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Book Review: Catholic School Leadership

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BOOK REVIEW

Catholic School Leadership

Anthony J. Dosen and Barbara S. Rieckhoff
Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2016
216 pages; \$45.99 USD (paperback), \$85.99 USD (hardcover)
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Reviewed by Tom Kiely, Marquette University

Catholic School Leadership is a tightly constructed collection of essays edited by Anthony J. Dosen, CM, Ph.D. and Barbara S. Rieckhoff, Ph.D., and is part of the *Research on Religion and Education Series* edited by Larry Burton and Fr. Dosen. As such it seeks to serve as both a primer for those considering Catholic school leadership, and a reflective piece for those currently serving in leadership positions. To both audiences the editors and authors provide a rich buffet of food for thought.

Developed structurally around the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (NSBECS)* Dosen and Rieckhoff work to address a full complement of topics pertinent to understanding the contours of leadership in Catholic schools. Fr. Dosen writes the first five essays addressing styles of leadership, the essence of a Catholic school, the general status of pre-K-12 schools within the larger context of Catholic juridical structures, a demographic history of U.S. Catholic schools, and the driving forces that distinguish Catholic school curriculum from other approaches to learning in schools. The second half of the book contains contributions from Frank Montejano, Ed.D. who currently serves as principal of Holy Family Catholic School in South Pasadena, CA, Sr. Patricia Helene Earl, IHM, Ph.D. Professor of Education at Marymount University in Arlington, VA, and Dr. Reickhoff. An *Afterward* reflection is also provided by Ronald Hoover, M.Ed., principal of St. Joseph High School in Westchester, IL. These essays treat school funding, enrollment management, faculty professional development, the role of the pastor, and a general examination of issues related to operational vitality. Taken as a whole, the essays form the core of a Catholic school principal's "curriculum," and do a fine job detailing the crossovers between

Catholic and public schools. A few examples help to illustrate this observation.

One of the key difficulties in conveying the essential nature of a Catholic school is confronting what appears on the surface to be standard educational vocabulary in describing the aims and objectives of schooling. Dosen's first two chapters attempt to convey a "tapestry of ideas" about how Catholic schools operate from a visionary leadership perspective. He cites several types of leadership theory that are illustrative of the strands helping to form this "tapestry" focusing intently on the ministerial service that drives Catholic school leadership theory. In a similar manner, he surveys the "Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools" from the NSBECS and explicates them as either part of the ecclesial mission of schools or the educational mission of schools. Whereas the religious dimensions are well grounded in the work of Thomas Groome, Dosen grounds the notion of educating the "whole child" on John Dewey with a crossover to Anthony Bryk's work on character education in Catholic schools. He then places the Catholic worldview requirement in the educational section. The effect is to contemporize the philosophical roots of Catholic educational theory while retaining the theological language via a more modern lens. In this respect, he does a good job, but students for the principalship will need assistance in understanding these components of a Catholic school's rationale. This could be provided via instructors or additional reading which is provided at the end of each chapter. Chapters three and four provide the organizational structure of Catholic schools within the larger Church, and a brief survey of the demographic and numerical shifts that have occurred in U. S. Catholic schools since their inception in the 19th century. For those unfamiliar with the canonical status of schools and the decline of enrollment numbers over the last 50 years Dosen's summary creates a fine context for understanding the current organizational state of Catholic schools.

Chapter five treats curriculum in Catholic schools and Dosen uses H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* as a framing device for understanding the variety of ways that schools may be understood vis a vis the culture in which they exist. Repeating his method of layering secular educational theorists and practitioners beside theological reflections he employs the work of Ralph Tyler, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in order to give a well-honed explanation to how Catholic schools seek to accomplish their religious mission within the context of secular schooling. In short, student learning is integrated via the consideration of multiple intelligences and a

goal centered approach wherein all the capacities of the student are engaged via authentic classroom assessments and a reflective approach to extra-curricular activity.

As *Catholic School Leadership* pivots from the work of Fr. Dosen to his co-authors, so the content of the book moves from the “tapestry” of religious purpose and secular learning to the managerial dimensions of being a Catholic school principal. This shift retains the easy-to-read quality of the book as a whole, but the sheer number of issues that must be addressed, at times, becomes too massive an undertaking for a volume of this size. Each chapter attempts to cover a great deal of material and tends to quickly summarize issues that will require greater exposition for those learning to be leaders.

One of the framing devices that *Catholic School Leadership* employs is the use of opening vignettes for eight of the ten chapters. This allows readers to immediately immerse in the experiential moments of Catholic schools. (I found familiar faces coming to mind as I read each vignette.) The vignette method also allows for complex situations to be presented and then explicated in a more systematic fashion. Each of the authors uses this device effectively. In this way, the managerial areas of consideration convey a little historical context, a sense of the current state of affairs, and healthy doses of advice on how one might navigate the issues. Topics handled in this manner are finance and funding, recruitment, retention, the culture of schools, advancement and development, faculty spiritual and professional growth, and the many operational details ranging from facilities to technology to developing a strategic vision. In short, Dosen and Reickoff present the full complement of issues that will challenge Catholic school leaders.

A chapter deserving particular mention is the chapter addressing the role and the relationship with the pastor. Presented partially as a literature review and partially as a survey of effective pastor-principal relationships the chapter opens up multiple issues for further scrutiny. How is the pastor-principal relationship similar or dissimilar to the president-principal relationship in many high schools? How do the parish council and the parish trustees affect the school-parish relationship? How might changing configurations and models of future parish-school relationships be affected by current decisions? These issues are hinted at as leading items for additional research and writing within the context of lay-clerical collaboration for the future of the Church.

On the whole, *Catholic School Leadership* is a solid introductory work for Catholic school principals and other administrators. I would also recommend it to be read by board members and benefactors so that they can get a

more complete sense of the multiple and sometime disparate areas of leadership that Catholic schools demand. Perhaps the strongest aspects of this work are the robust bibliographies at the end of each chapter with additional lists of references for further learning. However, and this is not meant as a criticism of the editors, some of the research on Catholic education is beginning to age given the rapidly changing field of education. Rather, this is an indication that more recent research is needed in all areas of Catholic education. Given the multiple authors, the thread of thought and voice in *Catholic School Leadership* is consistent and authoritative. Areas that could have been addressed in summary fashion would be the relationship of principals with the (arch)diocesan office of Catholic schools and the case of religiously sponsored schools. The book addresses a sprawling field of study, and tries to retain and prepare leaders to guide the closely-knit community of a Catholic school. The *Afterward* by Ronald Hoover is the final touch in this effort to marry the personal with the institutional, the believer with her or his belief in the mission of Catholic schools.

Thomas Kiely directs the Institute for Catholic Leadership at Marquette University. For 30 years he has served Catholic schools in administrative capacities, faculty positions, and governing roles. He holds degrees from Georgetown University, the Catholic University of America, and Mt. St. Mary's University. Correspondence regarding this review can be sent to Mr. Kiely at thomas.kiely@marquette.edu.