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National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools: An Archdiocesan Framework for Excellence

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As Superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, my first acquaintance with the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools* (NSBECS) occurred during the 2011 meeting of the Chief Administrators of Catholic Education (CACE) in Mobile, Alabama. At that conference, I attended an overview presentation on the NSBECS (in development) by Lorraine Ozar, Ph.D., and Patty Weitzel-O'Neill, Ph.D., and immediately concluded that this common framework of characteristics and criteria—grounded in Church documents on Catholic education, clearly articulated, and carefully organized—was both necessary and long overdue. Now in my ninth year as an archdiocesan superintendent and my 50th as a Catholic educator, I'm more convinced than ever of the significant and timeless nature of this work.

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee's system of Catholic schools currently consists of 95 elementary schools and 15 high schools in the 10-county region of southeastern Wisconsin. According to the NCEA's 2017–2018 *Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing*, Milwaukee ranks 12th nationally in school enrollment and 9th in number of schools (McDonald & Schultz, 2018). In 2012, I invited my team of three associate superintendents, principal advisory councils, and Office for Catholic Schools collaborators to consider establishing the NSBECS as the single framework for all work related to Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee including, but not limited to, school accreditation, our Archdiocesan Exemplary Recognition Program, our Teacher Effectiveness Framework, school improvement planning, and teacher and principal evaluations.

Elementary School Accreditation

In 2012, soon after we made an archdiocesan commitment to using the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (NSBECS) (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) as our overall framework for excellence, the Wisconsin (arch)diocesan school leaders began to align statewide

Catholic elementary school accreditation standards with the NSBECS as well. The Catholic superintendents from the dioceses of Green Bay, Madison, La Crosse, Superior, and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, along with representatives from the Wisconsin Catholic Conference and the Wisconsin Religious and Independent School Association (WRISA), worked closely with Lorraine Ozar to ensure that the integrity of the NSBECS was preserved and fostered through the new accreditation process. Approved by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference of Bishops in 2014, this new process, based completely on the NSBECS, is now the premier and preferred accreditation tool for all Catholic elementary schools in Wisconsin. Information about the Wisconsin Catholic Schools Accreditation tool may be accessed [here](#).

Exemplary Recognition Program

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee has always fostered ongoing school improvement and excellence among its elementary and secondary schools and, in 2010, implemented an Exemplary Recognition Program to formally acknowledge schools exhibiting excellence in various key areas. In 2015, the Exemplary Recognition Program was modified, in light of the commitment described above, to align with the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (NSBECS) and the Defining Characteristics of Effective Catholic Schools. Using the NSBECS and the Defining Characteristics as the framework for rigorous self-assessment and as a means to achieve ongoing school improvement and, ultimately, school excellence, our schools now have a blueprint, based on national standards, to attain exemplary status in the areas of Academic Excellence, Educating the Whole Student, Mission and Catholic Identity, and Technology Integration. This recognition is awarded biennially and is valid for five years, following an in-depth application process, screening by teams of topic-area specialists, and site visits by those specialists for schools that advance to the visit stage of the process. To view the Exemplary Recognition Program in its entirety, click [here](#).

According to Kristine Klein, principal of St. John XXIII School in Port Washington, Wisconsin, whose school was awarded Exemplary Recognition in Academic Excellence in 2018, “We are a culture of continuous improvement. This is a journey led by a team organized around the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools*, including individuals who exhibit strength in each of the standards and the *Defining Characteristics of Effective Catholic Schools*.” Since the 2014 – 2016 application cycle, 20 individual schools have attained Exemplary Recognition status, several in more than one recognition category.

Teacher Effectiveness Framework

During the 2015 – 2016 school year, dialogue began within our Office for Catholic Schools about the need for a comprehensive Teacher Effectiveness Framework that would address concerns with current evaluation practices related to validity, consistency, and integration of skills, knowledge, and dispositions unique to Catholic schools. Research confirmed the ineffectiveness of most current teacher evaluation processes, and no contemporary model specifically focused on expectations for educators in Catholic schools. In collaboration with the Institute for Catholic Leadership at Marquette University, we closely analyzed current teacher evaluation processes and practices, as well as the nature of teacher effectiveness itself as embedded in the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools* (NSBECS). While we realized that the NSBECS are not intended to define teacher effectiveness in detail, we believed it was critical to create rubrics that would support the expectations implied in the benchmarks.

With that correlation completed, we were able to craft a document for teacher evaluation and professional growth that fully integrated expectations for Catholic school educators. The initial draft was completed in January, 2016, and a Task Force was convened to design the framework and identify the professional development needs of administrators. The Teacher Effectiveness Framework is now fully implemented and is based on the belief that consistent correlation to the NSBECS is integral to all aspects of teachers' growth.

Mission and Catholic Identity School Self-Assessment

In 2018, Seton Catholic Schools, the newly established network of 11 Catholic urban elementary schools in Milwaukee, designed a [Mission and Catholic Identity School Self-Assessment](#) based on the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (NSBECS) in collaboration with the Institute for Catholic Leadership at Marquette University. Specific questions for self-assessment focus on the effective promulgation and integration of the school's mission and mission statement, implementation of archdiocesan religion curriculum standards, catechetical training of religion instructors, the reflection of Catholic identity in the school's environment, integration of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching into all aspects of the school's programming, the Gospel witness of school faculty and leadership, the centrality of Catholic liturgy in the school's overall programming, the pervasiveness of and varied opportunities for student prayer, workplace

spirituality fostered through intentional adult faith formation, meaningful parent-teacher partnerships, and service as a community value.

Results from the self-assessments have been compiled and shared with all school leaders during individual meetings with reviewers. Faith formation planning at the school and network levels will be based on the results of these assessments and reports. As we look forward as an archdiocesan system of schools, we hope that this tool can become the basis for similar self-assessments for all elementary and secondary schools.

Defining Characteristics of Effective Catholic Schools

While much emphasis has been made in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to fully implement and integrate the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (NSBECS), we also attempted to identify and support the [Defining Characteristics of Effective Catholic Schools](#) as the foundation and essence of our schools.

At the opening of the 2015 – 2016 school year, we led our elementary and secondary school principals in a reflection exercise on the nine (9) characteristics: Centered in the Person of Jesus Christ, Contributing to the Evangelizing Mission of the Church, Distinguished by Excellence, Committed to Educate the Whole Child, Steeped in a Catholic Worldview, Sustained by Gospel Witness, Shaped by Communion and Community, Accessible to All Students, and Established by the Expressed Authority of the Bishop. School leaders were asked to sit at one of nine tables, each table representing an assigned Defining Characteristic. Silently reflecting on the characteristic, they underlined or highlighted the significant words or phrases in the description that resonated with them, shared the reasons for their choice of word or phrase with others at their table, cited one possible application of that characteristic to their school community and, as a group, composed a phrase or sentence that captured the characteristic's essence. All "essence statements" from the 9 tables were publicly shared and later integrated into [A Prayer for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee](#) that remains in regular use by parish, school, and archdiocesan leaders.

In addition, we organized the [Archdiocese of Milwaukee 2015 - 2016 Catholic Schools Annual Report](#), the first such report in archdiocesan history, around the Defining Characteristics of Effective Catholic Schools, and the [Archdiocese of Milwaukee 2016 - 2017 Catholic Schools Annual Report](#) around the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools.

Impact and Next Steps

While it appears to be too early to adequately measure the depth of impact of the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools* (NSBECS) on the Catholic elementary and secondary school communities in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, it is certainly possible to affirm that their usage here is universal, consistent, and increasingly meaningful.

Randal Green, principal of St. Andrew School in Delavan, Wisconsin, states that he and the principals in his region are using professional development opportunities to help their staffs learn about the NSBECS for the purpose of creating more aligned curriculum, developing standards for student assessment, and implementing evaluation practices to drive higher growth gains in student performance. He states, “It’s within these benchmarks, which also shape our local School Improvement Plans, that we define our own school culture and individual professional goals to lead each of our students toward a lifetime of success.” Similarly, Barbara Haase, veteran principal of St. Katharine Drexel School in Beaver Dam, a rural Wisconsin community, asserts that she has used the NSBECS most often when presenting to various parish councils and committees since the NSBECS “deepen community members’ understanding of the high standards to which Catholic schools hold themselves and enlighten them regarding the form, substance, rigor, and process which makes all of Catholic education healthier.” She further expresses gratitude that “the NSBECS link us to the world beyond our own backyard.”

Other initiatives within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee based on the NSBECS include annual School Improvement Planning for each archdiocesan school, a mentorship program for first-year principals, parish/school strategic planning, and numerous written communications and public presentations that reference this foundational framework. In process is the development of principal and president evaluation forms, also framed around the NSBECS, and the development of ongoing, practical strategies to use the *Defining Characteristics of Effective Catholic Schools* in the formation of Catholic school leaders.

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