according to the principals, the number of families in need of tuition assistance has increased significantly: “It used to be that we had 60 to 70 % of families that could pay, and 30 to 40 on financial aid. Since 2008, that has flipped. So, now 60 to 70 % are on financial aid.” This has created a dependency on diocesan subsidies and fund-raising.

Though these policies and practices speak directly to the integrity of the principals and their steadfast commitment to inclusivity and providing the best Catholic education to anyone willing to take part in the consortium’s mission, all three principals admitted that financing the schools according to these policies was an ongoing challenge and that they constantly wrestled with the moral dilemma of how much to charge each family, as explained in this principal’s concrete example:

I’m going to say maybe, at the most, 10 students actually paid the full tuition. Everybody else was receiving assistance. If we were able to receive the full amount, or even half the school paid the full amount, the financial need would not be there. But, it’s still a challenge.

### **Distributed Leadership**

Recognizing the similar needs of the three schools, the superintendent requested that the principals work together as leaders of the consortium. In order to achieve this goal, instead of one principal planning events and programs for her school, the three principals applied a distributed leadership approach that harnessed and molded their ideas into consortium-wide ventures such as a three-school band, joint faculty meetings, and joint professional development. This principal-level collaboration involved ongoing communication and planning.

Shared responsibility among the principals appeared in two different forms. First, aspects of the principal leadership within the consortium were shared among the three principals, such as creating agendas and objectives for the joint faculty meetings and scheduling inter-school activities such as dances and field trips. Second, the principals felt comfortable relying on one another, which allowed each principal to focus on her personal strengths, areas of interest, and individual leadership identity. For example, issues related to music were diverted to the principal who founded and was in charge of the

band; professional development across the consortium was usually diverted to the principal who demonstrated strong instructional leadership; and, the principal who best understood the nuances of the neighborhood and community usually planned and organized fundraisers and events that involved families and outreach. In the end, this particular consortium model consisted of an effective COP among principals where multiple perspectives were harnessed into common ideas and large-scale, interschool programs were provided their due attention and care. Speaking about the shared responsibility among the three administrators, one principal stated:

...having three schools work together...we're stronger. I think it creates a stronger way of us helping each other. I know Jeff and Sonia (pseudonyms) and myself, we try to help each other when possible. So I think it's a great thing. We get ideas from each other.

There was distributed leadership within the consortium at the teacher level as well. One of the schools created a technology coordinator position for one of its teachers who already had extensive experience with technology integration in the classroom. Part of her job was to attend off-site training sessions and professional development workshops that focused on iPads and their applications related to classroom content and skill building. Upon her return, she was responsible for passing on the information to, and training, the rest of the faculty and staff at her school. As a way of demonstrating for other teachers how to incorporate the iPads into classroom lessons, the technology coordinator invited other teachers to observe in her classroom. Here is the technology coordinator describing how she weaned her colleague off of his projector and onto his iPad:

...he had at least one free period where he could come in and observe me and the class...I actually would involve him in the lesson so instead of using my iPad I had him use his iPad to project whatever it was that I needed. And then that way, he learned how to do it and he felt more comfortable...this year, he never touched his projector.

When asked if she would consider accepting the leadership role as technology coordinator for the entire consortium, she said yes and suggested that it would be a great idea and would potentially take pressure off of the principals.

**Teacher collaboration.** Another facet of the consortium was the collaborative professional development among the teachers, encouraged by the principals. One of the main goals of the consortium was to create a collaborative culture across schools so that teachers could learn from one another and share resources in order to improve upon their curricula and classroom instruction. Here is a first-year, middle school teacher describing his collaborative experience with the teachers from the other consortium schools and the benefits of working within a COP:

The ability to collaborate with someone outside of [this school] has been invaluable to me because sometimes you are on an island in a parochial school. And, to just bounce ideas off each other, especially resources, which are, I mean, it is always tight. But, especially at a place like this where we can share stuff. And...it has been pretty helpful, especially as a first year teacher, too. Because those other folks have been guiding me...

According to the teachers and principals, this collaboration happened during joint faculty meetings where the faculty and staff from the three schools met and discussed current and upcoming events in the schools and then, during allotted time for professional development, the teachers separated into small COPs based on grade for elementary teachers and content area for middle school teachers.

During observations of these teacher COPs—specifically the grade-level/content-area breakout sessions—teachers shared various iPad applications and taught each other how to use them in the classroom; teachers who had experience with the new digital textbooks and/or knew how to navigate the diocesan-wide attendance and grading system provided tutorials for their colleagues; and, they shared lesson plans with one another. During an interview, this fourth grade teacher mentioned cross-curricular planning:

...we talk[ed] about curriculum, about how the cross curriculum between language arts and social studies, if you don't have enough time [to teach both]. We tried to do that a lot this year. Like I said, I've been lucky I've been able to collaborate with other teachers.

Some teachers, such as this fourth grade teacher, described the ongoing COP collaboration that occurred outside formal meeting times:

I started using this great book last year, and I told the other fourth-grade teachers. I actually sent a picture of it to teachers over there because I said, 'This is a great Common Core Standard math book. I just make copies.' They're like, 'Really?' I said, 'Yes.'

As highlighted above, according to the teachers, the time spent in their inter-school COPs was beneficial. However, they made it clear that the process was still in its beginning stages and that a conscious effort was needed moving forward so that teachers continue to reap the benefits and gains are not lost. For example, one middle school teacher reflected:

...I think as long as they continue this, it will be beneficial. We are just getting to the point where we are going to be able to help each other out. So, as long as they continue, it will be beneficial. If they stop right now then it would have been a waste of time.

When asked about how the consortium could improve for the future, most teachers said they would like more opportunities throughout the school year to meet in their COP and to observe same-grade-level or same-content-area teachers from the other schools. Another frequent suggestion was for the three schools to create a common curriculum so that same grade-level and same content-area teachers across the three schools could curriculum map with one another at the beginning of the year. This would enable the COP to match their pacing so that collaboration throughout the year would be easier and more efficient.

Lastly, the data clearly suggest that leadership will be critical in determining the future of the consortium. According to most of the participants, without strong leadership from the superintendent and the principals, the consortium will not continue to develop and will eventually become a non-entity. When asked about the future of the consortium, teachers stated that they would like to have more opportunities to collaborate across schools. Teachers listed examples such as organizing joint field trips and participating in shared professional development and curriculum mapping sessions; however, they do not think these ventures will happen unless initiated, planned, and led by the principals. And, the principals shared this same expectation, but of the superintendent. Moving forward, if the consortium is to remain impactful, the principals will be looking to diocesan leadership for vision-driven guidance, perspective on setting priorities and goals, and feedback on implementation and evaluation.



### Catholic Identity (CID)

CID was central to the shared mission and goals of the consortium; it brought stakeholders together and guided their collaboration; and, it was prominent and conspicuous on all three campuses. A principal said the following about CID:

One of the things that is so obvious here is the faith—the Catholic identity of the school. That is one of the things that I noticed when I first arrived here. Because faith is number one with the Latino community. When parents come to the school, when I asked them why they want to bring their child here...the first thing they mention is the faith.

Regularly scheduled occurrences and events such as daily recess and lunch, tests in the classroom, and weekly faculty meetings always began with a prayer and the offering of intentions. Even special occasions such as consortium band concerts took place in the main cathedral at diocesan headquarters in front of the bishop who, according to one teacher, has been a tremendous supporter of the consortium schools and their faculty, staff, students, and families. The schools also offered opportunities for the students to bring their faith to the community while interacting with and serving the less fortunate people living in the local neighborhoods. For example, the students performed a live Stations of the Cross in a nearby park; they volunteered at a local convalescent home and the county food bank; they visited a cancer hospital; and, they participated in a food donation campaign for a community animal shelter. One of the principals stated that, for how little they have themselves, their students showed tremendous generosity and kindness to those in need.

CID was also present in the curriculum. For example, during classroom lessons in various content areas—not just religion—teachers had discussions with their students about many of the tenets of the Catholic faith, such as respect, citizenship, “Catholic behavior,” the golden rule of treating others like one would want to be treated, social justice, and stewardship. The songs that students learned and performed in music class were about Jesus, Christianity, God, and the teachings of the Bible. Even holidays such as Halloween and Valentine’s Day were celebrated in the classrooms with a Catholic theme (i.e., All Saints Day and Saint Valentine’s Day). Another example of CID in the curriculum was observed during a religion class; there was a particularly powerful lesson on the life of Mother Teresa that moved beyond simple facts

about her life and focused more on her moral and ethical teachings regarding poverty and liberation from the material world.

Even with all of the positive findings related to a strong Catholic identity among the consortium, there remains room for growth. For example, a number of teachers expressed the need to increase student and family mass attendance on Sundays. In addition, during a small group breakout session at a joint faculty meeting with all three schools in attendance, teachers from each of the three schools expressed concerns about student behavior. However, in a demonstration of the omnipresence of the Catholic faith within the consortium, one teacher suggested, as a remedy, a transition away from the typical punitive system and toward a way to help students rekindle their belief in, and commitment to, God: "If they improve their relationship with Christ then they will improve their behavior and lives...it is important to have a relationship with someone and something that is greater than yourself."

### Discussion

For the consortium of Catholic elementary schools located in a historically Latino community investigated in this case study, the *what*, or common purpose, was twofold: (a) to develop all three schools to a viable and sustainable level and (b) to provide a high quality, rigorous, culturally responsive, and Catholic-centered education for all of their students and families. Interestingly, the goal of remaining viable was articulated by the superintendent, while the principals articulated the goal as providing a strong Catholic academic experience. The principals appeared to be more student-focused yet further indicated that the rigorous academic and strong Catholic experience were in service to the larger marketing goal. It was clear that the superintendent and the principals realized that, in order to achieve financial stability across the consortium, enrollment needed to increase at all three schools. Therefore, there appeared to be the need for a collective and targeted marketing effort and there were signs of one in the making. As numerous Catholic schools nationwide—particularly those serving lower income communities—face declining enrollment (Hunt & Walch, 2010; McDonald & Schultz, 2012), this consortium provides an example of how three schools collaborated through common marketing and enrollment outreach efforts in order to reach their superordinate goal of financial stability.

The *who*, or mutual engagement, within the consortium consisted of multiple stakeholders within the school communities. All stakeholders—superintendent, principals, teachers, parents, and students—were somehow involved

in the creation and implementation of the consortium's goals and shared vision; and, leadership played a vital role in the development and growth of the inter-school, collaborative model. While the diocese was responsible for the consortium's inception, much of the burden of implementing and sustaining the new model fell on the three principals. Not only were they responsible for their own collaborative efforts toward creating joint marketing, community relations, and financial stability plans, they were tasked with collectively facilitating opportunities for teachers to learn from one another, for students to socialize with one another, and for parents to network. Teachers expected the principals to initiate the collaboration, define its goals and objectives, and guide the vision for its future. Principals looked to the superintendents for the same type of leadership and the teachers believed that the future success of the consortium will rely heavily on the effectiveness of its leadership.

Finally, the *how*, or shared repertoire, consisted of all classroom, school, and community-wide strategies and activities the stakeholders implemented to reach their common goal. There were numerous joint initiatives, projects, activities, and events that brought together the stakeholders within the consortium and provided evidence of developing COPs. The principals shared responsibility and practiced distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006); stakeholders created and implemented consortium-wide marketing and financial aid programs; the schools held joint faculty meetings where the principals addressed issues that concerned the consortium as a whole rather than each individual school; and, the joint faculty meetings served as forums for grade-level and subject-area collaboration among the teachers.

Overall, the data show substantial evidence of this three-school consortium's emergence and development into an operational COP, which may provide an example to single-parish schools similarly situated to serve working class communities. Within the context of this consortium, instead of the overall COP containing multiple parts that work independently of one another, the various elements of the COP (i.e., distributed leadership, teacher collaboration, CID, marketing, and financial aid) existed and operated more as interrelated and interdependent elements of a multidimensional system. The three schools shared a common vision, frequently interacted and supported each other, and had shared repertoire—all indicators of a COP.

Additionally, it was clear that the consortium was continually learning from each other how to pursue their common purpose. Like any organizational marketing plan, the ongoing efforts to increase enrollment in the consortium needed substance—characteristics of the consortium that appealed

to the community. Those characteristics included: (a) an innovative leadership structure founded and built upon the theories and practices of shared governance, distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and leveraging economies of scale (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011); (b) academic excellence in the form of improving teacher capacity via professional development within COPs; and (c) strong Catholic identity. And, during our time spent in the consortium schools and classrooms, we observed principals, office and support staff, teachers, parents, and students working tirelessly to improve each one of these characteristics. For example, principals divided their responsibilities to lead certain aspects of the consortium, such as professional development and the consortium band; teachers began to collaborate with one another to improve their technology use in the classroom; parents helped organize community events for liturgical holidays; and, students from all three schools participated in joint extracurricular activities.

COPs provided a foundation for distributed leadership, academic excellence, and strong Catholic identity witnessed at each school and acted as the stakeholders' blueprint for collaboration, support, and improvement. The principals were a COP as they learned how to navigate distributed leadership and the teachers created their own grade-level or content-area COP during joint faculty meetings so that they could teach each other how to apply their new technology tools in the classroom. CID across the three schools included frequent and ongoing celebrations and study of the Catholic faith; these were rarely done in isolation and deeply entrenched in the fabric of all levels and elements of the system. With findings suggesting that CID is predictive of school vitality (Hobbie et al., 2010), the strong demonstration of CID across the schools may suggest that this consortium will be successful in terms of school vitality.

Lastly, leadership emerged as the foundation on which the system was built and sustained; and, according to the teachers and principals, it will be the vital component to continuing the growth and development of the consortium. Leadership provides the foundation for a successful COP; diocesan-level leadership (i.e., superintendent) put forth the ideas for creating the consortium and using distributive school-level leadership (i.e., principals) promoted and facilitated a collaborative culture among the teachers, students, and families within the consortium. The multi-level collaboration across the consortium supported the collaborative leadership, the focus on increasing teacher capacity, and the strong CID of the three schools. Similar to the work by numerous Catholic school scholars (Burnford, 2012; Convey, 2012;

Fuller & Johnson, 2014; Hobbie et al., 2010; Manning, 2014), without strong leadership, the collaborative culture within the consortium would not have withstood, and most certainly will not withstand, over time.

Many evaluations of new governance and finance models within Catholic schools around the country use enrollment as the sole criterion by which to assess success, ignoring the nuances that make each diocese, school, community, and neighborhood unique. With the application of the well-established theoretical framework, COPs (Wenger, 1998), this qualitative case study searched beyond enrollment numbers and unearthed an in-depth description of the myriad of interconnected variables and details that accompany a sizeable, multi-school change initiative. That said, the enrollment numbers of the three schools in the consortium were stable. While the leaders expressed desire to improve enrollment, evidence was found to support strong marketing plans in support of financial stability across the consortium. Certainly, time will tell if the partnership continues to be effective by growing enrollment but in the meantime, evidence exists to suggest that these three schools have initiated a successful partnership. Like any study, limitations exist and should be considered when interpreting the findings. As a qualitative study, the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts, given the nuance and unique characteristics of the schools and neighborhood. That said, many Catholic parish schools exist in lower income areas with the primary purpose of serving the poor and declining enrollment numbers may suggest that many are focused on ways to increase financial stability. As such, the findings may be relevant to similarly situated schools. Other schools, interested in pursuing such partnerships, may benefit from learning about the key aspects that assisted with this successful collaboration. In evaluating the current consortium, the strength of leadership cannot be overlooked as an essential component of successful collaboration. In this diocese, the superintendent was a strong leader who set the vision for the schools, and in turn, the principals were all veteran leaders who knew how to execute the superintendent's vision. Each principal had a shared understanding that competition across schools was detrimental to the superordinate goal and as such, they each appeared to authentically believe in collaboration with each other. They expressed gratitude for opportunities to work together and to support each other. It was also clear from observations within the schools and at joint faculty meetings that the principals set the tone and created a culture in their schools where teachers were expected to participate collaboratively in their own COP. As such, to prepare for successful partnerships, all school leaders must be involved and

frequently interact; buying into the shared vision was also critical to this partnership, suggesting the need to lay the groundwork and establish a superordinate goal. Particularly, this study provided a formative evaluation of a three-school consortium model that included distributed leadership, collaborative professional development among teachers from different schools, and joint ventures that involved students and their families. In addition, because of the nature of the investigation, it provided a comprehensive explanation of why and how certain aspects of the model succeeded while others fell short. Both of these contributions can serve as guides for the leaders in Catholic education who continue their search for a diocesan-wide panacea. Single-parish schools also benefit from learning that collaboration across schools is possible even amidst a competitive environment.

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