



CATHOLIC EDUCATION: PROMISE, FIDELITY, HOPE

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Bruce Rodrigues,
Superintendent of Education

...the one constant that has marked our history is the ever present hand of the Creator.

What is required most for this dialogue is an openness of mind and heart.

The Waterloo Catholic District School Board has been faithful to its proclamation of Catholic Education within the region for over 170 years. In the life of any organization that spans such a length of time it would seem reasonable to assert that if one were to retell the story a myriad of traditions, tensions and transitions would characterize its retelling. There would exist an entire spectrum of highs and lows, joys and sorrows, hopes and despairs, victories and defeats, laughter and tears; however, regardless of any specific moment in time that one may point to, the one constant that has marked our history is the ever present hand of the Creator.

This report is simply another moment in time. Its purpose is to reflect on some of the waves that are currently cresting against the boat of Catholic education within the Waterloo Catholic District School Board as we navigate our way over the next 170 years. Such reflection is intended to raise many questions and often times it calls us to sit pondering the question and living it awhile until we discover a new question. Simple definitions, quick retorts, short term solutions and shallow answers usually serve the purpose of appeasing but lack the necessary depth for understanding and sustainability. This report will attempt to “eff” the ineffable. It will try to provide language for the beginnings of a conversation that has been taking place for a long time and will continue for a long time to come. What is required most for this dialogue is an openness of mind and heart.

The report’s purpose will be achieved by presenting the findings of the work completed through the Discussion Kit of the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) Symposium, the results attained through the Parish/School Relations Committee and the information they were able to glean from the participating groups and finally some commentary about the ongoing integration of the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations and Character Education within our schools. All of this will be summarized through the lens of Catholic School “Distinctiveness”.

In determining a format to present the information, many came to mind and each had its own strengths and weaknesses. In the spirit of transparency, authentic questioning, open non-judgmental dialogue and focused next steps the following approach that parallels student learning seemed most fitting. Within the context of each issue the following four questions can be raised:

- What is it that we expect from ...?
- How will we know when we have achieved it?
- How will we respond when we have not achieved it?
- How will we respond if we are already doing it?

We often look at the quantifiable but we need to be sure that we touch the heart. Success has many faces in Catholic Education.

What do you say Catholic education is?

Dignity and sacredness of every human person

We often look at the quantifiable but we need to be sure that we touch the heart. Success has many faces in Catholic Education.

Before proceeding any further one requires to take some personal reflection time and grapple with your own personal belief of Catholic education and its distinctiveness. In the Scripture Jesus asks Peter, "Who do you say I am?" Catholic education asks each of us that same question "What do you say Catholic education is?" Do take some time now and reflect on what your response will be.

Recall that the lens we are using to view the information is one of "Catholic distinctiveness". Distinctiveness is not comparativeness. Although one way to view distinctiveness is through comparison, when it comes to Catholic education distinctiveness is more about asserting that which is unique. Catholic education exists because of the Catholic Church and therefore has an ecclesial dimension. This ecclesial platform provides us a foundation on which our building blocks of scripture, sacrament, history, ethics and pastoral intervention sit and together create a "Catholic culture". The French often speak of their distinctiveness as that which cannot be easily articulated because it has this sense of "*culturelle animation*", perhaps this notion also extends to Catholic education.

Our Catholic Schools 2006-2007 – ICE Symposium Report

In October 2006 the Institute for Catholic Education held a symposium whose purpose was to gather teams of individuals from each of the Catholic School Boards in the Province as well as other Catholic provincial partners and dialogue about the future of Catholic education. From December 2006 to March 2007 every school in the Board gathered at their sites in varying groupings and responded to six areas:

1. The Distinctiveness of Catholic Schools
2. The Value of Catholic Schools
3. The Community's Hopes for Catholic Schools
4. The Major Issues Facing Catholic Schools Today
5. Strategies for Promoting and Protecting Catholic Education
6. What to Tell the School Boards and the Institute for Catholic Education

These reports were collated and submitted to ICE on May 31, 2007. ICE then collated all the reports from all the Catholic boards in the province and released the attached Appendix A in August 2007. The attached report summarizes in detail the process, lists the findings and identifies possible next steps. Therefore this report will not elaborate extensively on the ICE findings but rather for our part we will examine the highlights of our Board submitted report.

For each of the six areas identified above the top three responses will be provided.

1. The Distinctiveness of Catholic schools

- A. Responses related to proclamation of the faith.
 - Catholic values, gospel values lived out in school's discipline/organization, fundraising for causes
 - Dignity and sacredness of every human person
 - Jesus as our model in all that we do; we seek the kingdom of God

***Catholic values
integrated in all of the
curriculum***

***Social responsibility,
communal perspective;
sense of service;
transform society***

- B. Responses related to providing and supporting space and time for the sacred and academic.
 - Celebration of the liturgical year, sacraments, clergy presence
 - Retreat time, daily prayer, time to honour God
 - Catholic values integrated in all of the curriculum; reconciliation, forgiveness
- C. Responses related to promoting the Catholic faith.
 - Creating a Christian community to mirror the values of the Church; support role of the church.
 - School/parish partnerships; pastoral teams that provide community support.
 - Social justice; peace on earth

2. The Value of Catholic schools.

- A. Responses related to proclamation of the faith.
 - Catholic values, gospel values lived out in school's discipline organization, fundraising; bring scripture to life; Christ centered learning environment.
 - Dignity and sacredness of every human person
 - We are here to nourish the child on the journey to God
- B. Responses related to providing and supporting space and time for the sacred and academic.
 - Catholic values integrated in all of the curriculum; reconciliation, forgiveness
 - Retreat time, daily prayer; time to honour God; share our faith
 - Celebration of the liturgical year (Eucharist, Advent, Lent, etc.)
- C. Responses related to promoting the Catholic faith.
 - School/parish partnerships; pastoral teams that provide community support; church, home school connection
 - Welcoming environment; safe and secure; caring, approachable environment
 - Social responsibility, communal perspective; sense of service; transform society
 - Family values and beliefs; discipline

3. Responses related to proclamation of the faith.

- A. The community's hopes for Catholic schools.
 - Continue to live as witnesses of the Catholic faith
 - God to remain at the centre of our educational system
 - Remain faith-driven rather than business-oriented
- B. Responses related to providing and supporting space and time for the sacred and academic.
 - Increased funding
 - Graduate expectations
 - Faith programs for staff and parents; include parents, draw parents, inform parents

Continue to exist as a system

- C. Responses related to promoting the Catholic faith.
 - Strengthened Church-school-family relations; greater collaboration between parent and school councils and schools
 - Continue to teach and live social teaching, transform society, social justice
 - Increased School Council involvement in faith development and other aspects of education

4. The Major Issues Facing Catholic Schools Today

- A. The community's hopes for Catholic schools.
 - Keep commitment to Catholic faith (teachers, parents, students)
 - Apathy and indifference
- B. Responses related to providing and supporting space and time for the sacred and academic.
 - Keep faith integrated into the curriculum
 - Funding in light of UN recommendation; funding formula; impact of politicians
 - Lack of /shortage of priests; poor visibility of priests in schools
- C. Responses related to promoting the Catholic faith.
 - Lack of home support; few families attend church; increasing numbers of students who are not baptized; lack of involvement of parents in child's faith development
 - Continue to exist as a system
 - Church must support schools; greater church involvement

5. Strategies for Promoting and Protecting Catholic Education

- A. The community's hopes for Catholic schools.
 - Communicate our values
 - Maintain Catholic distinctiveness
 - Fight complacency
- B. Responses related to providing and supporting space and time for the sacred and academic.
 - More integration of Catholic values all courses; teach faith reflection
 - Increased time for prayer, retreats, discussions in media, yearly Spiritual Development day
 - Ensure that staff are committed to the Catholic faith, promote teacher renewal
 - Establish clear Ontario Catholic Graduate expectations
- C. Responses related to promoting the Catholic faith.
 - Involve parents, expose them to school culture, educate them about issues; School councils more politically involved and vocal; more evidence of Catholicism of new students
 - Increased church support; develop grass roots pastoral teams; ensure more church visibility in schools
 - Celebrate and promote distinctiveness by «walking the talk»

Ensure that staff are committed to the Catholic faith, promote teacher renewal

***Stand up for
Catholicity; be
supportive, be aware,
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6. What to Tell the School Boards and the Institute for Catholic Education

- A. The community's hopes for Catholic schools.
 - We must remain faith-based and not driven by money

- B. Responses related to providing and supporting space and time for the sacred and academic.
 - Opportunities such as this to share convictions beliefs are appreciated
 - Increased time for prayer, retreats, discussions, in media, yearly Spiritual Development day
 - Staff need more spiritual guidance on PD days; regular classroom teachers need more support; teacher programs
 - More Church presence in schools

- C. Responses related to promoting the Catholic faith.
 - Stand up for Catholicity; be supportive, be aware, be proactive
 - Strengthen ties with Church and community
 - Trustees must be more supportive of Catholic schools in terms of public recognition and appreciation of efforts
 - Ensure dialogue among partners; work together with stakeholders, schools, communities, parishes, ICE; solidarity; collaborative approach; united voice

When paralleled with the ICE report our report is consistent with trends in the province however, at times it does provide some food for thought with some interesting nuances.

Parish/School Relations: Focus Group Summaries

In January of 2007, a Board committee was formed to examine the current state of parish/school relations. The committee formulated four key questions to guide moderated conversations within three groups: pastors (deanery), elementary administrators and secondary administrators and chaplains. The four questions posed to each of the groups were the following:

1. What is working well in terms of parish/school relations?
2. What challenges are you facing?
3. What would it look like if we were operating at our very best?
4. What do we need to do to get to our ideal?

All three groups met independently between April 18th 2007 and May 2nd 2007. What the findings summarize is that a strong partnership between our Catholic schools and our parish communities is essential to the success of our combined mission of building the Kingdom of God. As such, we recognize the parents to be the first teachers of our students but along with our students' parents, we look upon ourselves as "co-parenting" the adult Christians of tomorrow. This relationship must be based on respect, trust, courage and a willingness to stretch ourselves. An underlying theme of "relationship" weaves its way through each question.

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Together, we are caught in this maelstrom and together we will come through it stronger and more vigorous.

If this relationship is a priority, then it should be reflected in the budgets of the parish, school and Board.

This Christian vision of the human journey is best understood within the context of relationship.

1. What is working well?

All stakeholders commented on the strength of cooperation between parishes and schools and were able to articulate and describe clear examples of these.

2. What challenges are you facing?

Here the statistics speak volumes. The shortage of priests and other religious; the drop in church attendance and parish connection; the reality of present-day family life; the economic and social realities of post-Christian society (i.e. consumerism, widening economic gaps, etc.) – all are factors that shape the efficacy of the parish/school relationship. Together, we are caught in this maelstrom and together we will come through it stronger and more vigorous. Religious “illiteracy” for adults and children is a reality.

3. What would it look like if we were operating at our very best?

The ideal would see a greater engagement by our youth in the life of the Church. This would involve a new framework or model in which the parish team is seen as a member of the school staff and vice-versa. It would be marked by celebration and a tight communication loop among stakeholders. The re-evangelization of society could come through this.

4. What do we need to do to get to our ideal?

Each partner needs to renew efforts to honour the importance and role of the other and to become more mindful of opportunities to do so. If this relationship is a priority, then it should be reflected in the budgets of the parish, school and Board. Schools and parishes need examples of best practice to which they can refer and then adapt to their own needs.

Parish/school relations cover the spectrum from well integrated and highly functioning teams to difficult and occasional communicative partnerships. This clearly is a difficult area based on the many intricacies of relationships, responsibilities, ideologies and levels of comfort in an increasingly complex ecclesial structure.

Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations:

The Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations were developed by ICE. The following comments are how OCSTA prefaces its proclamation of the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations.

“Distinctive expectations for graduates of Catholic schools are determined and shaped by the vision and destiny of the human person emerging from our faith tradition. This Christian anthropology or world view reveals the dignity and value of the person. Our tradition tells us God creatively and lovingly calls each of us into the wonder of life, sustaining us by the power of the Holy Spirit, throughout the human journey, into life eternal. We acknowledge that the journey includes moments of brokenness and sin. We recognize in the person of Jesus, the risen Christ, the human face of God sharing our life in order to heal us of our brokenness and liberate us from sin.

This Christian vision of the human journey is best understood within the context of relationship. It is accomplished in community, in solidarity with brothers and sisters in the Church and beyond.

It would be fair to note that different schools and different teachers make these links to the Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations to varying degrees.

...when pushed to articulate what constitutes “character” the common response is to ascribe certain qualities, attributes, assets, traits or behaviours.

Catholic education views human life as an integration of body, mind, and spirit. Rooted in this vision, Catholic education fosters the search for knowledge as a lifelong spiritual and academic quest. The expectations of Catholic graduates, therefore, are described not only in terms of knowledge and skills, but in terms of values, attitudes and actions.”

Within the Waterloo Catholic District School Board the Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations are referred to often especially when articulating what we would like our students to know, to do, to be like and to value. Catholic course profiles all contain appropriate references to the Catholic graduate expectations and align the course expectations and the Catholic graduate expectations. Much that is undertaken at the school level, where students are involved, is measured by how it supports the Catholic graduate expectations. It would be fair to note that different schools and different teachers make these links to the Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations to varying degrees.

Character Education

When the Province of Ontario first announced its intent to highlight the character education initiative as a key initiative supporting student success, Catholic school boards were delighted and welcomed the announcement. It was an affirmation of a long standing tradition in Catholic school boards that has persistently and consistently proclaimed the necessity of such an education. While excited by the announcement and recognizing the fact that character education is embedded in its very foundation, those within the school system struggled to articulate clearly what this meant and how it was lived out. Immediately many pointed to the Religion and Family Life curriculum along with the Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations as key components that demonstrate the integration of character education. Although understandable, when pushed to articulate what constitutes “character” the common response is to ascribe certain qualities, attributes, assets, traits or behaviours. While much of this may provide us with a particular lens through which to view “character”, none of them individually or collectively give sufficient credence to what it means to develop character in a Catholic school.

So what then comprises character education in a Catholic school? Surely, one can unequivocally assert that education in a Catholic school has a sacramental quality. If the sacraments are visible signs of God’s invisible presence then certainly the Catholic school has as its definitive mission the call to ensure that all people in the school will encounter Jesus on a daily basis. God’s invisible presence will be made known through relational visible signs that unfold as people attempt in community to touch the face of God. Continuing with this sacramental motif for education and examining the seven sacraments more closely, it appears that one can gain some insight from Catholic sacramental theology. Interestingly, in sacramental theology three of the seven sacraments actually confer to the recipient what is referred to as “character”. Sacramental character is defined as “an indelible mark left on the soul”.

This notion of sacramental character has much to teach us about character education in a Catholic school. Character education in a Catholic school could best be defined as the tapestry of handprints, a collection of indelible marks if you will, left on the heart through the various interactions within and outside the school that have made the invisible God visible within us.

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If one were to take a few minutes and go deep into their own consciousness and reflect on the people, places and events that have left handprints on our hearts we would dare admit that these have been instrumental in contributing to our character. Character education challenges all of us involved in the lives of students to fulfill our vocation in such a way as to leave our handprints on their hearts. To ensure that as they live out their lives that they will reflect on those involved in their education and see a tapestry of handprints of educators that have helped form their character.

Character education is not simply comprised of qualities, attributes, assets, traits and behaviours it is by its very nature relational, it involves community.

Conclusion

Catholic schools in the most ordinary sense exist to educate students so that they can respond to the world in a very particular way. Students are educated in faith, formed in solidarity and community with an ethos that flows from Gospel values, educated for the common good with a specific worldview evidenced through the Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations, embrace a preferential option for the poor and see their education as preparing them for service.

In light of our four areas; the ICE symposium, parish/school relations, Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations and character education we return to the four questions:

- What is it that we expect from ...?
- How will we know when we have achieved it?
- How will we respond when we have not achieved it?
- How will we respond if we are already doing it?

At first glance it appears simple and we could turn it over to a committee to entertain next steps. However, these issues are far more complex and require collective reflection, a common language, generative dialogue and a focused approach. This does not mean that we don't do anything but rather we need to design an initial framework that does not provide band-aid solutions but delivers a comprehensive approach that ensures sustainability. The first step in the process – as outlined in the piece from the Director of Education entitled “*We Discern Our Future*” – is to carry the conversation forward engaging in dialogue at all levels of the system and with our community partners focusing on the *raison d'être* of Catholic schools.

The *raison d'être* of Catholic schools is to educate students so that they deliberately interact with others and the world in a way that makes Christ visible. This is the dance of Sarah's circle and not the climb on Jacob's ladder; it embraces the rich encounter of community pinnacled in the celebration of the Eucharist. What we do and how we do it will be a reflection of our beliefs and values. Remember we have been entrusted to be the stewards, guardians and advocates of Catholic education.