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The National Catholic Standards as a Unifying Strategy

Henry Fortier
Diocese of Orlando, Florida

I was blessed to become Superintendent for the Diocese of Orlando Florida in the same school year (2011-2012) as the publication of the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (NSBECS). In June 2011, I began my new role as Secretary of Education and Superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Diocese of Orlando, Florida. As with any new position, I gave myself a six-month window to immerse myself into the diocese and learn the culture of this Catholic community.

As I had promised the committee during my interview process, I took the first few months to listen and learn about the community I was called to serve. In my first weeks I had a few requests for meetings from veteran principals who were very unhappy with the direction of our system. I met with various groups that included teachers, assistant principals, office staff, curriculum committees, and visited schools. Not unlike other dioceses, our schools' community had challenges but there were many talented people already in place.

It was during my visit to a reputable Catholic School in Orlando that the principal, a 40-year veteran in Catholic education, pointed out one serious issue. As she articulated her frustrations she pointed to several binders on her bookshelf labeled, Florida Catholic Conference (FCC) Accreditation, Principal Growth Results, Diocese of Orlando Strategic Plan, School Strategic Plan, and School Support Visit. Each binder represented thorough and comprehensive information for achieving and maintaining Catholic schools' quality; however, each binder was distinctly different. This experienced principal posed the question, "Which plan do I follow?"

As I continued gather and analyze information, it became clear that at the diocesan level there were challenging issues. These issues included the following: the diocese needed a new principal growth process; the teacher evaluation tool was different for every principal; school-based strategic plans did not align with accreditation action plans or diocesan strategic plans; and a curriculum initiative, in its fifth year with major software issues, was causing dissention among the teachers and principals. To the dismay of some, I

abandoned the recently completed diocesan strategic plan and began approximately two-years of dialogue with colleagues and fellow superintendents, encouraging change with the FCC accreditation process for the Catholic Schools in the state of Florida.

In March of 2012, the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (NSBECS) was published. As the diocesan team, my Director for School Planning, and Associate Superintendents, we reviewed the document. It reminded me of an instrument called The Factors of Viability that was developed in 2006 by Dr. Ronald Valenti, then Superintendent for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Thus, began a rich discussion of how the NSBECS could be utilized in Orlando.

Remembering my discussion with the 40-year veteran principal when I first arrived, and the vision of the many different binders and goals, my hope was that these new standards might replace the “silo” components and the need for 5 binders. Perhaps this could be the core instrument that would join all diocesan schools together as a system of schools under a singular, consistent set of standards for efficacy and excellence.

These new standards, uniquely Catholic, timely and relevant, were created by Catholic education leaders around the country, supported by two leading Catholic universities, and were endorsed by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA). This document provided a new opportunity for the dioceses, and as such I introduced the NSBECS for discussion to the Diocesan principals in April 2012. With minimal discussion, it was unanimously decided by the community that the Diocese of Orlando should adopt the NSBECS and establish these standards as the keystone for all that we do in Catholic schools.

A number of issues were identified and the work began to adopt and implement the NSBECS. The principal evaluation process was the first item addressed. The process in place relied on constituent surveys without relevant evidence, reflection, or data, which resulted in goals for principal improvement informed only by the opinions of those willing to complete the annual survey. A committee was formed with its first meeting April 24, 2012, and their work resulted in a new reflective Principal Growth Instrument (PGI) based on the 4 domains and the 13 standards of the NSBECS.

At the same time the Orlando diocesan committee was developing the PGI, the FCC School Executive Committee was convened for the biannual meeting. This committee is made up of the seven superintendents in the

Province of Florida, along with staff from the FCC. Repeated discussions related to the accreditation standards were already occurring. The overall consensus was that the FCC accreditation process needed to be revamped. The FCC standards and benchmarks had been developed decades prior and although they were updated on a regular basis, there was a need for both the process and the standards to be revamped.

I reflected on my experiences and my involvement as an Associate Superintendent in the Archdiocese of Baltimore (2006-2009) and the Archdiocese of New York (2009-2011) as these archdioceses made significant transitions due to changing demographics and declining enrollment. In the spring of 2008 in Baltimore as we were preparing for a large strategic planning undertaking, the Office of Catholic Schools was charged with visiting and evaluating every school in the Archdiocese within 6 months using the Factors of Viability and rating them using a common scoring rubric. The teams were comprised of associate superintendents, directors, principals, and other experts in the specialty areas like finance and technology. This was a very eye opening, intense, and positive experience for all involved. At the same time the Archdiocese of Baltimore after long philosophical discussions decided to transition from site-based accreditation with Middle States Accreditation Association, to regional accreditation with AdvancED. In 2010 while in the Archdiocese of New York I found myself again in a system engaged in philosophical discussions about individual school accreditation versus regional or district accreditation. The archdiocese was in the early discussions of transitioning to regional accreditation with AdvancED similar to Baltimore. Knowledge gained from these professional experiences influenced my decision to move forward to develop a new accreditation process for the Orlando Diocesan schools.

We decided we needed to take a new direction, as a Catholic schools office and set out new diocesan policies and processes for school accreditation. As a Catholic schools office we had the ability to proactively schedule, visit and review the effectiveness of all Catholic school communities, based on the unifying principles of common standards and a diocesan plan and policies. The previous process was not intended to unify a system of Catholic schools around a common set of goals or expectations. School leaders struggled with competing compliance expectations. On one hand the schools were being accredited by an outside accrediting entity while at the same time being expected to comply with the Catholic schools office expectations, resulting in anxiety and conflict.

At the same time, the Florida superintendents were almost evenly split regarding the need to develop a process that mirrored district accreditation and wanting to keep the old processes. After much discussion and work, a compromise was agreed upon and a blended accreditation model was created. The Florida Catholic Conference would remain as the accrediting agency conducting 7-year team visitations; however, the third-year review process was significantly altered from a presentation the school personnel gave to the diocesan and FCC representatives to a mid-cycle diocesan-led team visitation to review progress. In our discussions, as superintendents it was clear that the NSBECS would completely replace the prior standards and benchmarks used by the FCC. The NSBECS were developed to support schools across the country establishing consistent standards in areas about which we are similar while allowing for the uniqueness in each of our Catholic communities. This was exactly what we needed in our accreditation process in Florida. This would allow for common standards for all seven dioceses while allowing each superintendent the authority to customize those standards to the policies and procedures of their diocese and local bishop. This also allowed for greater awareness and compliance to diocesan policies and procedures. All schools are now part of an accreditation process identified with specific standards in the NSBECS. This new hybrid evidence-based approach has supported the work of the central office especially when encountering a rogue administrator (or Pastor) who may not have always followed diocesan procedures in the past.

The Diocese of Orlando began the transition to accreditation by NSBECS in the 2013-2014 academic year. The mid-cycle review as noted above is referred to as the third-year review. These third-year visits are comprised of staff from the central schools' office and the diocesan offices of facilities and design, human resources, risk management, and finance. This group is accompanied by assistant principals and principals from other diocesan schools. These third-year review teams range in size from 5 to 10 depending on the size of the school and represent expertise in Mission and Catholic Identity, Governance and Leadership, Academic Excellence and Operational Vitality, the four domains of the NSBECS.

This new blended accreditation process has worked very effectively for the Diocese of Orlando. It has moved the Office of Catholic Schools from being reactionary and dealing with problems only when they arose to proactively scheduling visits to all schools and inspecting evidence provided by

the school aligned with each of the 70 benchmarks. Another positive outcome is a new sense of collegiality among school leaders as principals visit each other's schools appreciating the uniqueness and similarities in each of the communities while gaining new ideas and broadening their perspectives beyond one building. More importantly this effort has strengthened school compliance with local policies and unified our schools as a system of schools rather than a loosely connected group of schools with separate, unique plans tied to an outside agency.

These standards and benchmarks were developed solely for Catholic schools by Catholic educators, ensuring a most appropriate fit for this process. All the other accreditation programs that were reviewed, presented standards used to accredit public schools with an add-on section for Catholic identity, which was similar to trying to fit a round peg into a square hole. The adoption of the NSBECS was unanimously agreed upon and received approval by the Florida Bishops in 2013.

Finally, in 2015, once the new accreditation process was firmly established, a committee was formed to develop a new Teacher Growth Instrument (TGI) for the Diocese of Orlando with the NSBECS providing the foundation. The TGI particularly focuses on Domain I, Mission and Catholic Identity and Domain III, Academic Excellence.

In addition to the most recent development of the TGI, the Orlando diocese has worked in collaboration with the FCC to develop Early Childhood standards for accreditation based on the NSBECS. In the past, the seven Florida bishops assigned oversight of early childhood education to the local diocesan central schools' office. As a result, there were few, if any, measures for accreditation or accountability for Early Childhood programs. Today the Florida dioceses have consistent standards for schools from pre-kindergarten through high school.

In the Orlando Diocese, we are also working to create a *critical mass* of educators throughout the diocese who have been trained in the new accreditation process based on the NSBECS. Formal training is offered annually and to date, all of our principals and over 150 teachers (15%) have been formally trained and have shared their experiences with the new accreditation process. All of our elementary schools and early learning centers have completed either the third-year review visit or the 7-year formal accreditation visit using the NSBECS-based process. We now communicate with a common language based on the 4 Domains and 13 Standards.

The multiple binders that once filled the office shelves are gone now and, if possible, all components of our operations have been connected like the spokes on a wheel around the NSBÉCS empowering the mission of the Diocese of Orlando to proclaim the Gospel message within an academic environment that challenges students to be creative and critical thinkers who integrate faith, moral leadership and compassionate service to create a more just and humane world.

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