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The NSBECS Impelling Action in South Carolina

Sandra Leatherwood
Diocese of Charleston

The Diocese of Charleston is composed of 32 schools, of which 26 are parish elementary, two parish PK through 12, and 4 diocesan secondary schools. Unlike many dioceses in the United States, the Diocese of Charleston is unique in that it encompasses the entire state of South Carolina. This poses a challenge not only geographically, but also in many other areas where developing a system of schools is crucial to the sustainability of Catholic education. Among the challenges a diocese of this type encounters is not only distance from the Catholic Schools Office, but in many situations, the distance between schools, which is especially significant in our case since most schools have one class of each grade level. It has therefore been imperative that we look at what the schools have in common that can draw us closer together regardless of the geographic challenges.

The publication of the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS) in 2012 unearthed factors that each of the schools have in common, regardless of where they are located, grade levels, the culture of the school or the socio-economic makeup of the families. It revealed ways of thinking and talking about Catholic education to which all schools in the diocese could relate regardless of their size or composition. The NSBECS highlighted tangible ways in which we could begin to build a common language and work towards common goals while the schools and the Catholic Schools Office supported each other in the process.

In many ways, working with these benchmarks helped us enhance our ongoing efforts to unify our schools and build relationships among our diverse school leaders.

Description of the Process

In 2014, the Bishop of Charleston called for a Catholic Schools Task Force to establish a vision and plan to revitalize and strengthen the Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Charleston. The impetus of this request was his concern that, despite substantial population growth in certain areas of the diocese, as well as growth in the number of schools, the enrollments in exist-

ing schools were, in a number of cases, declining. The first assignment of the Task Force was to establish four planning areas based on the NSBECS. The Mission and Catholic Identity plan aimed to move forward in strengthening the schools' mission to bring children to Christ and His Church with a special emphasis on inspiring all Catholics in the diocese to embrace the mission of Catholic education. It also highlighted ways in which the schools could better exhibit their Catholic identity visibly and spiritually.

The Operational Vitality plan acknowledged that a commitment to effective and efficient operations is vital for achieving academic excellence and fulfilling our Catholic mission. With that in mind, the crucial goal established is to enable schools and the diocese to assess critical areas objectively and holistically in order to recommend strategies and tactics that are relevant, differentiated, and actionable. The subcommittees developing the Operational Vitality Plan looked at both facilities and financial challenges.

The Academic Excellence plan's goals focused on ensuring curriculum and instructional practices were rigorous and rooted in the Catholic faith, inclusive of diverse student abilities, and committed to concrete steps to attract and retain mission oriented, highly qualified teachers and administrators.

The Governance and Leadership's plan included a focus on hiring, developing, and retaining leadership in pastoral and administrative roles, strengthening administrative oversight and accountability, and providing appropriate supportive services to assist all students.

During the course of the two-year process of consultation, dreaming, and considering realistic strategies, more than 1000 people contributed their observations, concerns, and recommendations born out of their firm commitment to Catholic education.

The work of the Task Force resulted in the Diocese of Charleston Strategic Growth Plan, organized and detailed in the same areas as the planning process: Mission and Catholic Identity, Operational Vitality, Academic Excellence, and Governance and Leadership. It serves as a guide to support the schools as they individually work toward strength and vitality.

Following the approval of the Strategic Growth Plan by the Bishop, the first task, essential to the work of the Task Force, was to establish a Diocesan School Advisory Council (DSAC) charged with executing the plan. The Catholic Schools Office worked to accomplish this task within the first year. The configuration of the council charged with implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the strategic plan is into standing committees reflecting and named for the NSBECS Domains. Each committee has the responsibility

to develop annual goals taken from the plan. Although the development of the Strategic Growth Plan was a monumental accomplishment, the establishment of the Diocesan School Advisory Council was critical to ensure the work of the Task Force.

Outcomes

As the DSAC began the implementation process, one strategy in Leadership and Governance surfaced as being of significant importance. Since the 2012-13 school year, the turnover in school administrators in the Diocese of Charleston schools has been five to eight per year. Much of the turnover is a result of Baby Boomers retiring from school administration. This significant turnover has often resulted in interim appointments. Individuals who have spent their school administration career in the public sector, and are at the point where they too are facing retirement, often look to move into Catholic school administration for a shorter term of service. Both of these situations have led to the formation of a Diocese of Charleston Leadership Formation program. This program, piloted during the 2017-18 school year and now fully implemented, consists of two cohorts, the Prospective Leaders and the current 1st and 2nd year Administrators. The Prospective Leaders cohort consists of current teachers in our Catholic schools who are discerning leadership. Some are currently in a Master's Degree or Certification program in Catholic institutions. The first and second year principals are in a two-year program covering both years in leadership in our diocese. Some of these individuals are recent college or university graduates; others are experienced administrators either from other dioceses or from the public school sector.

The Leadership Formation Program for both cohorts consists of sessions in the areas of Mission and Catholic Identity, Academic Excellence, Governance and Leadership and Operational Vitality. Pastors and the Diocesan Offices of Catechesis and Formation for Ministry provide sessions in the area of Mission and Catholic Identity. Academic Excellence sessions include presentations by the Catholic Schools Office on curriculum, instruction, and assessment from the school administrator's perspective. Governance and Leadership includes sessions presented on Canon Law as well as by the Office of Human Resources. Operational Vitality presentations are divided into Marketing/Enrollment sessions presented by Schools Marketing division of the Stewardship Office and budgeting and financial management sessions, offered by the Office of Finance. Sessions for both cohorts take place 6-7 times a year. These cohorts include both elementary and secondary prospective and current administrators.

The commitment of the DSAC and the Secretariat of Education and Faith Formation to enhancing the diversity of our student population has also resulted in notable increases in greater racial and ethnic diversity and the inclusion of students with learning differences in an increasing number of our schools. These are just a few of the distinctive accomplishments we have made in the Diocese of Charleston over the years since the late 2015 presentation of the Strategic Plan and the 2017 establishment of the Diocesan Schools Advisory Council.

Results

Although there is still a long way to go after only two years of its work, the DSAC has made tangible progress on areas key to the success and sustainability of the Catholic schools. While collaboration between and among the schools in the diocese has increased in the past ten years, the work of the Strategic Plan, with a focus based on the NSBECS, has strengthened these efforts.

Utilizing the NSBECS has allowed for the development of focused goals to which all schools, regardless of makeup, could relate. It has emphasized that the support of Catholic school education in the future is based on a shared communion among schools, parishes and the diocese. It has riveted everyone's attention on the reality that we must work together to achieve our common mission to strengthen and revitalize the ministry of Catholic education in our diocese.

Moving Forward

The Catholic Schools Task Force resulted in the Strategic Growth Plan which has been implemented by the Diocesan School Advisory Council which, in turn, has led to the development of the Leadership Formation Program, more conscientious recruitment of a diverse student body, and greater accountability from the local to the diocesan level across the board. The Catholic Schools Office has been able to focus its professional development sessions and its services to schools from the matrix of the Strategic Plan. These are all examples of how the NSBECS can assist in moving towards a systematic process to sustain Catholic education in a diocese. The Strategic Growth Plan is a living document that will develop over multiple years. Over time, the plan will have to be adapted and update in response to the current needs of the schools. We in the Catholic Schools Office continue to seek tried and true ways, along with innovative means, to serve, guide, assist,

and support the schools. Use of the NSBECS has helped to refocus efforts that may get us off track to achieving the goals. It has also helped to see the way in which some areas intersect between multiple domains. In this case, committees have seen the benefit of working collaboratively on achieving these goals.

The future of Catholic education in the Diocese of Charleston requires the commitment to support the schools in the spirit of mutuality—community, collaboration and common mission. We believe that embracing the NSBECS to lead us through the process has been a benefit to that commitment.

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