

6-1-2005

Responses From the Field

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Recommended Citation

Warren, J., Schoenig, J., & McNiff, T. J. (2005). Responses From the Field. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 8 (4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0804052013>

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RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

Alternative teacher education programs have come under fire from a variety of sources – researchers, legislators, parents, even other educators. Our responses to the focus article provide the insights of practitioners who regularly work with teachers so prepared.

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Teaching in a Catholic school offers the educator the opportunity to pursue a calling, the vocation of Catholic school teacher. Today the majority of our Catholic school teachers are lay men and women who have accepted the challenge of not only providing quality academic instruction, but also passing on the faith to the future leaders and participants in our Church. The problem addressed in this study notes the absence of specific Catholic school teacher education programs in our Catholic institutions of higher learning, and an alternative approach adopted by the University of Notre Dame.

Significant to the study is the background on Catholic school teachers and the profile of the post-Vatican II Catholic school teachers. The majority of teachers in Catholic schools today are lay people who are not members of religious communities. Literature on Catholic school teacher training indicates that these teachers are trained in state universities or Catholic colleges and universities that focus on the public school system as the provider of student teaching experience.

There are various reasons cited by the researcher which include the cost of specialization to the premise of preparing future teachers for all models of school, from Catholic to private to public. The lack of an organizational planned response to the changed staffing of diocesan schools, as well as the absence of Catholic school teacher preparation in Catholic institutions of higher learning, are now programmatically addressed by local Catholic school leaders.

An element of the study that this writer would like to have seen quantified is that of teacher preparedness in the area of the teaching of religion. The researcher states that dioceses have taken up the task of teacher catechetical training and/or religious certification. The importance of quality, well-prepared, and motivated teachers is at the heart of overall school success. Catholic school teachers who are prepared to teach the four “Rs” would be helpful to both the Catholic schools and to dioceses on a variety of levels. The purpose of the study was to investigate ACE teacher training for Catholic school teachers. The topic of the effectiveness of ACE teachers as catechists lends itself for further research and study.

A significant benefit of this study lies in the fact that it emphasizes that Catholic K-12 schools are valid educational institutions for teacher training and formation. Research on effective schools indicates that schools that have specific goals, a shared culture and values are likely to be successful organizations for students and teachers alike in terms of growth, commitment, and continuous learning.

The tradition of the Catholic schools, inherited from the religious communities of the past, surely has set the foundation for effective schools not only for student learning, but also for teacher training and continued growth. The message that Catholic elementary and secondary schools are valuable resources for teacher training is a resounding message to be heeded and addressed by Catholic colleges and universities that are reluctant to send education students to the local Catholic school.

Catholic schools create social capital. What better means to take advantage of this resource than to include beginning teachers in this system. This research demonstrates that the Catholic K-12 schools are substantive resources for teacher training. Partnerships throughout all levels of Catholic education can only prove to be advantageous for the whole ministry of the Church.

Improved teacher training and preparation set in the real life and workings of the school are foundations for improved student and teacher learning. A proven system, such as the ACE Program, promotes quality teacher preparation within the context of the Catholic school. Through the research presented, it appears that over time, the ACE Program can contribute to providing continuity to the traditions of our faith-based schools through intentional Catholic school teacher training.

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At the dawn of this new millennium, the Church is undeniably faced with a myriad of challenges, all of which demand a response governed by vision, hope, and compassion. Those that have found their vocation in Catholic education confront a fair number of these challenges, as current administrative, staffing, and identity crises raise the specter of an alarmingly under-resourced and under-performing Catholic school system for the future of the Church.

The fundamental question behind “Alternative Teacher Education and Professional Preparedness: A Study of Parochial and Public School Contexts” is “Can an alternative teacher education program based in service to Catholic education prepare teachers to be effective in both parochial and secular settings?” This question gets to the very heart of a tremendous source of concern for Catholic education. Simply put, the Church must think critically about the way its K-12 Catholic school teachers are prepared, as well as who the organizations and institutions now capable of providing such a preparation experience actually are.

My experiences as a product of Catholic education, a Catholic middle-school teacher, and a faculty member at a Catholic university make this a very compelling question for me, as does my current experience as a foot-soldier in the battle for educational choice. I guess you could say that I have always believed deeply in the transformational Eucharistic mission of Catholic education, and that I have become a real advocate for systemic and sustainable reform in several realms of K-12 education, including the formation of a new generation of K-12 Catholic school teachers and principals.

The author does an excellent job establishing the parameters of the study, and the piece integrates some of the more compelling research that has recently been conducted on teacher preparation programs in both the public sector and at Catholic universities. Given the focused nature of the study and the care taken to use comparable instrumentation and design, I would concur with the fundamental conclusion that in-program teachers and graduates of the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) Program – as well as these teachers’ principals – perceive their preparedness across multiple professional dimensions at rates comparable to national samples. Given the relative youth of the program and its

somewhat radical mission in the realm of teacher education, it is quite clear that ACE has done an admirable job of forming effective and committed educators for both the public and parochial classroom.

What I think distinguishes this article, and what I hope will ultimately inspire further research on teacher preparation in Catholic higher education, is that it focuses on the question of being distinctly Catholic in mission and practice of forming teachers. This is very serious business, and it deserves thoughtful and immediate attention. As the Congregation for Catholic Education stated in *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, “teaching has an extraordinary moral depth and is one of man’s most excellent and creative activities, for the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings” (1998, §19). Because of this, is it not integral to the success of any Church institution that prepares teachers to maintain a focused awareness on what it means to be Catholic? While some may argue that there are market demands (such as the higher salaries in the public sector or the conception that Catholic practicum experiences “shelter” young teachers) that indicate that there is little value in teacher preparation programs maintaining a distinctly Catholic focus, there is a growing body of research that may indicate otherwise. In many ways, what may give well-designed Catholic teacher preparation programs their greatest strength is indeed the focus on maintaining a distinctly Catholic ethos. As Burtchaell noted in his landmark exploration of the disengagement of colleges and universities from their Christian churches, *The Dying of the Light*, programs devoid of such a focus offer “not the beat of a different drummer, but the dissonance of a band without a score” (1998, p. 849). In the end, it could indeed be the case that losing a distinctly Catholic focus does not provide the rigor that the field of teacher education demands, but instead provides for its demise.

As we look to the future of K-12 teacher formation for the Catholic Church, our objective should be dual – to be Catholic, providing true witness to the faith, hope, and love manifest in the Gospel message, and to be great. We must find innovative solutions to the identity challenges currently at hand and we must do so in a context that inspires exemplary pedagogy. One such solution likely exists in the realm of alternative teacher education, where several effective and distinctly Catholic initiatives currently exist. Such initiatives, however, cannot compose the entirety of our response. We must think critically about creating systemic and sustainable reform to the way we prepare teachers for Catholic schools; one that involves each of the various dimensions of Catholic education and challenges us to be tireless in our ministry.

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While admittedly subjective, a persuasive argument could be made that one of the most practical examples ever provided which illustrated the need for Catholic schools to be staffed by teachers educated in a spiritually-based professional development program came from a seventh grade student. As a Catholic school teacher conveyed the story to me during his first year of teaching, one of his students communicated her expectations of him while the class was in church for confession one afternoon. In acknowledging that his own confessional time spent with the priest was somewhat extended that day (both parties had commiserated over the loss of their favorite football team), he was surprised to find a teary-eyed, very confused girl sitting in the pew upon his return. Upon inquiring what was wrong, the student, reflecting on the amount of time her teacher just invested in the confessional, exclaimed, "And you're my teacher!"

While her ability to articulate the need for her teacher to be a spiritual role model may not have possessed the depth that other definitions contain, in many ways her comments cut right to the heart of this research and, albeit indirectly, provides a commentary on how important it is for Catholic school teachers to be prepared in a professional teacher education program that is infused with Catholic identity.

I was particularly pleased to learn this alternative teacher education study recognized the importance of assisting Catholic school educators with opportunities to grow both professionally and spiritually. Of equal significance, the study concluded that the one experience does not come at the expense of the other. ACE works, as dozens of Catholic schools across the country can tell us.

Another example of a successful Catholic alternative teacher education program can be found at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia. This graduate program, which has an on-line component to its curriculum, is specifically geared to enhancing the spiritual and academic qualities of

the teacher. I have seen, with pride and on numerous occasions, the professionalism in which Marymount graduates have responded to their teaching ministry. Similar to the ACE graduates, they make academically sound and morally based decisions that positively impact the welfare of their school.

In that regard, there are times when I believe the most insightful stakeholders for Catholic schools are our parents. During a recent diocesan school board meeting, a parent serving as a board member shared the following commentary during a lively discussion about the diocesan school accreditation process. As he correctly stated, "I agree teachers need to raise the level of academics for students, but our motivation for doing so is to ensure that we bring out the best in students so they can maximize the gifts God has given them." He concluded his remarks by saying the only way to accomplish this is to ensure our schools have professional, prepared teachers who can comfortably wear their faith on their sleeve.

It was encouraging to learn the conclusion for this particular study supports the premise that alternative teacher education programs, sponsored by Catholic institutions of higher learning, can satisfy the academic requirements for becoming a qualified educator and still maintain the goal of providing teachers the skills they require to help students with their own faith journey.

The Catholic school system in this country desperately needs more Catholic alternative teacher education programs. This observation is not solely based on the concern for finding solutions to the teacher shortage issues that challenge our schools. It is also rooted in the belief that Daniel Webster had it right when he noted, "whatever makes men good Christians also makes them good citizens" (1857, p. 44).

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