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Michael Boyle
Loyola University Chicago

Gail Donahue
Notre Dame of Maryland University

Mary Pat Donoghue
USCCB

David A. Faber
Diocese of Grand Rapids

Frankie Jones
University of Notre Dame

See next page for additional authors

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Witness to Hope: Catholic Schools Respond to COVID-19

Authors

Michael Boyle, Gail Donahue, Mary Pat Donoghue, David A. Faber, Frankie Jones, Jeannie Ray-Timoney, Brooke Tesche, and Timothy D. Uhl

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The twin uncertainties of the pandemic and the economic downturn have taken a toll on our Catholic schools. Yet reports across the country are that Catholic schools have been very successful in remote learning. Although there are well-documented efforts to define the values of Catholic schools, these values are not fully known and there is still not a well-crafted national value proposition for Catholic schools. As the context surrounding Catholic schools has changed, it has become imperative that Catholic schools coalesce around a new value proposition during uncertain times. What follows is an attempt by a group of dedicated Catholic school stakeholders determined to change the narrative. As our schools have pivoted to new forms of delivery and connections, this ad hoc group represents the same type of creative efforts to form a community.

As a committee, we identified five themes of hope that can continue to guide the work and witness of our Catholic schools: prayer, partnership with families, personalization, persistence, and planning. In the following sections, we provide a rationale and overview of each theme. We also include relevant testimonials of diverse stakeholders to illuminate each theme and give voice to the hope across our school communities.

Keywords

Witness, Catholic Schools, Response to COVID, value proposition

The twin uncertainties of the pandemic and the economic downturn have taken a toll on our Catholic schools. Already over 43 have announced their permanent closures due to the pandemic (follow the [updated list here](#)) and it is expected that the final tally might exceed 100 (Klein, 2020). With unemployment soaring, many parents have been holding off on re-enrolling (or enrolling altogether) due to the economic uncertainty. Studies have shown enrollment decline in private schools due to the Great Recession of 2008 and the same trend is expected (Scafidi & Wearne, 2020).

Yet reports across the country are that Catholic schools have been very successful in remote learning. The message has not been widely broadcast,

however, as Catholic schools have continued to struggle to define themselves as virtual Catholic schools. The following testimonials come from families enrolled in Catholic schools in our communities:

We, as a family, could not be happier to be part of our Catholic school community during this unprecedented time. The entire staff and faculty have gone above and beyond what we could have ever imagined to keep our kids learning and engaged. We love that the teachers are trying to keep things as normal as possible and completing the curriculum.

Thankfully, the faculty and staff at [name of Catholic school] have facilitated a distance learning program that has provided a strong, consistent learning environment for our children. Schooling-at-home looks much different than in the classroom, but children thrive with routine, so our day is as closely aligned to that norm as possible. More important than the academic needs of my kids, however, are their spiritual needs, and faith-filled teachers, staff and pastors have tended to these very well.

These testimonials exemplify that Catholic schools are finding success. However, the narrative has been one of change and challenge, rather than innovation. And many Catholic school leaders are reporting uncertainty in the parent community about re-enrolling in what might be a remote learning environment.

Although there are well-documented efforts to define the values of Catholic schools, these values are not fully known and there is still not a well-crafted national value proposition for Catholic schools. As the context surrounding Catholic schools has changed, it has become imperative that Catholic schools coalesce around a new value proposition during uncertain times. What follows is an attempt by a group of dedicated Catholic school stakeholders determined to change the narrative. As our schools have pivoted to new forms of delivery and connections, this ad hoc group represents the same type of creative efforts to form a community.

As the ad hoc committee came together to share our thoughts, we quickly came to consensus on a recommendation to focus on the purpose of Catholic education. Catholic schools form disciples by finding God in all things. Our students and educators are learning from this experience, finding meaning and purpose during these twin uncertainties of the pandemic and this sud-

den economic downturn. A renewal of faith, hope, and charity is so needed at this time in the world, and our Catholic school communities are uniquely positioned to provide just what is needed both for the families that we serve today and for a future sorely in need of the children who have been formed in them.

“Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Peter 3:15). Catholic schools seek at all times to recognize the presence of God in our midst, to acknowledge beauty, goodness, and truth, to grow in personal relationship with Him, and then to share His love with others as His witnesses in the world. Nothing about the twin uncertainties of the pandemic and economic downturn have kept Catholic schools from this central purpose. In fact, one may argue that the prayerful and personalized outreach of Catholic educators to each individual student and family, the partnership that has been renewed with parents, the perseverance of all through these trying times, and the planning that is emerging will pay lasting dividends to the future of Catholic schools.

From the letter of one Catholic school leader to the Catholic schools’ community, this dynamic was articulated this way:

BRAVO to all of you who jumped faith first into a new way to deliver meaningful instruction. Bravo to our brave school leaders who swiftly and profoundly rose to this challenge and led. Bravo to our faith-filled parents who, in mind, body, and soul, have accepted this challenge to deliver educational support like never before in our history. I am so proud to serve you in this moment. What a privilege it is to witness your goodness! Catholic schools exist to make saints, and these are our moments of refinement.

“In this you rejoice, although now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:6-7)

With all my heart, I express my gratitude to each one of you. May the Lord reward your heroic and saintly efforts in these trying times.

The second recommendation of the ad hoc committee was the need to evangelize these stories. We have interspersed our essay with these testimonies to give witness to hope and to ensure the promise of our collective future is not

lost in its uncertainty. We all recognized that our inboxes were full of powerful stories, and that we must relentlessly share them with the community in the form of:

- Testimonies from students discussing how they have been challenged, loved, and continued to learn.
- Testimonies from parents about how grateful they have been for the support of the teachers.
- Testimonies from staff members about how much they appreciate being a part of the community.
- Testimonies from school leaders about the collaboration and innovation they have witnessed.

Finally, our ad hoc committee has recommended asking stakeholders for their opinions to shape our planning forward. We need to establish ways to reach out and ascertain what teachers, students, and families need going forward. Through our strong relationships we can come to know the unique needs of all within our communities. With this information Catholic schools are nimble and responsive, and able to meet the demands of change without hesitation.

As a committee, we identified five themes of hope that can continue to guide the work and witness of our Catholic schools: prayer, partnership with families, personalization, persistence, and planning. In the following sections, we provide a rationale and overview of each theme. We also include relevant testimonials of diverse stakeholders to illuminate each theme and give voice to the hope across our school communities.

We have witnessed care and concern for every individual in our communities and have witnessed creative ways to build and strengthen community throughout this crisis. With intentionality of purpose, the telling of our stories and careful planning, the value of Catholic schools in uncertain times is unparalleled within the educational landscape.

Tennyson once wrote of prayer that “More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.” Here, Tennyson is tapping into the supernatural reality to which prayer provides an access road. Catholic schools provide this access by forming students in the habit of prayer, whether communal or individual prayer.

A critical piece of the integral formation offered by Catholic schools – and found in very few other education models – is the attention paid to the eternal souls of our children. This reflects the truth that our students possess “dual citizenship,” as Dr. Ryan Topping once wrote. In Catholic schools, we

work deliberately to nurture that awareness and to develop the faculties of the mind and soul that encourage our children to look beyond the physical world into the fuller metaphysical reality our faith promises.

It is interesting to note that, despite all the struggles associated with the flipped switch to online learning, Catholic schools prioritized prayer. One testimonial testified to this new reality:

More important than the academic needs of my kids, however, are their spiritual needs, and faith-filled teachers, staff and pastors have tended to these very well. Our children have LOVED listening to their teachers lead a rosary, pray with Fr. Guest during Stations of the Cross and participating while Bishop Burbidge lead all-school Mass. Although these virtual experiences are new and different, these acts of faith that strengthen our Catholic identity are indispensable.

Many school leaders began each day by leading their school communities in prayer, just as they do on campus. Pastors have live streamed Masses, Holy Hours, and devotions such as the Rosary and Chaplet of Divine Mercy. This certainly does not mean that our schools neglected the academic studies; in fact, they have excelled at continuing to provide engaging learning opportunities. But the beauty of the Catholic school is this: it proclaims an order to things, a knowing of “first things first.” And that is why we continue to thrive, even in these difficult days.

This emphasis on prayer was often recognized by parents who “have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that primary and natural responsibility for their children’s education belongs” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, no. 20). Catholic schools build faith-filled communities to educate the whole child in partnership with parents. The current environment of the pandemic has brought that relationship into the forefront. We recognize that the role of parents and families as the primary educators of their children is ever more important now that distance learning has been the predominant means of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As teachers have pivoted to deliver Catholic education via distance learning, parents also have risen to the occasion to support the learning day to day at a level involving much more direct attention and instruction on their part. The partnership between parents and educators has grown and strengthened as testimonials demonstrate:

The personal phone call, the postcard, so many things that make my kids and our family feel loved and cared for during this time.

Our school's response has been nothing short of extraordinary. My daughter is communicating with teachers and friends, creating a sense of normalcy and well-being amidst the chaos. Teachers have been responsive, engaged, communicative, and caring. I am so grateful to be part of this community.

Catholic schools are nimble and able to personalize learning for students, taking into consideration the needs of each family. Not all households are able to address the daily expectations of learning the same, as such, our teachers have worked to address these needs on an individual basis. We have witnessed countless situations where teachers have adjusted learning tools, instructional methodologies, and learning experiences to meet the needs of students and families. Technology has been used to build human connections as one testimonial illustrated, "The spiritual connection between school and home was maintained and extended through the use of technology." In turn, parents and families have responded to these adjustments positively, and continue to see the Catholic schools as a place to educate their children for life. It is a testament to the realization of both Catholic schools and parents that a Catholic education is still the best option to nurture a positive faith-filled community of learners whether in the same building or participating remotely with one another.

As the economic challenges mount, Catholic schools are determined to work with each family to keep their partnerships intact. As one Catholic school leader said,

In times of crisis or great transition, good emerges. From the inception of distance learning on March 12, the faculty and staff at our school have made every effort to provide a quality faith-centered educational program for our students. Every aspect of our distance learning program has been developed with a thoughtful and holistic approach - including parent communication, religious practices and activities, whole and small group live instruction, teacher created videos, and ongoing professional development.

Communication, care and community have all worked to build those family partnerships.

The family-school partnership is not the only integrating force at work in Catholic schools. In his *Urbi et Orbi* address in 1978, St. John Paul stated:

...the human being is always unique and unrepeatable, somebody thought of and chosen from eternity, some called and identified by his own name (no. 1).

This statement has implications for Catholic education and serves as a reminder to Catholic schools who are charged with providing an education that is geared towards the unique gifts and talents of each individual student. The appearance of COVID 19 has offered a challenge to strive for a new level of personalization across several domains. Because of their smaller size and different governance structures, many Catholic schools reportedly were able to “pivot on a dime” and offer academic programs in new configurations within days of the ordered school closures. This quick response allowed for students to experience some “level of normalcy and predictability” in an uncertain time.

Through the heroic efforts of Catholic school staff, new technologies and pedagogies were employed to personalize instruction to meet a variety of student needs. However, these new instructional approaches were paired with the “tried and true” strategies so critical to the Catholic education brand—the reliance on relationships. Using Zoom, Google Hangouts and other platforms, Catholic school teachers used these channels to not only formatively assess academic skills but to assess social-emotional status.

As part of their charism, the Jesuits speak of *cura personalis*, care for the person. This phrase can certainly be used to describe the efforts of Catholic school faculty in responding to COVID 19. Countless stories have been shared of Catholic school teachers spending time with students who were anxious and fearful for their parents who served on the COVID 19 front line. In addition to addressing the academic needs, teachers prayed with their students to provide spiritual support.

Given the economic challenges that COVID 19 has caused, Catholic schools have been exercising an expanded ministerial role in supporting families, a whole different level of personalization. In addition to supporting families that were experiencing food insecurities, Catholic school leaders also assisted families in locating other kinds of economic support. A fair amount of these families never thought that they would have experienced this level of economic need. Catholic school leaders found themselves in

uncharted territory, helping furloughed parents access financial support while maintaining support and dignity of the individual family.

Through the devastation of the COVID 19 pandemic, a moment of grace is surfacing. Catholic schools have become more cognizant of this critical characteristic and have had the opportunity to re-discover (and celebrate) the defining element of personalization. By embracing this critical characteristic and celebrating personalization, Catholic schools help to meet St. John Paul's admonition that all humans are unique and unrepeatable.

Part of the unique vision of humanity is emphasizing what needs to be celebrated. We took action to inspire one another, and each of you, for the greater purpose of forming disciples to see God in all things. In partnership with our faith family, we prayerfully accept this requires perseverance. Perseverance is doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success. Our Catholic school teachers and families have demonstrated resolve in finding ways to adapt and innovate their instructional strategies and utilize new technologies while responding to the emotional and spiritual needs of our students. We are so proud of the way our schools have embraced this challenging time and rediscovered passion for providing meaningful learning opportunities despite the disruption of the national shutdown.

Many people have been hurt by this virus, through illness or death, through job loss and economic hardship, and through increased stress. Our school children have also experienced loss in milestone events and the simple joys of the hallway or recess. I personally have also shared feelings of frustration and moments of fear while working from home but my faith never allowed the feelings to overwhelm my ability to persist. It is now we have been called to lead in new ways, many of which mirror Jesus, by reaching out to people where they are to touch their hearts, inspire their souls and transform their minds with quality academic instruction that is authentically Catholic.

We have lived through challenging times such as 9/11, the Great Recession, the abuse scandals and even the sniper attacks in the Washington, DC suburbs. Observing the changes in our Catholic schools brought about by the current pandemic, I am heartbroken for the losses we are suffering while at the same time, in awe of the determination with which our teachers and leaders have risen to the challenge.

When governors ordered schools closed, Catholic school leaders moved into action, leading and encouraging school communities as St. Paul did. "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (Romans 12:12). We worked simultaneously with school leaders to support teachers who were being asked to convert face-to-face instruction to remote learning

in three days. Once over the initial shock of what was being asked, our teachers began to see this time as an opportunity to confirm deep faith and trust in God; an opportunity to develop a unique connectedness with students, parents, guardians and caregivers; an opportunity to connect with the greater Church. Both of us have witnessed principals and teachers use the flexibility of site-based management to modify schedules, design instruction and strengthen partnerships with families.

The days have been stressful for teachers and for families. Rising early to attend Zoom professional learning sessions, facilitating synchronous Zoom meetings with students, and in many cases supervising learning for their own children. We have witnessed Catholic school teachers and families make sacrifice after sacrifice determined to deliver quality instruction. Most amazing was seeing teachers pivot seamlessly into remote instruction! Teachers from various school communities reimagining ways of teaching and reaching students by persevering to provide meaningful learning opportunities despite countless disruptions like weak Internet connections, shortages of electronic devices and training parents on the various educational platforms. Interestingly, for Catholic school teachers these past few months have proven to be a time to not remain in the safety of the status quo but to step forward in growth.

As one family articulated,

Covid-19 brought many challenges and opportunities for...families and staff. Right away we found that the...staff was well prepared, organized, and proactive in communication which helped us easily adapt to a distance learning environment. The spiritual connection between school and home was maintained and extended through the use of technology...teachers have gone out of their way to provide different platforms for learning to help with many different learning styles and to keep the children excited and engaged. Support and encouragement provided by the entire staff has continued throughout this unprecedented time.

Another family shared,

The Corona virus has been traumatic for our family. It has been a challenge to work from home, make sure our children are still learning and keep up with their school work, while keeping our faith journey moving in the right direction and not fall into despair. It's been a challenge, but we never gave up because of the support from our Catholic school

and the new ways we are sharing our faith. We can see our children learning and our faith growing.

As St. Therese of Lisieux illuminates, we have relied on faith, hope and persistence to do all things with love and remember in God's eyes, nothing we do is small.

We also felt compelled to testify to the truly heroic leadership we have been privileged to witness in our work in Catholic education. As they plan for an uncertain future, Catholic school leaders continue to display the same nimble ingenuity that enabled their heroic response to the abrupt disruption caused by Covid-19. Our Catholic schools are instruments of hope. Yet the hope that defines our schools is not a hope that springs from naive assessment or denial of the challenges ahead, but one that more closely resembles the paradox put forth by James Stockdale, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be" (as cited in Collins, 2001, p. 85). We are built for this kind of hope. As Catholics we look ahead to even the most brutal of days, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and see within and beyond it the hope of Easter Sunday.

As school leaders maintain hope and faith in the future of their school communities, they do not do so at the expense of confronting the brutal facts with ingenuity and diligence. Rather than viewing contingencies through a deficit lens, they courageously refuse to concede on mission and purpose. As one school leader noted, "We haven't and we won't budge on what we do or why we do it. We just have to figure out how to do it all in this new space."

Catholic schools are planning purposefully for all scenarios for the upcoming academic year - entirely in-person, entirely remote, and hybrid. School leaders are exploring options for summer "jumpstart" programs, extending schools days, or adjusting the school calendar. The drive to exhaust possibilities in planning is animated by a commitment to keeping the entire school community safe, healthy, supported, and learning. Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to build contingencies that leverage subsidiarity to maximize responsiveness to their communities. The Notre Dame ACE Academies network of Catholic turnaround schools is currently exploring the feasibility of a mixed hybrid scenario in which scholars designated for remote learning would actually complete that work on-site, with supervision in larger open spaces like gymnasiums and with breaks to engage in physical educa-

tion, music, art, language, and other specials to tend to their social-emotional wellbeing. This enables more intentional formation of the whole child while also meeting the childcare needs of their families, most of whom live at or below the poverty line.

Catholic school leaders across the country are rallying to articulate the opportunities in these challenges as they plan for the future. As Catholics we believe that God is in all things and that therefore there is opportunity in every challenge. The principal and instructional coach of St. Luke's Catholic School in Palm Beach Florida found that explicit instruction has actually improved during this time. "Recording explicit instruction has led teachers to script, rehearse, and reflect on their explicit instruction in ways we've always wanted them to! And students who need to have the opportunity to pause, rewatch, or engage their family in watching the explicit instruction as they move toward mastery. We plan to continue recording explicit instruction even if we are fully in-person next year because it has improved teacher practice which enhances student learning."

It would be a great disservice to children, and to our long tradition of continual improvement, for Catholic schools to eventually return to "the ways things were" simply because we are able to. We have learned too much. Transformational Catholic school leaders are planning to get better because of this crisis. As Betsy Rafferty, Assistant Principal of St. Malachy, an Independent Mission school in Philadelphia, reflected, "[By] relying on the systems, communities, and – perhaps most importantly – the shared values of the St. Malachy Community, they have stayed true to the vision and will emerge on the other side of this challenge stronger and further along than ever before."

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