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Inception to Implementation: A Response from the Field

Karen Hopson¹

Obstacles and the Catholic School

Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Matthew 19:14. Based on this quote from the Bible, we know that Jesus wanted His schools to work with and educate all His children, no matter what special learning need the child presents. While this can be a challenge, Bonfiglio and Kroh’s article (this issue) “Inclusion in Catholic Schools: From Inception to Implementation” provides considerations for school leaders looking to provide or expand services to students with exceptionalities.

Bonfiglio and Kroh identify three primary barriers to inclusion: (a) Lack of culture, (b) lack of resources, and (c) lack of knowledge and skills. In my experience, lack of culture can be one of the most challenging obstacles. It is challenging work to change the culture of the school to be open and accepting of all of God’s children. Many teachers still feel students with disabilities should be served in a special education classroom, rather than in the general classroom setting (Turnbull et al., 2010). Finances in Catholic schools continue to be a challenge, especially considering the lack of state and federal funding available to support Catholic schools in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Finally, lack of teacher experience serving students with special needs and professional development are constraints many school leaders face when seeking to expand services to students with disabilities (Boyle & Hernandez, 2017).

Serving Students in Catholic Schools

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) continue to reiterate their call to increase the commitment of Catholic schools to serve students with disabilities (USCCB, 2005).

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Bonfiglio and Kroh identify frameworks for successful inclusion of students with exceptionalities. Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) allow schools to use data to determine student needs and provide targeted instruction and support to students. In my experience, it is possible to implement this framework school-wide to support all students in the area of reading and math. This instructional framework can be implemented without significant financial implications for the school, but it does require utilizing instructional time and resources in a different way. The good news is that all students benefit from the implementation of MTSS.

High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) and Evidence Based Practices (EBPs) can be implemented across all settings, content areas, and grade levels to support all students (CEEDAR Center, n.d.). Good instructional practices benefit all students and provide the extra support students with exceptionalities need to be successful. While, HLPs and EBPs are not difficult to implement or a drain on the schools financial resources, professional development is required to ensure fidelity of implementation.

Increasing the professional knowledge and skills of a Catholic school faculty is a continual challenge for Catholic school leaders. I have found as a school leader, the benefit of having a special education teacher on staff to help provide information and support to our general classroom teachers. In addition, the special educator is able to provide on-going professional development to teachers related to the unique needs of the students enrolled in our schools. As school leaders, we are called to help our teachers to develop the skills necessary to meet the needs of the students enrolled in our school.

Principal's Perspective

Over my almost twenty-year tenure as a principal, I have witnessed the success that can come from creating a culture of meeting the needs of all learners. Serving students with special needs doesn't just happen because students with special needs are enrolled in our Catholic schools. Bonfiglio and Kroh provide essential elements and considerations to provide a framework to support both students and teachers in meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities from "inception to implementation."

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